

Gently Down the Stream¹

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June 12, 2011

Everything in nature meanders. I think about the creek in the woods near our house. It doesn't push in a straight line, but winds around rocks and trees, finding the smoothest and easiest way to go forward. LaoTse, an ancient Chinese wise man wrote, "Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong." Today we will be exploring the way of water, the way of meandering, which we call the Tao.

Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream²

Lesson For All Ages: The Wind & the Sun An Aesop's Fable³

Narrator: The Wind and the Sun were arguing with each other.

Wind: "I am stronger than you are," (boasting)

Sun: "No! I am stronger than you are," (very emphatically)

Wind: "I don't think so!"

Narrator: While the two were thus contradicting each other, they looked down on the earth and saw a man walking along a road. (Man comes by in cloak)

Sun: "Hey, I have an idea. Let us make an experiment. Let us see which one of us can make that man take off his cloak. The one who succeeds will plainly be the stronger."

Wind: (in an aside to congregation) "Hmm... she must not remember how many times I have torn down big houses and blown down trees twice as high as that man on the road. Surely I can soon tear a cloak off a man's back."

Wind: (to Sun) "Let's do the experiment. I agree."

Sun: "Very well, you try first. I'll just hide behind this cloud, where I can peek through a tiny crack and watch."

Narrator: Then the Wind began. At first she blew only moderately fast, then harder and more furiously. She pounded and she slapped and she whirled and she jerked. But the louder she roared, and the faster she blew, the more closely the traveler wrapped his cloak around him. Finally, angry at the traveler and peeved with herself, the Wind had to give up.

Wind: "I give up! This is impossible!"

Sun: "Now its my turn."

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² Trad. Nursery Rhyme

³ Adapted from Sophia Lyon Fahs, *From Long Ago and Many Lands*

Narrator: The Sun came out from behind the cloud and began in all her glory to shine down on the traveler. The Sun did not move or make a sound. Its warm sunbeams reached quietly down and around until they touched with their warmth everything below.

Soon the traveler began to feel warm.

(Traveler opens up his cloak, and then soon after, wiping sweat from his brow, flings off the cloak and carries it on his arm.)

Sun: "So, it seems to me that our argument is settled. You could not make that traveler remove his cloak even with all your bluster, but he has taken it off while I merely shone my light without any extra effort."

Narrator: what do you think is the moral of the story?

Reading: *Tao Te Ching #10⁴*

Can you coax your mind from its wandering and keep to the original oneness?

Can you let your body become supple as a newborn child's?

Can you cleanse your inner vision until you see nothing but the light?

Can you love people and lead them without imposing your will?

Can you deal with the most vital matters by letting events take their own course?

Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things?

Giving birth and nourishing,
having without possessing,
acting with no expectations
leading and not trying to control,
this is the supreme virtue.

Sermon

We live in a very busy society, in which "doing" fills our days. How many of you keep a "to-do" list? Doesn't it just go on and on? In our world it is easy to get so busy with our doing, that we forget about being. How many of you have a "to-be" list? I don't either. Of course, being and doing can come together. We don't have to eliminate either one. Every so often, I need to return to the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching, to remind me about the gentle ways of being and doing. If some parts of today's sermon sound familiar to you, it is because I revisited old sermons about the Tao, to remember the lessons I need to learn again and again.

The Tao Te Ching says: (in teaching #48)

In the pursuit of knowledge, every day something is added.

In the practice of the Tao, every day something is dropped.

Less and less do you need to force things until finally you arrive at non-action.

When nothing is done, nothing is left undone

True mastery can be gained by letting things go their own way.

It can't be gained by interfering.

⁴ All *Tao* readings are from the *Tao Te Ching* a new English version, translated by Stephen Mitchell

Today I want to frame these patterns as two different ways of engaging in life. One way is when I try to manage and control everything around me. I think of it as my "fixer" mode. When I am in the fixer mode, I tend toward being a perfectionist, a workaholic, a worrier, and know just what the right thing is for everyone. When I am the fixer, I move through the day in a rigid way, forcing and pushing my life ahead of me. Perhaps some of you have a fixer inside of you, too?

But sometimes, I find another way: I let go of control, don't try to fix anyone. Rather, I feel as if I have been dropped unexpectedly into a gently flowing stream, and it carries me through my day with grace and playfulness and faith. I enjoy other people, and feel trust. I remember what the mystic Julian of Norwich tells us, that "All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." And in that flowing way, so they are. When I move through the day like a boat going gently down the stream, I am soft, and yielding, and yet also more effective and happy in my life.

