

Learning as a Spiritual Practice

Readings: 'Learning Italian Slowly' by David Shumate
'Tula ["Books are door shaped..."]' by Margarita Engle
'What She Taught Me' by Marjorie Saiser

My brain is really good at remembering trivia. I can read a fun fact or a list of capital cities and it stays in my brain. This particular brain quirk was really useful in school, allowing me to not work as hard in classes that required lots of memorization, but beyond that, it's not particularly useful. I'm good at *Jeopardy!* and trivia games. I was the captain of my high school quiz bowl team. In an age when the answer to every question can be found on the phone that many of us carry in our pockets, my brain retaining trivia rarely proves useful. I would much rather have my brain easily retain more useful information, like the recipes I make over and over or how to change the humidifier filter or the names and faces of everyone gathered here, but that's not the brain I have.

The high point of having this brain came in seventh grade. I placed second in the state in the National Geographic Geography Bee. It's like a spelling bee, but with children taking turns answering questions about geography rather than spelling words. I was a kid who liked to look at maps and read books set in other countries... and my brain retained a lot of it. After competitions in my social studies class and the whole school and a standardized test, I eventually found myself on the auditorium of a local university competing with the best seventh and eighth grade geography trivia whizzes in Washington State. I placed second. I don't remember the question that I lost the state championship on, but I do remember the answer. It was 'The Ozark Plateau.' As the second place finisher, I won an atlas, which remains in a place of honor on my shelf, even though it is more hopelessly out of date with every passing year.

For a long time, an embarrassingly long time, I thought that this triumph in an academic competition was a sign of personal virtue. I thought that it made me a good person, when all it meant was that I had a brain that retains trivia better than other brains... It certainly doesn't make me a bad person. It's value neutral. Perhaps knowledge of geography might create empathy, as though knowing the capital of Burundi might encourage me to care more about Burundians, but that's an indirect way to do that. Conflating academic performance with personal worth is a trap that our culture sets for our children, one that I fell right into. We grow up in school environments where we are constantly evaluated and judged based on our ability to retain specific facts and perform specific mental tasks. We are graded on all this and those grades can shape our future possibilities. It's hard not to internalize that... and carry it into the world in other ways.

I have a video clip to further illustrate learning taken to its competitive extreme. The following is from *Portlandia*, a sketch comedy show that mocks some residents of Portland, Oregon and their peculiar ways of being in the world. These people get competitive about who is the most widely read.

(video: 'Did You Read It?' from *Portlandia*)

Now, while I've never been a part of a conversation that made learning quite so competitive, I've been in plenty where people more subtly compare and compete about how widely they've read or how much schooling they've had or how many credentials they've accumulated. Sometimes, we treat learning as a way to show off our value or our virtue. I know I've done that. Perhaps you've participated in these conversations too.

Confucianism holds out another reason for learning – learning, when done right, makes us better people, it is the cultivation of virtue. Confucianism is our religion of the month at People's Church. It is a wisdom tradition that includes among its symbols the yin yang symbol on the upper left of our world religions quilt. This symbol is shared among Chinese religions. Confucianism presents an alternate view on the purpose of education. The purpose of education is not to create brains full of facts, but people full of compassion and wisdom.¹

One might expect this sort of teaching from a founder of a religious tradition who was also a professional educator, a man revered as "The First Teacher." The word that the followers of Confucianism use for that tradition is *Rujia*, which translates as 'School of Scholars.'

Confucius was the first private teacher in China. He was a modest man who said he did not create new truths, but transmitted ancient teachings. He lived from the 6th to 5th century before the common era, at about the same time as Socrates, Buddha, and the Hebrew prophets. Details of his life are hard to come by, but tradition holds that he was born in Qufu, in what is now the Shandong province in Eastern China. His family was poor. He was a great student in fields as diverse as ritual, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, mathematics, poetry, history, and music. He became a private teacher and opened his school to men of all backgrounds, asserting that virtue was not just for elites, which was a radical idea in his time. He married and had children. He dabbled in politics, but was not successful. He taught thousands of students before he died in his early 70s. In the centuries throughout his death, the school of scholars has spread throughout much of East and Southeast Asia, often being practiced alongside Buddhism, which we explored last month, and Taoism, which we will focus on in February. In that part of the world, there is no understanding that one would only practice one religion. It is a common saying in China, at least before the advent of Communism, that 'Chinese are Confucians at work, Taoists at leisure, and Buddhists at death.' After being suppressed in the first decades of Communist rule in China, Confucianism is back, with leaders now quoting Confucius regularly and Confucian writings are again being taught in schools. And self-proclaimed "New Confucians" are attempting to apply the ancient teachings to our modern world and eliminate some of the sexism and patriarchy from them.

As one might expect from a tradition that calls itself 'school of scholars,' followers of Confucianism study as a religious practice.

