

Flow

Readings 'The Ocean Inside Him' by Rich Noguchi
 'Wind, Water, Stone' by Octavio Paz
 From the *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 3

Taoism, the tradition we are exploring today, begins with a story, possibly a mythic story. Lao Tzu was a wise philosopher and archivist who, if he lived – and that's a subject of debate – lived in the 6th century before the common era in China. He had grown disenchanted with society. He was ready to hit the road and wander, so he set off toward the West, riding a water buffalo. When he reached the Western border of China, the border guard, somehow sensing Lao Tzu's insight, stopped him and would not let him leave the country until he had recorded all his wisdom. Lao Tzu took three days, wrote down all he knew and gave the border guard a slim text called *The Tao Te Ching*, which translates as 'The Way and Its Power.' Lao Tzu was never seen again, but that little book lived long after him. It became widely influential in China and East Asia and is the second most translated book in the world, after the Bible.

There is much in this text that is worth pondering. I encourage you all to pick up a copy. It's short. You can read it in a few hours. The piece of wisdom that I want to lift up today is *wu wei*. *Wu wei* – and for you visual learners that's transliterated as two words w-u and w-e-i is one of the aspirations in Taoism. It's a way of being that translates literally as non-action. Translating the phrase in a way that capture it's full meaning is much harder. There are nearly many attempts at translating it into English as there are scholars who discuss it. English language renderings include 'creative letting-be,' 'creative quietude,' 'actionless activity' 'spontaneity,' 'effortlessness,' 'flowing with the moment' and 'pure effectiveness.' Perhaps you have noticed some contradictions in those phrases. What is creative about letting-be? What is actionless activity?

Let's step back and set the context. It is important to note that in China, Taoism emerged in tension with and opposition to Confucianism, which some of you might remember as our 'religion of the month' in November. Lao Tzu, the perhaps mythical founder of Taoism, lived, if he lived, about a generation before the very real Confucius. The two traditions have been in conversation with each other since their beginnings – and then Buddhism joined in when it made its way to east Asia a few centuries later.

A strange thing happened, or at least a strange thing for those of us with the Western mindset. Most of us in the West think that people can have one religious identity at most. Though there are some exceptions. In East Asia, most people assumed multiple religious identities. They didn't see a reason to have only one religion. Consequently, the theological arguments did not become an either/or proposition, the people said both/and. People claim multiple traditions, all at once. There is a saying that 'Chinese are Confucians at work, Taoists at leisure, and Buddhists at death.'¹ – and no one feels any

¹ Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Page 103.

contradictions in that. The idea of being only one religion is not part of the mentality in that part of the world.

Those of you who were at the services I led about Confucianism a few months ago, heard me reflect on two Confucian values – the value of education and the value of relationship. The Confucian tradition argues that we are our best selves when we are civilized, when we are in community with one another, when we are educated, when we know what is expected of us and meet those expectations. That is what leads to human flourishing.

The Taoist tradition completely disagrees. The Taoists assert that we are our best when we shed the trappings of civilization and become the most natural, spontaneous and intuitive versions of ourselves. We should not be constrained by society's expectations, but in touch with our most authentic, most natural selves. The tradition believes that we are inherently good and that engaging with civilization – formal education, hierarchies, roles, expectations take us away from that natural goodness. Civilization's attempts to cultivate goodness often backfire. Which leads us back to the idea of *wu wei*, of creative letting be, spontaneity, and nonaction.

The metaphors most often used to describe *wu wei*, both in the ancient texts and by Western scholars seeking to translate these ideas to new audiences are water metaphors. *Wu wei* means flowing like water, becoming like water in the way water doesn't have intention, but has tremendous power. Water imagery is throughout the *Tao Te Ching*.

The fifth chapter, which is entitled 'water,' includes this passage:

The supreme good is like water,

which nourishes all things without trying to.

It is content with the low places that people disdain.

Thus it is like the Tao [The Way]...

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.

Everyone knows this is true,

but few can put it in practice.²

How might we put this in practice? How might we cultivate the virtue of *wu wei*? The virtue of water?