Some things can only be brought forth as if in slow motion. There is a gentleness that is needed for creativity: to grow a garden, or raise a child, or grow a community that can transform lives through the power of love. There is an old story about a new farmer who was so eager to grow his crops that he went out at night and pulled on the tender shoots. Well that doesn't work! Life has its own rhythms and when we try to fix everything, we can destroy the very things we are nurturing.

Benjamin Hoff relates the story of a famous Chinese painting, called "The Vinegar Tasters." In the painting there are three sages standing around a vat of vinegar. Each has dipped his finger in, and tasted it. The expression on each man's face shows his individual reaction. The first has a sour look, and the second a bitter expression, but the third man is smiling. The painting is an allegory, and represents the "Three Teachings" of China, three responses to the Essence of Life.

The first sage was K'ung Fu-Tse, or as we used to say, Confucius. To him, life seemed sour. The present was out of step with the past, and the solution was a complex set of rules and rituals for every facet of life. Sounds to me a little bit like the fixer. It was said of Kung Fu-Tse, "If the mat was not straight, the master would not sit."

The second sage was the Buddha. This artist understood that for the Buddha, life on earth was bitter. The world was a revolving wheel of suffering, and one must let go of all desire and attachment to reach Nirvana.

The smiling sage was Lao-tse. To Lao-tse, the harmony that naturally existed between heaven and earth could be found by anyone at any time. But the more humans interfered with this natural balance, the further away the harmony retreated. The more forcing, the more trouble. What he saw operating behind everything in heaven and earth, he called the *Tao*, the Way. From the Taoist point of view, sourness and bitterness come from interfering and unappreciative minds.⁵

In teaching #34, Lao-tse says

The great *Tao* flows everywhere,
all things are born from it, yet it doesn't create them.
It pours itself into its work, yet it makes no claim.
It nourishes infinite worlds, yet it doesn't hold onto them.

One of the American interpreters of Taoism, Alan Watts, says, "The *Tao* is the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature." He calls it "the watercourse way" because the flow of water was used as its principle metaphor.⁶

The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain. [#8]
Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.
The soft overcomes the hard. The gentle overcomes the rigid. [#78]

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to participate with other UU ministers in a retreat led by the Rev. Carl Scovel. Our topic was the spirituality of ministers. One of the subjects Rev. Scovel addressed was the way that ministers can get off track by being too busy, by doing too much. He said, we get so busy doing many things, that we forget the most important thing. He led us in a meditation of a story from the gospel of Luke.⁷

"In the course of their journey Jesus came to a village and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the feet of Jesus and listened to him speaking. Now Martha, who was distracted with all the serving, said "Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me." But Jesus answered, "Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her."

⁵ Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*

⁶ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*

⁷ Chapter 10

Many of us, when we heard this story, identified with Martha. After all, there are so many things to do, and it doesn't seem fair that Jesus didn't tell Mary to help with the serving. (It's a bit like trying to get folks to help make the coffee at church.) But Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part. What did that mean? Rev. Scovel invited us to act out the story, and identify with different characters. And so I imagined being Jesus. I imagined arriving in the house of these two sisters, tired from my travels. I imagined how it would feel that Mary sat right down and gave me a listening ear. I appreciated that Martha was fixing a nice meal, but mostly I cherished that loving attention.

I realized that the most important thing in life is the loving connection I share with other people. If attending to a million details keeps Martha from love, than no wonder she is cranky and critical of her sister. And how often in my own life did I fall into being cranky and critical and over busy and worried and hurried? But I also knew that I had important things to do. What would happen if I stopped trying to keep everything under control? Would the world fall apart? Would everything become chaotic?

When I came back from the retreat, I decided to try an experiment. For just one month, I would let go of trying to fix or control anyone. For just one month, I would try to remember what was most important. I would have faith in people, and listen to them, and love them. For just one month, I would try to enter the rhythm of the watercourse way. I would try the way of the *Tao*.

The results were amazing. On one typical day, I had a whole list of phone calls to return, and many meetings scheduled back to back. The fixer in me would tend to worry and hurry through the day trying to get as much done as possible. But in the way of the *Tao*, I imagined the day as an adventure. I found myself enjoying my first meeting, as I got to know a new member of the church. When they left, another person I needed to call just popped into the office and we passed along our messages. I got an email from someone else offering to do a task that needed a volunteer. Someone canceled an appointment, but another person in crisis happened to stop by, and I was able to take the time to listen right away.

The day seemed to flow by gently, and I felt blessed by the people with whom I connected, and happy. Somehow everything important was attended to, and the next day would be soon enough to work on that other project I didn't get to. "They say, the *Tao* never does anything, yet through it all things are done." [#37]

But it also wasn't quite as simple as that. How exactly do we enter the flowing way, how do we keep rowing gently down the stream? It was hard to let go of the fixer. When I tried to loosen its hold on me, I made some discoveries.

