

TAOIST AND CONFUCIAN BELIEFS ABOUT BELIEVING
What Can We Learn?

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, March 19, 2017
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

READINGS	(see addendum)
Gathering	from Li Po (c740 CE, Confucian poet)
Invocation	adapted from the <i>Dao De Ching</i> chapter 16
Meditation	from <i>Two Tramps in Mudtime</i> , by Robert Frost
Reading #1	<i>The Wise Help All Beings</i> from <i>Dao De Ching</i> (64)
Reading #2	<i>Understanding Ceremonies</i> , Book of Moderation, Confucius

SERMON

Here is my summary understanding of what the Chinese Taoist and Confucian traditions believe about existence and how best to live in it. They both believe that the world is created from the power and in the way of an unknowable impersonal heaven. They believe each created entity is a part of the whole, each entity possessing a portion of the whole's great power with which to live and grow, each entity also possessing a deep inner instinct or potential for living according to heaven's great way.

As to how to live, the two religions diverge. The Confucians believe that human potential must be cultivated by the society and by the individual to achieve individual fulfillment that in turn supports the society. The Taoists believe that the vast natural human potential for compassion and righteousness get constricted by human culture and conventions so as to never flourish.

So, should we train wonderful human nature for its fulfillment and the benefit of society or, rather, free wonderful human nature for its fulfillment and the blessing of society. Are we part of the whole? - or islands unto ourselves?

If you've been pondering the power and way of Being, that is a question you may have resolved or not. But for now, we move on to the final faith question about the Chinese belief system - On what authority do people hold such beliefs? Who says it's so and why believe them? Perhaps hearing about "who says" and "why believe" will open us to new understanding or perhaps to a new way of coming to understanding, or perhaps a new awareness of why we believe what we believe.

For the Taoists, the primary authority for beliefs about Reality, and about how best to live in it, is the Power and Way of Existence. Understand their singular message and you understand everything. But they aren't saying. Those who know don't reveal anything, other than to be and do everything in the world.

So, say Taoist teachings, Nature is the locus of the Power and its Way that we can experience and so is our primary source of understanding – our primary authority about what to believe about Reality and how best to live in it. Nature is the closest and best spokesperson for Heaven and its power and way.

But Nature speaks only the originating language of existence, coming across only in symbolic messages of sensation. So, say the Taoists, we must fall back on the human mind as our fallible and limited, but only, authority.

Those minds who have listened most closely and deeply hear the message most clearly. These are our most ancient ancestors, still fallible and limited, but born closer to the beginnings of Nature and able to learn directly from it before societal accretions began to build up and obscure the Reality of the Heavenly and Earthly Power and Way.

The ancient ancestors passed down two things. First, to our bodies they passed instinct and intuition, which are close in Nature to the purity of the divine Power and its Way. Second, they passed on their personal efforts to understand through scripture – the *I Ching*, the *Dao De Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu* and others. The people receive them with gratitude and devotion, even knowing that their understanding is impaired by the limitations of societally conditioned interpretation.

And almost finally there is you, an individual Taoist, seemingly far distant from divine power and process and even from earthly ancestors and scriptures. But what you do have is instinct and intuition – the very same as that within which the first ancestors most directly encountered the Power and its Way. If you can strip away the societal and individual accretions that keep the energy and truth of being from being known, you can know what life really is and how you can best really live.

I said “almost finally there is you.” But finally, there is society, the least sensitive instrument for detecting the Power and its Way – society awash in the distorting deluding influences of greed and fear and hate and self-centeredness - oh my. So society is to be approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion - a learning process based on skepticism about every societal belief statement. When society teaches the way, you can be sure it is not THE Way. It’s teachings are what must be scraped away from instinct and intuition to free your natural understanding.

As I understand it, that’s the Taoist position on Authority over why hold certain beliefs about life and living.

The Confucians, however, say, “Say it ain’t so, Kung Tso.” And Kung Tso, or as we call him, Confucius, says “It ain’t, necessarily. But indeed,” says Confucius, “the great Heaven is the great Power and Way and so it is the locus of all understanding of the Power and its Way and is beyond human understanding.

“But what we do have is the writings of the great society of our great ancestors who were so close to heaven and whose way of living by the power of heaven, being closest to it, is necessarily the finest, most empowering, most fulfilling way. Their wisdom, their solutions, their music – all communicated through their holy ceremonial way– all are ours to study, contemplate, embody, enact, and prosper by.

“The ancestors and their teachings are our best available authorities about Reality and how best to live in it. Our families, communities, and societies are the best preservers and channels of the ancestors’ authoritative teachings. It is through the discipline of the rituals, those time-tested conventions of behavior, that our power becomes virtuous and serves the dignity of all.” Thus, in paraphrase, spoke Confucius.

I think of the Robert Frost poem, “Two Tramps in Mudtime” that we meditated on a few moments ago. This to me could be called a poem of impersonal Heaven’s natural power and its natural way made personal in us.

