

Effortless Virtue

A Chinese New Year sermon for January 29, 2006

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On a beach, in the hot summer sun and salty air, an earnest little boy is on his knees scooping and packing the damp sand with a plastic shovel into a bright blue bucket, we could call him Jimmy. Now he carefully upends the bucket onto the sand and lifts it to reveal a sand tower in his emerging sand castle. All afternoon he will work with concentration and diligence, spooning out the moat, packing the walls, placing stray stones as sentries on the lookout, perhaps popsicle sticks as wooden bridges; he'll build a sandcastle with passion, intensity, great delight; there is deep meaning here. In the city, surrounded by busy streets and rumbling traffic, a man is working in his office, perhaps he is a biotechnology executive. At his desk he organizes papers into stacks and delegates the assignments to his staff. He cradles the phone on his shoulder while he punches the keyboard of his computer. He is continually multi-tasking, numbers are juggled, contracts are signed, and much to his delight a profit is made. All his life he will work, devoting energy and intensity to devising plans, organizing the work of others, forecasting revenues, capital gains the bridges to his profits, he'll build a business with passion, intensity and great delight; yet something important is missing and deep within he knows it.

Two builders of two castles yet with much in common. They work diligently to shape particularities into order and results. Where before there was nothing they make something; both are diligent and determined. Yet the boy transcends the purpose of all this effort while the man succumbs to it. Watch Jimmy as the dusk approaches. As the ocean waves come near, the innocent child jumps to his feet and begins to clap. There is no sorrow, no fear, no regret. He knew this would happen, so he is not surprised or disappointed. When a great wave crashes into his castle and his masterpiece dissolves into the sea he smiles. He has no attachment to his work and so is content with this outcome. He smiles, looks around for his mom and dad, and then goes contentedly home. The businessman however does not have the same ability to work without attachment to the outcome. As the waves of years inevitably collapses upon his castle he becomes terrified. He hovers over his monument to protect it as best he can. His life becomes filled with anxiety. He tries to block the action of the waves upon the world he has

fashioned; yet soaked and shivering he snarls at the incoming tide. It is my castle he declares, but the ocean need not respond, both know to whom the sand belongs.

When first confronted with the Tao it is possible to mistake the effortless way as an easy way, but when I say effortless virtue I do not mean easy virtue, rather it is a way free of attachment, self-will and personal importance; a way consistent with the unfolding of the universe. Hear this view from canto 44 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Fame or integrity: which is more important?
Money or happiness: which is more valuable?
Success or failure: which is more destructive?

If you look to others for fulfillment,
You will never truly be fulfilled.
If your happiness depends on money,
You will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have;
Rejoice in the way things are.
When you realize there is nothing lacking,
The whole world belongs to you.

How many of us have fallen into a game of our own devising, in our passion forgetting that it is just a game, just one part of the unfolding of our lives, not truly life itself. Even a game goes better when we learn to hold it lightly, not too focused on the outcome. Caught in desire we see only manifestations of the real, forgetting that the eternal, the real and significant nature of our lives always transcends that which we are caught within. Our lives have a transcendent meaning which we sometimes lose within the trials of day to day living. Within the context of the unfolding of the universe, the waves that crash upon our carefully devised lives are nothing. Can we put away our tools, without fear or regret, and go contentedly home at the end of the day, as the tide washes all of our work away. This is foreign to western thought, painful for those of us attached to outcomes and results, but while never easy, it is a path of effortless virtue nevertheless. When you realize that nothing is lacking, the whole world belongs to you, and you to it.

As the *I Ching* says, “Limitations are troublesome, but they are effective.” It is not a defect of the universe that our lives have finite measure, but rather a result of our being an integral part of the unfolding of the universe. Within the breadth and scale of this awesome universe our lives matter, our problems have significance precisely because we are a transitory expression of the unfolding universe. Living contentedly within our limitations allows us to enjoy the transitory fruits of our labors. We engage with this life with intensity and earnestness yet when its time is over we applaud its goodness and let it go with delight. We dare to dream big, but when the time comes that we must let a dream go we must let it go. We must relinquish our earnest busy way of pursuing being, and then free from desire come to realize the true mystery of this life!

