

2/25/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 11

All versions are very similar. I'll try to do composite verses to avoid leaning too much on one. (The key is in v. 10)

Thirty spokes joined in a hub
Form a Wheel.
The Emptiness between,
the Non-Being,
Makes the Carriage useful. (Min)

pots are fashioned from clay
but it's the hollow
that makes a pot work (P)

Cut doors and windows
to make a room.
Where the room isn't,
there's room for you. (LG)

Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there. (F)
or
Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by
virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use. (L)

Several sages we read from view the three objects as metaphors for a human body, and all ponder the dialectic of Being and Non-Being. Red Pine quotes Te-Ch'ing in a nice summation. The Great Way is the Tao, of course:

Heaven and Earth have form, and everyone knows that Heaven and Earth are useful. But they don't know that their usefulness depends on the emptiness of the Great Way. Likewise, we all have form and think ourselves useful but remain unaware that our usefulness depends on our empty, shapeless mind. Thus, existence may have its uses, but real usefulness depends on nonexistence. Nonexistence, though, doesn't work by itself. It needs the help of existence.

Unless we ponder the objects as metaphors, there isn't much to this verse. For this we had recourse to our stack of books. Deb opened the discussion affirming that emptiness is filled with potential, and it's only after we make choices that their definition reduces the possibilities.

Bill revealed that at the back of the Mitchell translation are some additional comments. This morning I read some of them, and the one for the previous verse (10) is really spectacular. Check it out if you have a copy. It's mainly in reference to the line "Can you let your body become supple as a newborn child's?" The gist is that the child's mind is empty, so it is very flexible, and as it develops it "loses the immediacy of the moment." Yet a flexible adult has more meaning in their movements than the undeveloped child, as "It is resonant with experience." "Adult movement is awesome, because all life is included in it." (Quotes from Emilie Conrad-Da'oud) Her conclusion is "The more supple your body is, the less dictatorial you'll be." Contrasting flexibility with the rigid military stance and its opposite, the wishy-washy posture that doesn't stand for anything.

Andy brought up Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* as extolling emptiness, where the thought of emptiness arouses compassion. Whether Snyder means inspiring compassion in you or your compassion is inspired by someone having a thought of emptiness, you could read it either way.

It got Deb and me to recall the book's release in 1996, when we got together in an intimate group with Snyder at the Rimsky-Korsakoff House. A young person there, who like Snyder had attended Lincoln High School in Portland, asked him what it was like to turn 60 (he was already 66). We inwardly gasped, but Snyder suavely replied, "It's terrific. You have so much material to work with." Take that, kids! "It is resonant with experience."

Andy, still pondering Bushra's death last June, treated us to some of his recent thoughts on transience. As an artist he is very aware of the figure and ground dichotomy, how every boundary creates two shapes. Now, with his beloved partner figure gone, only background remains. Yet it is so resonant with her presence! She is still very much with him. It struck him that this idea of figure and ground helps him understand death: when you lose something, you lose a tangible form, effervescent moods and responses, yet when death happens and the person is not there, the ground is very clear. There's nothing in front of it. The ground is made up of relationships and reverberations of a life, and that is somehow more real even than the thing that disappeared.

In reverentially disposing of one of Bushra's favorite house plants, Andy first moved it outside, where it finished dying, and then cut it up into a medicine bundle. Finally he pulled up the root ball and left an empty pot in the yard. One day he knew it was time to throw the pot away, and as he picked it up he found all around the hole it had made, poppy flowers had sprouted. New life was springing up against the void, and Andy was deeply touched.

Deb said how we draw a thick line — this is living, this is not living—but it's a porous line. The people who have died are still with us, almost more alive than before. They live in us. Not as individual people anymore, but as a living-being-force.

Susan agreed, but admitted that kind of awareness is not always easy to admit. People don't allow it in themselves, and

don't want to hear it: "I feel as though my dead ancestors are with me (my mother, grandparents) but I think some fear this idea."

It's a good reason to become fearless.

Moni expressed the idea as a continuation, of us carrying what is left unfinished by our family members who have died. It got Jan thinking of a Lyme doctor both our kid's saw, Dr. Klinghart, who espoused a family constellation theory, where the unresolved conflicts of your ancestors are replayed in the present. It relates to the verse because the constellation doesn't have a physical form but is like a force that needs to get carried on and resolved.

