

## FROM OTHER LANDS

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker  
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Okay how many of you already own an I-phone? I know that there must be someone here this morning that already has one. And, now be honest, how many people here *want* an I-phone? A friend of mine, who does love her gadgets, has one and I must admit it is pretty cool. If you don't have one or haven't seen one, an I-phone is the latest technology that integrates a whole bunch of things into a single gadget. It's a phone, a camera, an I-pod and a means of browsing the internet all in-one. You can turn it sideways and the picture on the screen will adjust itself to show you a landscape picture rather than a portrait. You can do neat things like enter the word Starbucks and it will show you the closest ones to your location. It has satellite maps so you can see your building and actual cars on the street. It is really quite a remarkable gadget that does everything but cook dinner, though it can show you the nearest restaurant of your liking and dial the number so you can order dinner to go.

I don't have one...yet. After seeing my friend's I-phone I must admit to coveting hers. I started thinking about how I might use one and all the other gadgets I could do away with if I only had this one really cool gadget. I thought about the fact that I could get email wherever I was and whenever I wanted. I could browse the internet and have it look just like it does at home. All these things I could do, if only I had an I-phone. I almost had myself convinced that not only did I want an I-phone I *needed* an I-phone. My life would be simpler and easier if I only had one. I was just about ready to believe that if only I had an I-phone my life would be better.

Then the part of my life and being that *is* better kicked in and shouted "NO IT WOULDN'T!". Sure, I could do more things, but the problem with my life now is doing too many things. There was a time, not so long ago when we left our work at the office and enjoyed the time we had for rest. Now we can get our email and voicemail anytime and anywhere, so we never seem to rest. We can do more things with our free time which then makes the time no longer free time. We do, do, do.

We do so much that we've convinced ourselves that if we only did a little bit more, then things would be better. We would have a better place to live, though when we would enjoy all that space with all of our doing we can't really answer. We would have more money, but then we would spend it on more things that allowed us to *do* some more stuff. We, people of the West, do not know the art of not doing.

There are lessons we can learn from other lands that may help us get out of this endless cycle of doing. Our sources recognize the fact that there are lessons in religions from lands beyond the Western world from which we might learn how to better the quality of our lives. This morning as we explore our third source "Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life," we will do so through the lens of Taoism and what we might learn about doing and non-doing.

I have to admit that until very recently, my knowledge of Taoism was woefully lacking. In fact when I went before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to take my “exams” if you will, when they asked me to compare Unitarian Universalism with Taoism my answer was “can we pick something else, since I don’t know enough to even fake a guess.” They did, I passed, but since then I’ve become curious about Taoism and what if anything I might learn from it. So I did some reading about Taoism and its sacred texts. I won’t pretend to be an expert on the subject, that would take a lot more knowledge than I have gained, but what I do know has taught me that Taoism has something very important to teach us all.

Our reading and our responsive reading this morning were both purportedly written by the founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu. We don’t know that much about him, other than he was born sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E (Before the Common Era). The name Lao Tzu means Old Master, which was not his given name, but rather became a title of respect. His given name was Li Erh and he came from the southern part of what we now know as the Hunan province in China. It is supposed that he have worked in the imperial court as the keeper of the archives, and that when he was eighty, disillusioned by what he observed, he decided to leave the court but before he did he was persuaded to write down his teachings. He is then said to have written the 5,000 characters of the *Tao Te Ching, The Way and Its Power* which became the first and perhaps the most important of many Taoist texts.

The word Tao means the Way, but the Tao itself is hard to explain, in fact it is unexplainable. The opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* state that

Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself.  
Even the finest name is insufficient to define it.  
Without words, the Tao can be experienced,  
and without a name, it can be known.

To conduct one's life according to the Tao,  
is to conduct one's life without regrets;  
to realize that potential within oneself  
which is of benefit to all.<sup>1</sup>

The Tao is beyond our knowledge, yet it is within our grasp by living in harmony with nature rather than at odds with it. At the heart of Taoism is this idea of living in harmony. Harmony with nature, with each other, with the self. The ultimate way of living in harmony benefits not just the individual but it is to the benefit of all life. Yet, Taoism does not paint a rosy picture of nature as being all good. There is an understanding within Taoism that nature is what nature is, both good and bad. Nature has no desire towards either the good or the bad, it just is, and in our natural state we have no desire either. It is when we have desires, like for a new I-phone, that we lose our harmony with nature. We act not in accordance with the natural way, but out of our desire and when we do we place ourselves and our wants above those of other people and we create jealousy and ultimately discord. From the *Tao Te Ching*:

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<sup>1</sup> *Tao Te Ching* Chapter 1

Not praising the worthy prevents contention,  
Not esteeming the valuable prevents theft,  
Not displaying the beautiful prevents desire.<sup>2</sup>

These are thoughts quite unfamiliar to us in modern day Western society, and we might think them naïve. After all we have an entire industry whose sole purpose is to get us to desire things, the advertising industry. We are told to desire this brand of soda versus that brand. We are told to desire this car and that dish detergent. Even our medical care is subject to the pressures of desire. We are told about desires we didn't even know we had or should have "ask your doctor about the little purple pill." We are to desire the latest greatest thing, and we are to show them off too. But Taoism helps us understand that our desire for more things is not what will bring us contentment. What brings true contentment is service to humanity:

Enlightened people are not cultured;  
Culture is not enlightenment.  
Content people are not wealthy;  
Wealth is not contentment.

So the sage does not serve herself;  
The more she does for others, the more she is satisfied;  
The more she gives, the more she receives.  
Nature flourishes at the expense of no one;  
So the sage benefits all people and contends with none.<sup>3</sup>

The more we give, the more we receive. But what is it that we receive, surely not riches. What we receive is peace of mind, of body and of soul.

