

WHEN THE GREAT COMMUNION TAKES EFFECT
Drawing Beliefs About Morality from Taoism and Confucianism

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, March 12, 2017
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

READINGS

(see addendum)

Invocation

Taoist Peace, Confucian Righteousness

Meditation

Four Tao Philosophers, by Robert Francis

Readings

The Great Togetherness (Confucian)

Action and Non-Action (Chuang Tze 13)

Beauty and Ugliness (Lao Tze)

SERMON

Consider how you were raised to live – to what purpose and by what way to that purpose. Of course, it depends on who your parents were then and what they thought about human beings and what the conditions of life were for them and society.

And consider how you are now directing yourself to live – again, to what purpose and by what way to that purpose? So much is influenced by so much - but it seems we humans can be taught or can teach ourselves to consciously influence our own lives and try to direct them to our own best purposes. At the same time, other people will influence our lives and community and world as well as themselves.

It looks to me like this influencing is always happening, every moment of time. Perhaps that is one reason we here take so seriously the spiritual dimensions of affirming the worth and dignity of every person and of trying to ally closely with the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part – especially in difficult times – so each may have due influence for the common good.

This concern seems to have surfaced with particular significance for the people of China 2500 years ago, in the days of the philosopher theologians Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tze and Chuang Tze – and they may have something to say to our times. Theirs was a time of what one scholar calls “social anarchy” – a chaotic violent time and people and rule. Many Americans are here because of such times in their forebears’ lives. Many Americans still live in such a state. Many people around the globe are swept hither and yon by such

conditions. It is at such times that we might appreciate the inscrutable directions that Yogi Berra, star philosopher of the New York Yankees, gave an guest invited to his house: "When you get to the fork in the road, take it."

That is what we hear from ancient China in the teachings of the Confucians and the Taoists. It seems not untimely advice to ponder, to see if the fork leads to a more effective way to live than our current way.

The launching point for deciding how best to live (if we pretend that one is not just thrown into life without any conscious plan) is one's understanding of the Reality of Being and beings. What is existence and what are we in relation to it? What do we start with? What do we start as?

The Confucians and the Taoists agreed that the Ultimate Uncreated Creator Reality was unknowable other than to say it is Being, with vast Power or energy (call it *De* or *Chi*) and that it uses that power in its own vastly creative Way (call it the *Tao*).

They also agreed that all Created Ephemeral Limited Beings, like humans, are derived from this energy of Being and wax or wane depending on whether or not their way of using their allotted power is in harmony with the Great Way. Thus far, the honored scientific ancestors Albert Einstein, Nels Bohr, Stephen Hawking, Barbara McClintock and Neil DeGrasses-Tyson are happy.

The Taoists and Confucians also agreed that a person or a world achieved that blessed harmony more fully the more spontaneous and unconditioned by ambition or anxiety its action are. To act in a way that is without selfish ambition and without personal anxiety is to let the fullness of one's energy flow into one's task in harmony with the divine way, no matter who you are.

The great Taoist teacher Chuang Tze thought he dreamed that he was a butterfly. But he wondered if maybe he was really a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tze. One might conclude that nothing about how we live matters. One might conclude that life changes beyond our control. But traditional Taoists and Confucians I believe would say, No matter if you are currently a butterfly or a person, be the best butterfly or person you can be in harmony with the Tao.

How to do that? How can one come to live in harmony with the way of divine power? What is the human way to best live for the goodness and happiness of self and world? This is where Confucians and Taoists come to Yogi's fork in the road and take it divergently.

In brief, the Confucians say, To learn the best human way, trust not the way of

nature nor of instinct, but of culture and self-cultivation. Become a faceted and polished gem.

On the contrary, the Taoists say in brief, To learn the best human way, trust not the way of culture and self-cultivation, but of nature and instinct. Become a functional simple stone and be not coveted, but useful.

What is going on with this divide? The Confucians say, Without cultivation, the raw impulse of instinct is selfish, shortsighted, and ultimately destructive of what supports and enhances human life. To fulfill human potential and be fully truly human, we need learning and training to use the basic human qualities of compassion, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, and create a kind of second nature to channel the energies of life to their best purpose.

That, say the Confucians, is how “the sacred you” can most effectively and efficiently use the divine ultimate energy of life and contributes to the mutually sustaining community. This is the dance we do for fulfillment of a person and a people – each dancer politely invited in; each with a part as child, parent, sibling, ruler, friend; each a seed planting itself and reciprocally nourishing others; each learning to follow or to lead as needed; each attuned to the guiding music and words and rhythm; each knowing the need and the sailing joy of the music and the dance. The ritual of dancing well together is the way to honor one’s ancestors, to show that you were brought up well enough to contribute positively to the life of the life-sustaining community.