To recognize that our efforts cannot create anything that is eternal; to recognize that the ways that can be told are not the eternal way; that any divinity that can be named is at best a proxy for the divine; and that the eternally real and significant is ultimately un-nameable but that we have been invited into and are able to participate in its becoming. Such is the way of the Chinese Tao, the path of doing through not doing; where nothing is done because the doer has wholeheartedly vanished into the deed; the potential fuel has been completely transformed into flame; and the doer has become one with the whole universe. Taoism has something to teach early 21st Century Americans about what it means to truly live one’s life; to enjoy this moment in time. To recognize that all we have, and all that we can ever hope for, are moments in time and this is good!

The American poet Mary Oliver captures this concept for me better than any other living American in her poem *In Blackwater Woods* which goes:

Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light, are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment, the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating over the blue shoulders of ponds, of every pond no matter what its name, is nameless now.

Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends upon it; and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

Thus Jimmy playing with intensity and delight in the summer sand knows this. He engages life with true earnestness, holding on to this moment as if his very life depends upon it, and when the waves begin to rise, and the sun begins to set, he lets it go with joy. The businessman for all of his intensity and delight in building up his business has forgotten, so he struggles anxious and terrified, far too attached to what was to welcome what is to be. How many of us hold on so earnestly to what was that we are unprepared for what will be? How much better would it be if we could learn to just let go? By earnestly trying to block change we are undone. As Lao Tse asks us: "Fame or integrity, which is more important? Money or happiness, which is more valuable? Success or failure, which is more destructive to us?" How can we truly engage life without knowing the answer to these simple questions; or how to let go when the time comes to let it go; we must learn to let go!

This evening will be the second new moon after the winter solstice, which makes it the beginning of the Chinese New Year, a joyous celebration that begins today and continues for fifteen days until the next full moon. For Chinese astronomers this is the 4704 year of human civilization, and in the Chinese 12 year cycle of auspicious animals, today is the beginning of the year of the dog! Gung Hay Fat Choy! It is a time for reunion and thanksgiving. It also seemed to be an auspicious time to introduce you to the wisdom of Lao Tse and Taoism. For me there is something in this deep wisdom that is an antidote to the constant doing of early 21st Century America. There are days when I feel like saying: Don't just do something, sit there and appreciate the wonder of your life!

Taoism is an old religion, preceding the teachings of Buddha or Jesus by at least 1000 years. We hear echoes of non-attachment in Christianity, particularly from monastic sages, and certainly within that part of Buddhism called Zen, yet no where is non-attachment so richly explored and esteemed as among the ancient Taoist sages. Free from desire they come to realize the true mystery of this life. Whereas caught in desire we see, hunger and thirst after what are only images of the real. It is like going to one of those Japanese restaurants that give beautiful plastic representations of their meals and we prefer the plastic images to the sublime food offered within. I think this is what a Taoist would say about modern Americans: because we treat

the temporary and transitory as if it was the real thing, we too often miss the eternal and significant. Can we not perhaps focus upon the real and significant instead?

I would like to end this sermon with another Mary Oliver poem, this one she called *When Death Comes*:

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn;
When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy
me, and snaps the purse shut; when death comes like measles; when
death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything as a brother and a sister,
And I look upon time as no more than an idea, and I consider eternity as
another possibility, and I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field
daisy, and as singular, and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending as all music does toward silence, and each body a lion of courage,
something precious to the earth. When it is over I want to say: all my life I
was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world
in my arms. When it is over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my
life something particular and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and
frightened, or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Taoism asks along with Mary Oliver: what you will have to show for this
one short wild life of yours? How will you justify your choices? What will
lead you to be able to let go, and contentedly leave behind that which is your
life? These are important questions for each of us to ponder, perhaps at least
until the next full moon. Blessed be and Amen.