

22 October 2016

## **The Wonder of The Tao**

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My entire life I feel that I have been admiring the wrong qualities, and looking up to the wrong people. I've valued ambition, strength, activeness, and cunning as if these somehow better a person. I've slowly tried to mold myself into the form of idols who never stopped reaching, never seemed to be wrong, and seemed to spend every moment of their lives striving for an elevated existence. I've come to realize that I was wrong in trying to cultivate these things within myself. I've learned selfish habits; I've sponsored pipe dreams of transforming the world, of leaving a part of my presence behind after death, of being ahead of the game. All of these things have left me feeling as if I have already failed, without even taking the first steps toward "success". Reading Tao Te Ching filled me with a type of calmness I haven't experienced before, simply because I have never sought out a philosophy of non-action, of humility and of giving up control. It never occurred to me that someone with no power could be perfectly content and centered in the world. I re-read Tao Te Ching three times and was excited to practice the ideals as best I could, even beyond these four days.

The third time I read Tao Te Ching I took down quotes I felt I could incorporate into my daily life at university. I kept them in my pocket and referred to them whenever I felt I needed to. Which ended up being quite often. One quote that stood out to me was number 48, "In the practice of the Tao, every day something is dropped." I set out to unlearn some behaviors that I know impede my self-actualization, focusing on one thing per day. The first day I decided to stop smoking, and I didn't smoke for all four days. It seems inconsequential, but it's a detriment to myself, to my family, and to those I pass by while indulging in the habit. The second day I decided to focus on anxiety. I was diagnosed with general and social anxiety at twelve years old, and it greatly hinders all of my endeavors. I repeated several quotes to myself when I felt fears arise, and constantly stopped to try and center myself in the universe. One line I repeated to myself was from chapter 9, "Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner." I said this as I walked to class one day, and made an effort not to think of what they thought of me, but to think of what they thought of themselves, and how scared they themselves could be. I reminded myself of chapter 13, "See the world as your self. Have faith in the way things are," and chapter 44, "When you realize there is nothing lacking, the world belongs to you." It was as if I'd found a wealth of calmness within myself that I hadn't known about before.

On the third day, I set out to stop fearing deadlines, to stop scolding myself for not doing enough in the pursuit of my career, and to stop trying to steer my life in any direction other than where it would naturally lead me. When I stopped fearing deadlines, I was able to focus on the work, and in focusing on the assignments I could let go of the fear of failure that often impedes my motivation to write. I was able to, "Confront the difficult while it is still easy; accomplish the great task by a series of small acts." (63) I tried to "let go of fixed plans and concepts," (57) and see failure as an opportunity, as it states in chapter 79. When I addressed my frustration with where I am relative to others in my major, I tried to stop comparing myself to others, there is no way I could know their circumstances, and they are no doubt different from my own. A quote I kept on the list with me from chapter 24: "He who rushes ahead doesn't go far. He who tries to shine dims his own light. He who defines himself can't know who he really is." I remembered the Taoist's value of humility, and trying to place myself on some meaningless ladder of hierarchy in my field was not humble, it was assuming things of myself and boasting of abilities that don't contribute to what is truly important. The quote that hit me the hardest, the first time I read through the book, was chapter 29, which made me rethink my long held dream of improving the world. "The world is sacred. It can't be improved. If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it." To think that I could improve the world is not humble, but aside from this, my effort to enforce some kind of change through film or otherwise would only damage a world that is perfect on its own, following its natural path. I've decided to do further searching for a new goal in life, to improve myself before assuming I could ever improve the world.

On the fourth day I set out to evaluate the conflict in my life, not to try to "fix" my confrontations or somehow solve all my problems, but to take in my opposition with a different perspective; a perspective of acceptance and calm instead of matching opposition and defensiveness. One of my biggest stressors has always been other people, even people I consider my close friends. I have a friend here who is struggling with her own problems, but in doing so often negatively affects those around her, as her coping mechanisms are sometimes detrimental. For a while I had been considering slowly seceding from her endeavors, but I hesitated, as I don't like the idea of leaving someone in a tough spot. I remember the chapter that said, "What is a good man but a bad man's teacher? What is a bad man but a good man's job?" I don't want to imply that this person is bad, or that I am any better, because I also remember the passage on closing one's mind in judgment, but this prompted me to stay with

this person after a particularly challenging day. To try to be a positive influence in a situation with many negative ones. Something this person often says is that she is “co-dependent” and that she needs and relies on others to feel any sense of well-being, so on the fourth day I began encouraging her to find this feeling of confidence and contentedness within herself, revisiting chapter 44, “If you look to others for fulfillment, you will never truly be fulfilled.” I also face a lot of conflict within my family. While it has prompted “filial piety” as it says in chapter 18, the resulting anxieties remain part of my daily internal dialogue. To re-evaluate this I looked to chapter 8, “In family life, be completely present.” My relocation was in part to do the very opposite of this, to remove myself from the stressors of my family’s fighting, but I want to make an effort to be completely present. I sent each of my family members, extended included, a letter, reaching out to them and expressing both love and a desire to stay connected. So far three people have received these letters, and each one was so pleased by that simple communication that I felt a great relief from the usual feeling of guilt.

At the end of this personal philosophical experiment I had hoped that I would feel a definite connection to Taoism, but instead, I think I am better equipped to search for more connections; not assuming that I know anything, letting the world and other philosophies naturally form and influence my life. I hope I can retain the sense of calmness these four days have helped me discover, that I can understand the three things Lao taught, “simplicity, patience, compassion.” (67) For as many days as I remember I will repeat this to myself, “Empty your mind of all thoughts. Let your heart be at peace.” I will accept the way that things are, giving up control of the world, and immersing myself in “the wonder of the Tao.” (16)