Western scholars who describe Eastern religions to Western audience use water metaphors in their explanations of *wu wei* as well. Huston Smith writes, 'Of the natural elements, it was water that impressed the Taoists most. They admired the way it supports objects and carries them effortlessly on its tide. Poor swimmers flail against it while good swimmers float

² Mitchell, Stephen, trans. *Tao Te Ching*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988., quoted in Novak, Philip. *The World's Wisdom*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco: 1994. Pages160-161.

motionlessly, knowing that it will support them if they don't fight it. Then again, water is unobtrusive and adaptive; it assumes the shape of its containers and seeks out the lowest places. Yet despite its accommodations, it subdues what is hard and brittle. Its currents carve canyons from granite, and melt the hills we call eternal.

Infinitely supple, yet incomparably strong – these virtues of water are precisely those of *wu wei*. The person who embodies them “works without working.” He acts without strain, persuades without argument, is eloquent without flourish, and gets results without coercing. “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists. Of a good leader, when his work is done the people will say, ‘We did this ourselves.’”

Smith concludes, ‘A final characteristic of water that makes it an appropriate analog to *wu wei* is the clarity it attains through calmness. “Muddy water let stand will clear.”’³

Stephen Prothero, another Western scholar of world religions, uses surfing as his water metaphor of choice to explain *wu wei*:

He writes, ‘Someone once explained *wu wei* to me in terms of the choices that present themselves to a surfer. Bobbing up and down in the ocean, she has three ways to proceed. She can force things by paddling to shore (intentional action). She can sit there and drift (non-action). Or she can catch a wave (*wu wei*). My colleague David Eckel tells me that the best metaphor for *wu wei* is water that effortlessly runs downhill. Falling water exhibits the Daoist virtue of *ziran*, which literally means “self-so” but typically refers to acting spontaneously or letting things take their natural course.’⁴

How might we cultivate *wu wei* in our lives? The Taoist sages would probably laugh at the idea of intentionally trying to be more spontaneous, of bringing effort to our quest for effortlessness... If we wanted a whole life defined by spontaneity, creative letting-be, and action-less action, we would probably have to follow Lao Tzu's example and head west on a water buffalo... but that is not how most people live Taoism, they live it in combination with Confucian teachings, including that we should be in relationship, in community, and improving ourselves through education.

Perhaps it is better to begin by noticing the moments of *wu wei* that are already part of our lives. When do you experience creative quietude, effortlessness, spontaneity, acting without intention? Many of us find our moments of *wu wei* in moments of creation or other absorbing work. Writing, making art, acting, playing, dance, anything that requires our full attention can provide these moments of *wu wei*. In our culture, we might think of these moments as ‘being in the zone’ or to use a term popularized by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow. He coined this term after a number of people that he interviewed spoke about these experiences using the metaphor of being carried along in a current.⁵ It's not quite the same as *wu wei*, but flow shares the same unselfconscious, spontaneous, not focused on outcomes, way of being. When have you had those moments?

³ Smith, Huston. *The Illustrated World's Religions*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. Page 136

⁴ Prothero, 295-296

⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975. Page 10.

For me and for many, they involve improvisation, whether formal or informal. My ministerial formation included taking improv comedy classes. It helped me get better at being present, paying attention, and get out of my own head. I am not particularly good at improv comedy, but neither was anyone else in my level zero and level one classes. However, there were rare, brief, beautiful moments of flow. Moments when we were able to be present to one another and work within whatever constraints we were given. Moments when the ideas just flowed, where we could set aside our critical, judgmental minds and create elaborate scenes aboard whaling ships or among woodland creatures... afterwards the instructors would ask us how we got to those flashes of creativity and we couldn't piece it together. There was no plan. There was no intention. It just happened. It just flowed. Or, as a Taoist might say, we connected with our natural spontaneous state of *wu wei*.

There was something in those spontaneous, intentionless moments of holiness and wholeness, a holiness and wholeness described beautifully by musician Stephen Nachmanovich. He writes, 'This whole enterprise of improvisation in life and art, of recovering free play and awakening creativity, is about allowing ourselves to be true to ourselves and our visions, and true to the undiscovered wholeness that lies beyond the self and the vision we have today.'⁶

Those who create professionally can grow to be experts in *wu wei*. Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Jennifer Egan writes, 'When I'm writing fiction I forget who I am and what I come from. I slip into utter absorption mode. I love the sense that I've become so engaged with the other side, I've slightly lost my bearings here. If I'm going from the writing mind-set to picking my kids up from school, I often feel a very short but acute kind of depression, as if I have the bends. Once I'm with them it totally disappears, and I feel happy again.'⁷

We can think of flow as something that only happens in the arts or to artists or in work that looks creative from the outside, but flow can be found in nearly any task if approached in the right way, with creativity. In his book on flow, Csikszentmihalyi profiles two people with jobs we might not think of as catalysts for *wu wei* or being in the zone, a lawyer and a welder.