Embracing the Way, you become embraced;  
Breathing gently, you become newborn;  
Clearing your mind, you become clear;  
Nurturing your children, you become impartial;  
Opening your heart, you become accepted;  
Accepting the world, you embrace the Way.

Bearing and nurturing,  
Creating but not owning,  
Giving without demanding,  
This is harmony.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Chapter 3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Chapter 81

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Chapter 10

This makes so much sense, doesn't it? But it seems so very hard to live. We are so caught up in the doing and the getting and the more that we lose sight of the truly important things in life. Now, I will be the first to tell you that giving up desire for more things is something that I find almost impossible. I do want the latest toys and the neatest gadgets. Most of you have already heard that last year for my birthday I bought one of those expensive toys and I'm glad to have it. But I do wonder what toll it is taking.

Yes, watching a baseball game on my big screen television is almost like being there, but I haven't been to a single game this year. And I wonder if in being able to see the game from my living room am I losing some of the pleasure of being at the ballpark. There is something magical that happens there, when you're with hundreds of other people watching a game on a warm summer day. The way the grass is mown, the beauty of a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. I am missing that magic because I can just watch from the comfort of my living room. It's not that I don't know what I'm missing, and what I can be enjoying, it's more that my toys have brought me not closer to being in harmony with people but further away from it. I suffer for that. I may not always be aware of it, but I lose something special when I desire material things.

We all do. In our rush to do things and own things we lose a little something. We get further away from each other and from the simple pleasures of life. It's not evident all of the time, but we become more and more isolated. We use the internet instead of going to the library and we miss the contact with another human being. Our children play video games instead of kicking a ball around and they lose the simplicity of play. And through all of this our hearts become closed to other people and we become lonelier and lonelier. We don't know the names of our neighbors and we become less and less compassionate. We begin to think we can do just about anything and our actions become more and more destructive without our even realizing it. Just look at what we have done to the environment.

Taoism can serve as a necessary corrective to this path of self annihilation we slowly tread upon. Lao Tzu gave us a treasure that we might look to apply to our own lives:

Here are three treasures  
That I cherish and commend to you:  
The first is compassion,  
By which one finds courage.  
The second is restraint,  
By which one finds strength.  
And the third is unimportance,  
By which one finds influence.<sup>5</sup>

Compassion, restraint and unimportance or what we would call humility. These are called the three jewels of Taoism. And look at what he says of each of them. Through compassion we find courage. Through restraint we find strength and through humility we find influence. This seems paradoxical. When we think of compassion we do not think it will bring us courage, but rather we think that we must be courageous enough to be compassionate. And influence through

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Chapter 67

humility? We live in a society where if you don't toot your own horn you don't get very far. Anyone who has watched any of the Presidential candidates debates can tell you that. Yet Lao Tzu says just the opposite. We gain more influence by being unimportant.

He may be right. All those important people telling us how much they've done or will do for us don't seem to be fixing many of this society's problems, they all just seem to be adding to them. Yet when I stop in on a Monday night or a Friday afternoon and see the people of this church and other so-called unimportant people feeding the hungry I see your influence clearly. When I see our young people and old people too going down to New Orleans to help rebuild a city that the so called important people have forsaken, I can see their influence too. When I see you reach out to one another through our many ministries of caring to help someone get to the doctor or visit someone in the hospital or just to hold a friend who needs the touch of someone who cares, I see your influence. None of you tell the world how important you are, in your humility you just show your compassion and you change the lives of so many, many people. You don't say "gee if I help someone, then I will get something from it", no you do it because it seems like the right and good and natural thing to do. You act not for your own gain but out of the compassion that is in your heart.

The last lesson we can learn from Taoism this morning is what is called *wu wei* or non-action. It too is paradoxical and is often expressed as a paradox action without action *wei wu wei*. This does not mean that we sit and do nothing and watch life go by. What it is saying is that our actions must be in accord with nature not in accord with our desires for nature. We cannot control the world and the people in it. We can only give of ourselves and we cannot know how our giving will make a difference. If we desire the outcome we will lose the motivation and the outcome will not be for the benefit of all but for the benefit of our egos. Yet if we act in harmony with nature, giving up our attachment to outcome then we will create the peace we seek.

The Way takes no action, but leaves nothing undone.  
When you accept this  
The world will flourish,  
In harmony with nature.

Nature does not possess desire;  
Without desire, the heart becomes quiet;  
In this manner the whole world is made tranquil.<sup>6</sup>

When our actions come from our compassionate hearts and not our selfish desires then we truly will make a difference in this world and we will walk on the path of the Tao.

Like I said, I am no expert in Taoism, and there is much more to say about it; too much for a single sermon on a Sunday morning. But there are lessons for us to learn that can make our lives and the lives of others fuller and richer. Compassion, moderation and humility. Action without action. Living in harmony with nature and not at odds with it. Simple lessons from which we can all learn and live. I leave you with these words from the Tao Te Ching:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Chapter 37

The sage does not distinguish between himself and the world;  
The needs of other people are as his own.

He is good to those who are good;  
He is also good to those who are not good,  
Thereby he is good.  
She trusts those who are trustworthy;  
she also trusts those who are not trustworthy,  
Thereby she is trustworthy.

The sage lives in harmony with the world,  
And his mind is the world's mind.  
So she nurtures the worlds of others  
As a mother does her children.<sup>7</sup>

Let us all seek to be sages in this world so full of knowledge and lacking in wisdom.

Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Chapter 49