

“MY JOURNEY WITH TAOISM”

A sermon by the Rev. Dottie Mathews
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org

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Readings: *from Etty Hillesum*¹ – a contemporary of Ann Frank's, a few years her senior – this is an excerpt from her journal as the Nazi incursion closed in around her...

“Yes, life is beautiful, and I value it anew at the end of every day, even though I know that the sons of mothers...are being murdered in concentration camps. And you must be able to bear your sorrow; even if it seems to crush you, you will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself, part of your body and your soul, you mustn't run away from it, but bear it like an adult. Do not relieve your feelings through hatred, do not seek to be avenged on all German mothers, for they too sorrow at this very moment for their slain and murdered sons. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate....And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God” (p 97)

And from a few days later...

[We should] ..., always striv[e] for more simplicity. Yes to become simple and live simply, not only within yourself but also in your everyday dealings... reach for true simplicity in your inner life and in your surroundings... (p 102)

Sermon:

I will tell you up front that for me, Taoism, or more particularly, the book entitled the Tao Te Ching, has provided my greatest spiritual inspiration for the last many years of my life. Although I have numerous sources from which I regularly draw – Rumi, Buddhist writings, contemporary poets like Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry – none speaks to me as consistently and directly as the Tao Te Ching. I feel the wisdom of that book is so simple and so profound that it never fails to help me address whatever current dilemmas have entered my life.

¹ Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996)

I am by no means a Taoist scholar – I have not dug into the corners of the rich, esoteric history of either the philosophy or the religion..... all I know is that when I read this book (which I do often), I feel like every single page extends a gentle tap on my shoulder, “Psst - Remember, Dottie? Remember these things that you so easily forget? Remember that your life feels so much more harmonious when you live like this? Remember?”

So, I have chosen to undertake today the grand and impossible task of telling (in twenty short minutes or so) the essence of this ancient and ageless philosophy as I understand it – not because I’m hoping to convert any of you to take on my appreciation and respect for it but just to tell you what it has meant to me in my own spiritual life.

It’s interesting to me that Taoism isn’t much known in our western world --- even though it may have hundreds of millions of devotees worldwide. Perhaps that’s because those followers don’t feel the need to limit themselves – they feel no compunction about freely drawing from several Eastern religions - all of which have much in common with one another. It’s said that Taoism is an outgrowth of Confucianism and that Zen is the Buddhism of India filtered through the Taoism of China. However it works out, many adherents apparently feel no need to devote themselves exclusively to a single philosophy.

Even so, there’s not much in popular domestic culture about Taoism. Countering that, at the Fellowship here, there is a growing group of people who are together exploring Taoist teachings and they even have an upcoming retreat scheduled in December. We love the fact that our UU pluralism continues to grow and I’d reckon that in that group you will find people who are more deeply immersed in the particularities and specifics of true Taoism than am I... I’m not sure what has sparked the increased interest here at the Fellowship. Perhaps, like me, these folks are drawn to the utter simplicity of Taoism. The entire Tao Te Ching has 81 very brief “chapters.” As some say, it can be read in a ½ hour or it may take a lifetime.

“I have just three things to teach,” the Tao says in #67 “simplicity, patience and compassion – these three are your greatest treasures².” Wow – just three things to teach sounds like a kind of faith I can get into to!!

I’m being facetious, of course, but there is also significant truth to that. One of the central teachings of Taoism is simplicity and this is modeled in the direct and uncomplicated yet poetic language used over and over again – stressing those three things in a variety of ways – simplicity (clearness in action and thought without pride or ego), patience (don’t FORCE life – allow life to unfold) and compassion (loving-kindness, starting with yourself so that you will then have it toward others). The Tao Te Ching teaches these things over and over, urging each of us in a multitude of ways to find our center and to act from it.

The point is that life will inevitably be full of ups and downs: joys and disappointments,

² Stephen Mitchell, trans. *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Perennial Classics 1988) #67

victories and humiliations. Our human tendency is to see each of those as an end. “Hooray, I am being honored!” Or, “Oh this is terrible – people will never respect me again!” But, if we can recognize that at all times life is simply flowing forward and if we can choose not to engage with the drama of the unending and unavoidable highs and lows, we can use the internal power to find more creative ways to respond in life. When we get caught in life's dramas - of either sort - we sputter and spin and are off balance. But when we hold to the center, we can be clear and more skilled in our responses. Obviously, much of the martial arts techniques are founded on this notion of redirecting the oncoming challenge so as to maintain one's own balance and agility.