But the Taoists say, Ritualized propriety is not the way. In fact, any way that is learned from society is not the true way. To find one’s own true way for harmoniously using divine power, one must unlearn all cultural conditioning and instead study the least distorted manifestation of divine power, which is in one’s instinct and intuition and the ways of nature. Pare away cultural accretions so life’s natural power can flow easily. No coercive effort, no selfish ambition – this is the effective efficient way. Peace in the world comes only at the end of a progression which starts only with peace in the heart.

A scripture common to Taoism and Confucianism is the *I Ching, The Book of Change*. It teaches that life is full of change because the nature of life energy is *Yin* and *Yang* – action and reaction, now this pole, now that pole, in cosmic flux.. A horse runs away, a whole herd returns, taming the horses you suffer a broken leg, on crutches you deter military conscription and perhaps death. Such is the flow of life’s positive and negative forces; appreciate both. Only peace in the heart, only equanimity in the face of fortune good or bad, will center and strengthen life. Ritualized obedience gives up on life; opening to the spirit empowers life.

So we see the divide between Taoist teachings and Confucian teaching. And so we ask Yogi, How can we take both roads diverging in these woods? And Yogi answers, People call me a lucky ball player because I always seem to get the right bounce from the ball. I'll tell you, Yes, I am lucky, and the more I practice, the luckier I get. The more I practice, the more natural, the more spontaneous, the more precise my instinct when the moment calls me to act. No effort, no choice - just free flowing grace, just reenactment of a move made 10,000 times in practice. These ten thousand repetitions are the mother of the one act of true perfect grace.

And besides, said Yogi, when you get to the fork in the road, both branches curve around to my house. You can't go wrong. Practice adding graceful skill like Confucius? Yes. Practice removing awkward limitation, like Lao Tse? Yes. Now *Yin*, now *Yang*, now apart, now together - now center the final move in peace, in ease, in full presence to the moment. That is the way.

We are here to better understand our fabulous power and its best way. Four Tao philosophers - or four Confucian philosophers - as cedar waxwings: in this communion, in this common good, we are one. Was this not always our true style?

For the great communion to become real and effective, act as if the great communion is already real and effective. Be you philosopher or cedar waxwing or butterfly, be the best you can, for they are all beautiful and beneficial and can lightly soar in their own way.

May the force and its course be with you.

READINGS

Invocation: *Taoist Peace, Confucian Righteousness*_____

For peace in the world **let us make peace in the nations.**
For peace in the nations **let us make peace in the cities.**
For peace in the cities, **let us make peace between neighbors,**
For peace among neighbors, **let us make peace in the home.**
For peace in the home **let us make peace in our hearts.**
May we be righteous of heart **for beauty in character.**
May we be beautiful in character **for harmony in the home.**
May we be harmonious in the home **for order in the nation.**
May we be orderly in the nation **for peace in the world.**
May we be peaceful in the world **for communion with heaven.**

Meditation: *Four Tao Philosophers* by Robert Francis

Four Tao philosophers as cedar waxwings
chat on a February berry bush
in sun, and I am one.

Such merriment and such sobriety--
the small wild fruit on the tall stalk--
was this not always my true style?

Above an elegance of snow, beneath
a silk-blue sky a brotherhood of four
birds. Can you mistake us?

To sun, to feast, and to converse
and all together--for this I have abandoned
all my other lives.

Readings

The Great Togetherness (Confucian)

When humankind achieves full communion,
all people everywhere will live for the common good;
leaders of worth and ability will be selected;
their words will be trusted and they will be makers of peace.

People will not love their parents to the exclusion of parents of others,
nor their children to the exclusion of the children of others.
They will provide sustenance to the aged as long as they live,
employment to the able-bodied,
opportunity for development to the young,
friendly care to widows, orphans, the childless and the disabled;
for each person a task and for each person a home.

Not wishing to be wasteful of their possessions,
they will nevertheless not keep them for purely personal use;
not wishing to be inactive in the application of their strength,
they will at the same time not exert it merely in their own behalf.

Thus evil devices will cease or fail to prosper,
robbers and traitors will be out of work,
and outside doors will not need to be locked.

This will be what we call the Great Communion.

Action and Non-Action (Chuang Tze 13), Beauty and Ugliness (Lao Tze)

Chuang Tze said, "As the Tao is ceaseless, the wise are ceaseless: ceaseless in tranquility, ceaseless in spontaneous service, ceaseless in peace within and without – like moving water transporting, renewing; like still water clarifying, reflective, trusted as level – empty of anxiety, full of vitality, fruitful without ambition, joyful bringing joy."

Lao Tze said, "Do you know that when you name something as beautiful you name something else as ugly; and when you name something as good you name something else as bad? Therefore: to learn fully, appreciate the noise and the music; to teach fully, give yourself truly; to honor one, honor all. Nourish but don't claim; participate but don't control; contribute as one of many, but not as the only one. Never claim importance, and never doubt it.