'For Pam Davis it is much easier to achieve this harmonious, effortless state when she works. As a young lawyer in a small partnership, she is fortunate to be involved in complex, challenging cases. She spends hours in the library, chasing down references and outlining possible courses of action for the senior partners in the firm to follow. Often her concentration is so intense that she forgets to have lunch, and by the time she realizes that she is hungry it is dark outside. While she is immersed in her job, every piece of information fits.'⁸

'If you want to accord with The Way,' the ancient master writes, just do your job, then let go.'⁹

⁶ Nachmanovich, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1991. page 177.

⁷ Egan, Jennifer. 'Chapter Three.' In *Why We Write: 20 Acclaimed Writers on How and Why They do What They Do*. Meredith Maran, ed. New York: Plume, 2013. page 28.

⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008. page 40

⁹ Mitchell, quoted in Novak, page 154

And the welder:

'Joe [Kramer] was in his early sixties, a welder in a South Chicago plant where railroad cars are assembled. About two hundred people worked with Joe in three huge, dark, hangarlike structures where steel plates weighing several tons move around suspended from overhead tracks, and are welded amid showers of sparks to the wheelbases of freight cars. In summer it is an over, in winter the icy winds of the prairie howl through...

Joe came to the United States when he was five years old, and he left school after fourth grade. He had been working at this plant for over thirty years but never wanted to become a foreman. He declined several promotions, claiming that he liked being a simple welder, and felt uncomfortable being anyone's boss. Although he stood on the lowest rung of the hierarchy in the plant, everyone knew Joe, and everyone agreed that he was the most important person in the entire factory. The manager stated that if he had five more people like Joe, his plant would be the most efficient in the business...

The reason for his fame was simple. Joe had apparently mastered every phase of the plant's operation, and he was now able to take anyone's place if the necessity arose. Moreover, he could fix any broken-down piece of machinery, ranging from huge mechanical cranes to tiny electronic monitors. But what astounded people most was that Joe not only could perform these tasks, but he actually enjoyed it when he was called upon to do them. When asked how he had learned to deal with complex engines and instruments without having any formal training, Joe gave a very disarming answer. Since childhood he had been fascinated with machinery of every kind. He was especially drawn to anything that wasn't working properly: "Like when my mother's toaster went on the fritz, I asked myself: 'If I were the toaster and I didn't work, what would be wrong with me?'" Then he disassembled the toaster, found the defect, and fixed it. Ever since, he has used this method of empathetic identification to learn about and restore increasingly complex mechanical systems. And the fascination of discovery has never left him; now close to retirement, Joe still enjoys work every day.'

Csikszentmihalyi continues, 'What [Joe] did at home was perhaps even more remarkable than his transformation of a mindless, routine job into a complex flow-producing activity. Joe and his wife live in a modest bungalow on the outskirts of the city. Over the years, they bought up the two vacant lots on either side of their house. On these lots, Joe built an intricate rock garden, with terraces, paths, and several hundred flowers and shrubs. While he was installing underground sprinklers, Joe had an idea: What if he had them make rainbows? He looked for sprinkler heads that would produce a fine enough mist for this purpose, but none satisfied; so he designed one himself, and built it on his basement lathe. Now after work he could sit on the back porch, and by touching one switch he could activate a dozen sprays that turned into as many small rainbows.

But there was one little problem with Joe's little Garden of Eden. Since he worked most days, by the time he got home the sun was usually too far down the horizon to help paint the water with strong colors. So Joe went back to the drawing board, and came back with an admirable solution. He found floodlights that contained enough of the sun spectrum to form rainbows, and installed them inconspicuously around the sprinklers. Now he was really ready. Even in the middle of the night, just by touching two switches, he could surround his house with fans of water, light, and color.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Flow*, 147-9

On this day, when our service is focuses on wu wei, flow, and water, let us end with the image of a house in the middle of the night, light up with rainbows.

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