So, I first encountered this way of seeing the world while I was in high school. A sophomore at St. Bernard's during the time of Vatican II and rampant ecumenism, my Religion class was less a study of Catholicism and more a review of world religions. We covered the major faiths and a few of the ancient philosophers. For our final papers, we were given a long list of various religions and told to select one and do a paper on its history and basic beliefs. I remember scanning the page. There were several I was familiar with Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, for whatever reason, my eyes went all the down to the “T’s” and fell on Taoism and I knew that was what I wanted to write about, possibly because I knew absolutely nothing about it. I wasn’t even sure how to pronounce it!

There was no Google or Wikipedia at the time, of course, so between my family’s Colliers Encyclopedia and the school library, I found enough information to write an acceptable paper. And I remember back then being quite taken by the core belief that there is an evident but invisible eternal energy flowing through the universe – indeed, through me – that is undefinable but at the same time, it is that mystery which enlivens all that is, was, or will be. And that a sense of personal harmony comes through attuning oneself to that energy. This ineffable force is beyond description, beyond containment, and yet it is everywhere. It is sometimes referred to as the Source of Being (which is a phrase I particularly like). It is The Way (which is what Tao means) - the way of the world.

Some portions of #14³ tell us:

Look, and it can't be seen.

Listen, and it can't be heard.

Reach, and it can't be grasped. [...]

subtle, beyond all conception. [...]

*You can't know it, but you can be it,
at ease in your own life.*

*Just realize where you come from:
this is the essence of wisdom.*

³ Ibid.

I learned in that little bit of research that Taoism is devoted to nature and the ordinary cycles of life – joys, sorrows, births, deaths, seasonal shifts and changes, male, female – these aspects of our world are natural and constant. Life flows – the Tao continues. I found that notion comforting, having already experienced a great deal of death and unexpected disappointments in my early life, this undramatic and utter acceptance of these natural life changes was both realistic and consoling to me. Despite what some others had said in those days, I knew that people don't “get what they deserve;” that good doesn't always win out, and it's not necessarily the good who die young. To the followers of Tao all events of life simply are. The question is how we respond.

Unlike other faiths with which I was familiar, I learned that they had no single “god” per se – no all powerful being busying himself or herself with dictating the events of life on earth - only this indescribable energy that keeps moving life – with ALL of its complexities and changes – ever onward.

Taoist teachings refute dualistic thinking --- the Taoist sees that even attempting to assign terms like “good” and “bad” are pointless because they really only define one another (like the words “high” and “low” and all other sets of opposites) – the terms cannot exist without one another and they flow constantly into and out of one another. The Yin and Yang symbol shown on your Order of Service⁴ depicts this. (This one has a bit of Unitarian Universalist liberty taken by the chalice insertions, though – but I kind of like that). I learned that this symbol is to be seen as being in endless motion – like life. Life flows! Stuff happens! Things we may be tempted to call good, sad, praiseworthy, challenging – it all just is what it is. And often when we try to assign a value judgment, we're just plain wrong and making those determinations can impede our own progress or creativity in dealing with the situation. The point is that no matter what is going on around us, we should be alert to it, as we strive to maintain internal BALANCE --- **Balance is the key**....as we're told in this abridged excerpt from #13

*“Success is as dangerous as failure [...]
Whether you go up the ladder or down it, your position is shaky.
When you stand with your two feet on the ground,
you will always keep your balance.”*

The writer is saying “Don't get too worked up in seeking the praise of others, or in buying into the criticism of others, don't get too tied to your current good fortune or losses --- if you do well, accept it humbly; if you make a mistake, rectify it. Keep to the center and there you can know who you are.”

This is a teaching I try hard to remember --- it's so easy to lose my balance and to get



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http://www.uuplanet.com/clipart/chalices/uu_yinyang.gif

buffeted by life events or to become invested in relative positions. We're constantly tempted to assess whether we are going up societal ladders or down. But the truth is that those estimations rapidly change on any given day. Whatever we do in life, we know that it takes one great sale, one A+ paper, one superb evaluation to feel like the hero of the month ...and one bad review, one perceived misstep, one lost client to quickly prompt the slide downward!