I found out that worry is what my mind does, when my heart is feeling fear. When fear comes into my heart, instead of just feeling the fear, my mind goes overboard by imagining all the things that could go wrong, and trying to control what might happen. And why is the fear in my heart? It seemed to me that fear is what my heart feels, after it has experienced some pain, and anticipates its possible return.

Each day, I needed to take time to quiet my mind, let go of worrying, and instead, be present to my feelings of fear and the pain I was carrying. Then, I needed to lay them down. Sometimes it helps me to imagine that God is a River—that the River, the flowing, is the underlying energy of Life and Love. If I paused every morning, and consciously laid down my burdens next to that flowing River, I could find my way into living in the gently flowing way. If I neglected that meditation, I would be carrying around too many burdens and be cross and anxious, and then start trying to fix the world so it wouldn't bother me so much, so it wouldn't hurt me so much.

Ironically, trying to control everything actually increases our pain. The best defense, for stress, is no defense at all: to roll with the punches, to be flexible and fluid. Water is not broken by a knife, but merely parts to contain the knife. It is only when we are rigid like ice that a knife can break us. Alan Watts explained it like this: "the chances of survival are best when there is no anxiety to survive, and the greatest power is available to those who do not seek power and do not use force. To be anxious to survive is to wear oneself out, and to seek power and use force is to overstrain one's system. One is best preserved by floating along without stress."

To enter the flowing river, I needed to acknowledge and let go of my fear. Choose to trust. During that month of trying the Way of the Tao, I had a dream about a lion cub. I was in a house and the lion cub was there, very small like a cat, but it was a lion. At first I was afraid, but then I realized that if I wanted to touch the lion I must have no fear. And so I dropped the fear and approached the lion with total confidence. It let me stroke and pet it, and responded with something like love and affection. I felt the pleasure and excitement of our connection.

What might happen if we based our actions, not on fear and control, but on joy and trust? What strength might be waiting for us, like the lion in my dreams? I invite you to try your own experiment—don't take my word for it—just try it for a month or even a week. No more fixing. Just believe in people and yourself. Just lay down your burdens every morning. See what happens.

The 23rd teaching of the *Tao Te Ching* tells us:

Express yourself completely, then keep quiet.

Be like the forces of nature: when it blows, there is only wind;

when it rains, there is only rain; when the clouds pass, the sun shines through.

If you are open to the *Tao*,
you are at one with the *Tao*
and you can embody it completely.
If you open yourself to insight,
you are at one with insight
and you can use it completely.
If you open yourself to loss,
you are at one with loss
and you can accept it completely.
Open yourself to the *Tao*,
then trust your natural responses;
and everything will fall into place.

Guided Meditation:

I invite you now into a time of meditation,
a time to practice entering the way of the flowing stream.
If you like, you can close your eyes, and get comfortable...
I invite you to imagine yourself walking in the woods,
on a path that leads toward a beautiful river...

You are carrying some heavy burdens, like rocks in a bag...
They slow your steps and weigh you down...
But as you come to the side of the river,
you set down your bag, and open it up.
You begin to take out the rocks, one by one.
Each rock is something that you have been worrying about...
But for today, you can let go of that worry.
Just for now, you can set it down, and leave it on the river bank...
Some of us may have one or two rocks to lay down.
Some of us may have many.
Just for now, lay down every rock, and leave it on the river bank. ...
Keep laying down rocks until your bag is empty...

And now, let yourself step into the cool, clear water of the river,
feel the flow of it against your skin.
Let it wash you and refresh you in your deepest being.
This is the river of love, the river of trust.
This is the river of life.
Let yourself feel it flowing, and let yourself flow gently down the stream...
Let yourself remain in meditation, as the choir sings to us now...

Choral Anthem: Down in the River to Pray Trad.
As I went down in the river to pray, studying about that good old way,
and who shall wear the starry crown, good Lord, show me the way.
Oh, sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down.
Oh, brothers, let's go down, down in the river to pray.

Reading: Selections from the Tao Te Ching
The Tao is like a well: used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities...
Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?...
If you want to be a great leader,
you must learn to follow the Tao.
Stop trying to control.
Let go of fixed plans and concepts,
and the world will govern itself.⁸

Closing Words:
Lao-tse says,
Express yourself completely, then keep quiet.
Be like the forces of nature:
when it blows, there is only wind;
when it rains, there is only rain;
when the clouds pass, the sun shines through.

⁸ Tao, #4, 15, 57.