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Imposing Our Will

By Samantha Swartzendruber

Lao Tzu asks in the *Tao Te Ching*, "Can you love people and lead them/without imposing your will?" (*Tao Te Ching*, 10). We often believe we know what's best for others, especially our loved ones. In reality, however, what we deem the right thing for them might not actually be so.

Epictetus, an important Stoic, also encourages us to let go of the notion that other people fall under our control in some way. In *The Handbook* he writes, "Never say of anything, "I have lost it;" but, "I have returned it"... What difference is it to you who the giver assigns to take it back? While he gives it to you to possess, take care of it; but don't view it as your own, just as travelers view a hotel" (Epictetus, 11). This said, we must not consider other human beings as fair recipients for our judgments and advice.

The question of whether we can really know what is best for others is also treated by Chuang Tzu's parable *Symphony for a Sea Bird*. In the story, a prince welcomes a sea bird to his palace and treats the animal as a human guest.

The Prince ordered a solemn reception,
Offered the sea bird wine in the sacred precinct,
Called for musicians
To play the composition of Shun,
Slaughtered cattle to nourish it:
Dazed with Symphonies, the unhappy sea bird
Died of despair.

How should you treat a bird?
As yourself
Or as a bird?

This tale highlights the dangers of imposing our values and ways of life onto others without thinking carefully about what could actually be good for them. Modernly speaking, this mistake can often be observed in parenting and education, among friends as well as in relationships and families.