The Tao Te Ching encourages us to smoothly ride out those inevitable, incessant vicissitudes of life --- allow the flow to come and go --- and to cling to the solid place of adaptability and flexibility that is always to be found at our own center.

Our opening reading is about a time far more crucial and dramatic than praise or fault at work or school, and you may have wondered about why I would include a reading from a young Jewish girl during the Nazi era (who, by the way, happens to be another of my other heroes). To me, in her own way, Etty Hillesum is expressing her recognition of these same cycles – that life is always beautiful at the same time it is devastating. Both are true – always and ever. And, knowing that, even in the midst of her unspeakable conditions, it made her reach for that deep, inner simplicity. To live the only life that was available as fully present as she possibly could.

These are hard concepts. It is not to say tritely that things always work out for the best – it is to say that getting caught in dualistic thinking weakens our ability to respond and puts us out of harmony with nature.

There is a folk tale about a Taoist farmer that illustrates this:

A man who lived on the northern frontier of China [with his son] was skilled in interpreting events. One day, for no reason, his horse ran away to the nomads across the border. Everyone tried to console him, but [the] father said, "What makes you so sure this isn't a blessing?" Some months later his horse returned, bringing a splendid nomad stallion. Everyone congratulated him, but [the] father said, "What makes you so sure this isn't a disaster?" Their household was richer by a fine horse, which his son loved to ride. One day [the son] fell and broke his hip. Everyone tried to console him, but [the] father said, "What makes you so sure this isn't a blessing?"

A year later the nomads came in force across the border, and every able-bodied man took his bow and went into battle. The Chinese frontiersmen lost nine of every ten men. Only because the son was lame did the father and son survive to take care of each other. Truly, blessing turns to disaster, and disaster to blessing: the changes have no end, nor can the mystery be fathomed.⁵

Well, when I wrote that paper, my high school mind was charmed and challenged by what

⁵ Ellen J. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, pp 99-100, 1997).

I'd learned but I was still then bound by my Western mentality, so I completed that course with a bit of familiarity and fondness for this Eastern wisdom – and felt no particular draw away from my liberal Christianity.

By the time I had reached my early 30's, though, a lot had happened and I had set aside all organized religion – none of those I'd experienced seemed adequate to the realities of my life. I was struggling to find my inner strength, my centeredness, in the face of a difficult divorce and great concern for how I would be able to care for my three very young children.

One day, I was browsing in a bookstore called the Bodhi Tree on Melrose in Hollywood, and found a copy of the Tao Te Ching (which, by the way, means The Way and its Power). This little bookstore was the sort of place that played peaceful New Age music, had big comfy chairs and tea brewing all the time, so I sat with this text – this old friend - and read it once again. I was reminded in the preface that it was purportedly written by a man named Lao Tzu who lived somewhere around 500 BCE. He and Confucius had many shared beliefs but Lao Tzu seemed to rely far less on rules for right behavior and more in the eternal life force – the energy – the Tao – and its infinite manifestations. So, whereas Confucius promoted a regulated system for how one ought to live and how society ought to function, Lao Tzu felt that fewer rules allowed people to embrace the natural flow of things – to experience on a deep level the interconnected web of existence, if you will - and with that internalized knowing they could flourish together.

So, after reengaging my appreciation for the Tao Te Ching in this Hollywood bookstore (I did buy the book, by the way), I began practicing meditation with some regularity and I found it worked well for me to read a section and ponder it as I went into my time of silence. Each day a new section --- a light but steady digesting of the wisdom contained there.

This was my private ritual – nothing I felt compelled to declare as my final Truth – just an assist as I worked out the path that life was presenting me....and it was effective for me.

A few years later, I encountered an actual School of Taoism --- a spirituality center in Los Angeles was offering a two-year course and I thought that since I had gone this far with it, I might as well delve more fully and **really** get a sense of what true Taoism is.

The first few classes were definitely interesting – the history of ancient China with its dynasties. We learned some of Confucianism's rule-bound orderliness and Lao Tzu's less rigid, more flexible approach. I was fully engageduntil they got into the Taoist religious practices (which grew from the philosophy). Apparently, the Taoist priests focused much thought on how to use this limitless Source to extend ones life – immortality was a high goal --- and our teacher described the alchemy and several rituals they developed to help them enhance, hold onto and channel their personal energy through the natural functions of life.