Speaking of constellations, we shared a fascinating take on this verse from *Meditations on the Way*:

Peter said that he had heard another translation of this verse before, but today a new depth of meaning dawned on him. [Possibly from Lao's convoluted translation about the three objects, wheel, pot and room: "Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of (each one)."] Instead of the spokes sharing a hub, he pictured the several people living here (in the Gurukula) as spokes sharing a hub, and that which all share in common is "Nothing," in that it is not any one of them in particular but what is common to all of them. That emptiness, which is the hub, can be adapted by any member of a community who wishes to mobilize the whole. That Nothingness, which is usually overlooked in human relations, is the central and most "useful" element between people.

Which gives a new meaning to the word *spokesperson*....

Jan commented that we don't always think of that silence as building community, but it's an intriguing idea. Probably there's more to it than just the quiet....

Peter's insight reminded me of something I felt near the beginning of my relationship with Nitya, when we had begun a small spiritual community together. (Both Peters were in fact part of it.) In my mind's eye I saw the dozen or so of us as parts of a single cell, like mitochondria perhaps, with Nitya acting as the nucleus, psychically adjusting to keep the whole cell in balance. I've only ever written a little about it. Here's what I dug up:

In the first Portland Gurukula in 1971, Nitya was very active in counterbalancing everyone both personally and as a group. In a wild and chaotic group of young people, I could see him in my mind's eye as moving around psychically to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, preventing our collective consciousness from getting out of hand. It required him to be more extreme than he would have preferred to be, I'm sure, because we were all over the map, experimenting with breaking every rule in the book. (Gita Ch. XII)

I read out some more on emptiness, from *Meditations on the Way*:

Guru mentioned that when Kahlil Gibran's Prophet was asked for his comments on love and his advice to lovers, he responded, "Always keep a space between you." The Prophet's analogy was, "The two pillars that hold up the temple stand apart."

To our surprise, *Meditations on the Way* includes a reminiscence of Deb's time traveling with Nitya. I don't think either of us had come across this before:

Guru reflected, "When I was traveling with Debbie [in 1971], the most beautiful aspect of our companionship were the many hours which we passed in absolute silence. We would sit

together silently, and in a few minutes I would completely forget that she was there. I don't know if she also forgot about me, but I imagine so. After a while longer, I even forgot myself. We would sit like that, enrapt in silence. This happened in Rome, in Athens, in Paris, in Geneva, all the way to Fiji, where she left me. When we spoke, it was most unpleasant. Often we would even become enraged with one another, trying to make the other understand. But those precious hours we passed together lost in silence were an extremely loving experience. There was no 'other' in that experience." (39-40)

Let's hear it for silence!

Before the closing meditation I shared one last thought. While cruising low over Costa Rica wondering if I was in the last moment of my life, it occurred to me—for the first time, I think—that our deaths would leave a hole in the fabric of our friends and family. We actually mattered to them. It would slowly close, but I had a vivid visualization of the empty psychic space our absence would create. Then I realized that the world is full of holes everywhere, and creatures are passing through them all the time. It's like an immense wall of holes in constant activity. Very useful, holes. It reminded me of Nancy's comment last week that the gates of heaven are birth and death, and it left me a sense of the intense throb of life on our planet. Magnificent!

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

11
Being, together
with non-being, give life to
useful artifacts.

Part III

From Debbie:

Yesterday I sat out in the old herb garden, in the fresh sunshine, and closed my eyes as I brought my thinking, my self, to simply being there. I spent many years cultivating this small space, learned many earthy lessons, enjoyed so many beautiful plants. In class last night it was sweet to read Nitya's remarks in Meditations on the Way about the year we traveled together and the many times we sat in silence. I don't know if he disappeared to me as he wrote that I did to him in those moments, but the space around us, and we ourselves, were all certainly empty. That is what I brought to mind yesterday, just an open emptiness. As I sat there I could hear the birds in the bushes around me, hopping and fluttering. As I continued to sit, they were coming closer and closer. I could hear the sound of their wings against the air, their little feet on the leaves. I thought, I am the emptiness sitting here, the birds are the active manifestation. They are attracted to the emptiness and the emptiness expresses itself in them. We are both, alternating between emptiness and manifestation, conjoined aspects of the mysterious whole.