¹ my primary source for the information on Confucianism is the chapter on that wisdom tradition in Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not Great: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Pages 101-130

In its first centuries, a practitioner of Confucianism would devote themselves to the study of five texts, called in the tradition, the Five Classics. All of these texts predate Confucius, though he is credited with editing and reforming them. The texts are the *I Ching*, a manual for divination; two books of history, a book of poems; and a book about etiquette and rituals. This wide ranging study was said to help cultivate virtue. The core texts changed after a reform movement in the thirteenth century, these texts were replaced by ones authored by Confucius and his followers. That later collection of books was the basis of school curriculum and civil service exams in China from the year 1313 until 1905.

From what we know of Confucius, we know that he probably wouldn't be particularly pleased with his teachings being something that students or aspiring civil servants learn by rote or cram before exams. Studying is a way to improve one's character, Confucius taught. He argued that by learning we were not preparing ourselves for careers, but learning about virtues and how to practice them. Through studying texts, learning from the example of virtuous people, and learning how to do things the proper way, we build character. And when we improve ourselves, we improve our communities and the wider world.

Confucianism, of all the world's major religions, is among the most focused on ethics. There is little teaching about the afterlife or anything supernatural. For that reason, the scholars of religion often debate whether it is actually a religion. Whatever it is, through study and learning and application of its texts it teaches a specific way of being in the world and that way of being is called *ren*. *Ren* doesn't translate easily into English. It has been translated as humaneness, benevolence, altruism, love, compassion, and human-heartedness. It's Chinese character combines the image of human being with the image of the number two, leading some to translate it as 'right relationships among people.' That echoes much of our project here at People's Church, trying to live in the world in right relationship, trying to live with integrity.

How does one practice *ren*? Through the practice of *li*, which is usually translated as 'doing things in the proper way,' though that might lead us to limit all that *li* can be. *Li* is etiquette and propriety and manners. It is being hospitable and treating others, especially elders, with respect. It is taking pleasures in moderation and listening more than one speaks. It is to recognize every situation as one where virtue can be practiced. One scholar says, '*li* is to make space for reference in all things, treating seemingly ordinary interactions as if they were sacred ceremonies.' *Li* are all the things we do to make our values real. *Li* is when we are the hands and feet and voice of kindness, love, and justice. It is all the small and big ways we seek to create heaven on earth, to create the Beloved Community. Confucius teaches that *li* and *ren* together are a self-perpetuating virtuous circle. When we commit ourselves to *ren*, we practice *li*, when then increases our *ren*, which leads us to practice more *li* and so on. And this is not self-improvement for its own sake, our internal work ripples out to make our families, our communities, and our world better, more rooted in humaneness and right relationship.

Through the intentional cultivation of *ren* and the practice of *li*, one might become a *junzi*, an exemplary person, or a sage, the highest achievements in Confucianism. The *junzi* is a person

who approaches every person they meet with the questions, “How can I accommodate you?” “How can I make your life better?” There are no otherworldly rewards for these achievements, just the satisfaction that comes from living a life of meaning, purpose and virtue, the satisfaction of watching others live better lives because they are inspired by the example the *junzi* or sage provides. Humble Confucius, when others called him a sage or a *junzi*, would always decline such praise, saying he was just someone trying his best, someone who still often failed to live by the virtues.

It is not only a Confucian idea that education should produce good people, not walking libraries. This conversation is ongoing in our public schools, with much debate about what sort of character education might be best and whose definition of “good people” we should aspire to. Here at People's Church our children are learning things that we hope will help them be good people. Most of our children are learning about world religions, just as we are today. They are learning the stories, teachings, and practices so that these wisdom traditions might inform their spiritual development and so our children will be good neighbors and friends in our religiously diverse world. Some of our children are participating in the coming of age program, where we encourage them to pass their lives through the fire of thought and name what it is they believe, what truths they hold fast to, and what virtues they seek to cultivate. Other youth are participating in the Our Whole Lives Sexuality education class where they will reflect on how our values of respect, justice, and inclusion might influence their sexual decision-making and the information they need to make good choices... and it is not just the children and youth who participate in religious education here. In the adult religious education classes here, I often remind people that we have no tests, which for me is a short-hand urging us all to learn as much as is useful, but to attend to relationships more than facts, to put what we learn together in service to our lives. It is my hope that all we learn here and everywhere helps us cultivate compassion, love, and right relationships.

Learning is something that we do to make our lives and our communities more virtuous, more loving, more beautiful. Today, we have invited you to learn new songs as a way to experience this, a way to put this Confucianism into practice. I know that singing is hard for many of us. Perhaps someone told you in words or in other ways, that you can't sing. Perhaps it makes you self-conscious. Perhaps you sing loudly when no one can hear you, but singing in public is another thing entirely. Perhaps you love to sing and look forward to this part of our time together every week. Whatever you bring, whatever they told you, I invite you to set it down as we learn a new song together. You have sounded great three times already – and now I invite you to sing again, to create another moment of inspiration for us all, to fill this corner of our community with beauty.

May our learning help us grow in intellect and virtue.

May we learn in ways that create compassion and humaneness.

May we act in ways that create compassion and humaneness.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.