The poet tells of the *Yin* and *Yang* of a New Hampshire April, now spring sun, now winter wind - the *Yin-Yang* of the joyful labor of expertly splitting logs, now strain and heat, now satisfaction and warmth - the *Yin-Yang* of two tramps from the woods and lumber camps showing the split between love and need - and finally the fullness of the Way and the fulfillment of its Power in turning over the axe and the work to give love and need their rightful place in that moment.

This is Taoism and Confucianism together, I think – in holy ritual, the reciprocal giving and receiving of dignity.

My understanding is that the layers of traditional authority in Confucianism and Taoism have usually operated well in Chinese culture in response to the alternating millennia of prosperous peace and violent oppression. The Confucian authority of elders was there to guide one through one’s younger years – that is, Confucianist cultured order is good and necessary for the young, disordered, or immature. The Taoist authority of the self, looking to its own nature’s Power and Way, was there as guide in one’s more mature stages of life –always aware of the alternating *Yin-Yang* current, as expertise and learning and love and need swing back and forth – that is, Taoist freedom

To conclude by looking at its relevance in more modern times, I think of Albert Einstein (as professor of the philosophy of science, Steven Gimbel reports) at first refusing to believe his favorite university professor when the professor explained to him the breakthrough implications of Einstein’s own Special Theory of Relativity that had not occurred to Einstein himself. And I think of how Einstein’s best friend Grossman had to teach him the math for explaining the curvature of space and time necessary for Einstein’s subsequent General Theory of Relativity.

So it seems nobody does anything entirely under the authority of their own understanding. Yet what we do may change, beyond anyone's imagination, the nature of authority and the authority of nature.

Consider the extraordinary educational achievements of Chinese American students in the California university system was found by researchers to be attributable to the traditional Confucian values of family loyalty and love of learning.

Consider Harvard socio-biologist E.O. Wilson's compelling thesis that, from ants to humans, cooperation within groups brings greater success to the group and its members.

Consider philosopher Herbert Fingarette's point that what Confucius did most notably was create an historical mythology – a memorable and meaningful narrative - about noble ancestors and their heavenly orientation that has sustained and healed Chinese society for 2500 years of dramatic change. This is the quality and dimension of myth that people from Joseph Campbell to Karen Armstrong say we much need in our world today. So we have something to learn from Confucians and Taoists.

The Confucian communitarian says, The young, the inexperienced, the uncertain, the unskilled, and the lost are well-advised to ask for guidance from authorities who are more mature in understanding; and those who prove to know more are wise to share, not by command, but by empowering the will, passion, hope, and understanding of others.

The Taoist libertarian interweaves with the Confucian communitarian, saying, Those established and elder in experience must prepare for the questions of the young and inexperienced by quiet self-examination and continuing study and exploration and discussion and discovering the questions that need to be asked and the stories that need to be told about life and living.

So now, Einstein would ask, What time is it?

Mother Teresa would ask, So why aren't you working already?

The Buddha of Compassion Kwan Yin would ask, Why do something when it works to just be there?

And Arthur Schroedinger would say, Regardless, be glad you're alive.

Happy authority hunting and happy springtime in your spirit.

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering from Li Po (c740 CE, Confucian poet)

You ask why I make my home in the forest of the mountain
and I smile and am silent and even my soul remains quiet:
it lives in the other world which no one owns.
The peach trees blossom. The water flows.
The birds vanish into the sky,
and now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

Invocation (responsive) adapted from the *Dao De Ching* chapter 16

This morning may we give rest to worry on this day of rest.

May our hearts be at peace.

This morning may we be aware of the turmoil of life,

but dwell at life's peaceful center.

May we recognize the separateness of beings,

but dwell upon their oneness in their Source.

May we recognize that enmity brings suffering,

but that finding oneness in our Source brings compassion,

like the kindness of a grandmother,

like the guidance of the wise.

This morning may we recognize the rhythms of life

and join in growth with grace and truth and joy.

Meditation from *Two Tramps in Mudtime* by Robert Frost

... The sun was warm but the wind was chill. You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still, You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak, A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak, And you're two months back in the middle of March....

Out of the wood two hulking tramps (From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps). They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks, They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said. They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head: As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain. My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain Theirs was the better right--agreed.

But yield who will to their separation, My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation As my two eyes make one in sight. Only where love and need
are one, And the work is play for mortal stake, Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sake.

Reading #1 *The Wise Help All Beings from Dao De Ching (64)*

Those who know do not speak;
those who speak do not know.
Those who do nothing improve themselves;
Those who love harmony right themselves;
Those who are not for sale enrich themselves;
Those who covet nothing sanctify themselves.
Those who learn what is unlearned
and assist without disrupting nature's way
help all beings regain what is lost
and enjoy their own nature once again.

Reading #2 *If One Understands the Ceremonies*
 from The Doctrine of the Mean, Confucius

Confucius said, "To find the Dao, there is nowhere you need to search. If it is not inside you, it is not the Dao.... A young person who is respectful and caring of his elders rarely undermines harmony. Is not respect for elders the root of goodness? In skilled archers there is a resemblance to mature people. When they miss the bull's eye, they turn and seek the reason for their failure in themselves.... Every day examine yourself: Through the day, have you been dutiful, have you been trustworthy, have you acted as you advise?"