As we studied, I was already aware that while Taoism honors feminine energy, it seemed

that all of the esteemed leaders were male....I just made a mental note of that.....and then the teacher explained that one of the favored practices of the priests was to hold onto their sexual energy– their *jing* – and they did this by having relations with as many virgins as they could without releasing their *jing* – thus rechanneling it back into themselves, thereby extending their vitality and their life. I remember my hand shooting up to voice my concern about the ethics of this practice and was assured that participation was considered a high honor for these young virgins..... hmmm.....

Well, that was the last class I attended. I thought, yet once again, it seems like everything eventually boiled down to sex and power..... even something this pure. At that stage in my life, I just lost heart to learn more. I was disillusioned enough that I again set the books aside for a good long while. I continued my private meditations but without the benefit of reading the Tao Te Ching.

And then, several years later, another copy fell into my hands. It was given to me as a gift by a friend at a time when I was really struggling with my teenage children. I had the best of intentions, of course, but I wanted so badly to control their behavior – to control my world – and I was running into one wall after another. The more I tried to force my world into the mold I wanted it to be, the more resistance I got and the more thwarted I felt.

This friend handed me the Stephen Mitchell translation and asked me if I knew about *wei wu wei* – doing without doing. I remembered this term from before – it’s the Taoist principle that the more we try to force life (in my language, the more we try to push the river or dig in our heels and try to stop the river of life) the less effective we can be and the more brittle and frustrated we become.

As we discussed it, she likened it to playing a beautiful piece of music that you’ve practiced and have internalized. Optimally, you **become** it and allow it to flow out of you --- if you concentrate too hard and **try** too hard, it will be coarse and inelegant. When we do without doing – – we do our very best to prepare well and be fully present to the moment, we can allow the skillful response to flow out of our center, our heart space.

I don’t know about you – but I am very aware of the physical sensation I get in my chest when I am not following this wisdom. When I am caught in fear or am exerting my will to acquire something or elicit some behavior or response from another person --- a kind of gripping right here. When, instead, I can follow my own best preparation with a letting go, an open hand, and a trusting in the flow of life, I can (as the Tao Te Ching describes) be nimble and flexible and creative in my responses to life - as opposed to the times when we’re stiff and demanding of our own way. In that state. we often miss our opportunities to adapt and respond in a way that brings the smoothest solution to life's challenges. It is counterintuitive but true - that the softest, most centered place is also often the most powerful.

So when my friend handed this to me – an internal voice sighed, “Ah – my old friend has come once again.” I thought back to the virgins and the *jing*-holding priests --- and I

realized that **for me** I didn't have to see this philosophy, this religion, this book as truth with a capital T. I didn't have to follow (or even know anything more about) those religious practices that are not of my era or my culture. I could just draw upon the words that rang true within me – I could accept the reminders that so strongly echo as truth to my own heart.

Perhaps, unwittingly, this was the day I became Unitarian Universalist. Knowing that life is full of wise sources – we need not limit ourselves to one. There is rich beauty available from countless sources – there is deep meaning out there waiting for me to personalize and draw it into me. This is yet another sacred source of inspiration and guidance to which my spirit powerfully responds.

Now, these dozen or so years later, the Tao Te Ching continues as my frequent companion. And the beauty of this UU faith is that we don't have to choose only one – we celebrate and live out of the truths found in all!

I'll close with #39 again, from Stephen Mitchell's translation. (This one, by the way, uses the male pronoun but that's cited as a limitation of our English language. Mitchell varies the gender throughout his translation).

*In harmony with the Tao,
the sky is clear and spacious,
the earth is solid and full,
all creature flourish together,
content with the way they are,
endlessly repeating themselves,
endlessly renewed.*

*When man interferes with the Tao,
the sky becomes filthy,
the earth becomes depleted,
the equilibrium crumbles,
creatures become extinct.*

*The Master views the parts with compassion,
because he understands the whole.
His constant practice is humility.
He doesn't glitter like a jewel
but lets himself be shaped by the Tao,
as rugged and common as stone.*

So may it be. Amen.