

11/25/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 57

This fascinating verse opens with three premises:

Use directness or routine to govern the state.

Use deception to wage war.

Use non-action or non-striving to master the world.

While LeGuin recognizes it as “A strong political statement of the central idea of *wu wei*, not-doing, inaction,” only Minford notes that the first two lines describe the actions of ordinary non-sages, and the third line is the Way of sages. Mitchell omits the first two lines entirely, lumping all strategies together as leadership, and asserting leaders must stop trying to control via plans and concepts.

Titling this verse *Of Their Own Accord*, Minford gives us crucial information: “Much of this is a Taoist response to the cynical ideas set out in Sun-tzu’s *The Art of War*, and to the draconian ideology of the Legalists, China’s first fascists.” Pine includes Sun Tzu’s central premise from *The Art of War* that opens our verse, and that Lao Tzu is plainly critiquing: “In waging war, one attacks with directness, one wins with deception.” Minford also quotes Chen in this regard:

Lao-tzu’s ideal of Non-Action can be seen both as a remedy to dissolve the tyrannical inclinations of those in power, and as a stimulant to encourage the self-expression of the folk. If the people of the world who control the reins of political power were all able to Return to Non-Action, to Cherish Calm, and not to Meddle, to be Free of Desire, then peace for mankind would be within our grasp.”

The River Master, in Minford, opens his commentary with the central tenet:

With Not-Meddling  
And Non-Action  
All-under-Heaven is won.  
This truth I know  
From the Tao  
In the present Moment.

Wang An-Shih, in Pine, says: “Directness can be used in governing, but nowhere else. Deception can be used in warfare, but that is all. Only those who practice non-action are fit to rule the world.” The class jovially amended “rule the world” to “relate to the world.”

Su Ch’e elaborates nicely: “The ancient sages were kind to strangers and gentle to friends. They didn’t think about warfare. Only when they had no choice did they fight. And when they did, they used deception. But deception can’t be used to rule the world. The world is a mercurial thing. To conquer it is to lose it. Those who embody the Tao do nothing. They don’t rule the world, and yet the world comes to them.” Again, if you take this in terms of personal relations, you get an explosion of insight.

Karen burst out that the Dalai Lama lives like that: being unmanipulative, the world comes to him. So true.

Next Lao Tzu proves his opening assertion using four classic Taoist examples:

The more prohibitions you have, the poorer or less virtuous people become.

The sharper the tools or weapons (or mind), the less security.

The cleverer peoples’ schemes are, the more weird things happen.

Lastly, the classic of all classics: the more call for law and order, the more criminals proliferate. In our day, it's the criminals themselves who loudly call for law and order, to divert suspicion.

Regarding the second example, Wang P'ang says: "Sharp tools mean sharp minds. And sharp minds mean chaos and confusion. Once minds become refined, customs become depraved, and the monstrous becomes commonplace." LeGuin's translation nails this perfectly: "The more experts the country has / the more of a mess it's in."

Lu Hui-Ch'ing makes a simple argument: "How do we know we can rule the world by means of non-action? Because we know we cannot rule the world by means of action." It's pretty much continuously being proved, over and over.

Another Pine sage, Wang Pi, says: "Prohibitions are intended to put an end to poverty, and yet the people become poorer. Tools are intended to strengthen the country, and yet the country becomes weaker and more chaotic. This is due to cultivating the branches instead of the roots." Yet I suggest we cultivate the roots so that we'll also have healthy branches—it isn't that we're trying to live without anything but roots.

Likewise the River Master tells us "They Return Home / To the Root." I'd suggest this does not mean abandoning the rest of the tree, but only knowing how and where it receives its primary nutrients.

The verse concludes that since this is all so obvious, sages relinquish control in several ways:

By doing nothing, it lets people transform themselves.  
By being peaceful, it lets people become honest.  
By not working, it lets the people become rich.  
By being desireless, it lets people return to simplicity.

While this attitude is nice and perhaps even necessary, Ho-Shang Kung's comments on this strike me as pure wishful thinking: "In cultivating the Tao, sages accept the will of Heaven. They don't change things, and the people transform themselves. They prefer not to talk or teach, and the people correct themselves. They don't force others to work, and the people become rich in their occupations. They don't use ornaments or luxuries, and the people emulate their simple ways." Let's face it, pseudo-sages in service of power and manipulation get all the attention and emulation these days. These are lovely ideals, yet more than a little naïve.

Our dialogue began with Deb acknowledging the sociopolitical context from Minford, yet even without that there is an essence in this verse that is like the more personal side of Vedanta, that as long as you are looking outward you will always have a piecemeal understanding of the situation. Because of this, your actions will never turn out well unless you are coherent in yourself and aligned with the Tao. The sage is centered, and the outer world aligns naturally with the centering quality. She felt it was a helpful reminder for when we interact in personal and social universes, and the class worked diligently toward a meaningful grasp of this, as you will see.

I spelled out my concerns about taking this verse as starkly as it is worded, which we learned stems from its opposition to war makers and Not Sees. That much is okay, yet we do have to work together with other people, and we have—and enjoy having—complex lives. Our days would be deadly dull if we didn't have relationships and projects, and we live enjoyably with the fruits of all we have, and what we act on.

The tone of the verse reminded me of the Enron movie, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, who dismantled the public trust and made a hefty profit from it, at the expense of pretty much everyone. The movie is a classic Taoist fairytale. The trailer is incomprehensible, but this summary is utterly in tune with verse

57:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5qC1YGRMKI&list=PL3\\_x0CVc7rFnu\\_PEXAizujCZyDnyaiLhr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5qC1YGRMKI&list=PL3_x0CVc7rFnu_PEXAizujCZyDnyaiLhr) . You can watch the whole debacle on Vimeo if you want more insight into business as warfare.

The word for the month has been *fraught*—I've seen it more lately than the rest of my life in toto. We're in a fraught situation with just about everything, because no one understands the premises. The whole social universe is out of control, since the operative assumptions are the Sun Tzu viciously competitive ones, not the Lao Tzu attitude of residing in neutrality.

Bill read out Mitchell's end note, that when it's in tune with the Tao, the world will govern itself, just as nature regulates itself. Bill said we can all see how nature is self-governing, but in trying to make a connection with the Tao, it somehow interferes with the naturalness.

Anita responded that we humans think we're not nature, but we are as much nature as the trees and the grass. We try to set ourselves apart, yet we are a part, not apart.

Deb agreed we humans are trying to barrel forward where we need to be a harmonious part of the living self-regulating system. We're not separate.

I lamented how much we are pitted against nature, that it's built into the economic and business mindset of exploitation, which relies on their being infinite resources available for exploitation. We have yet to accommodate the fact that our resources are limited, since our religions predated that now-obvious awareness. We are nonetheless a part of nature, and the destruction we see happening is nature's balancing of our excesses. Since we didn't voluntarily curb our greed, the planet will have to do it for us, and it won't be as pleasant as it might have been if we had put sage advice into practice.

Bill agreed, saying that's the essence of it, we try to control nature and make it better, as in let's make new weapons, and it always backfires.

In keeping with the Taoist approach, Susan read us a favorite quote from Franz Kafka:

You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

The lovely sentiment raised the tone in the Zoom Room right away. Anita talked about when she holds her cats, she feels an affinity, a loving sense that there is true sameness with all animals. Underneath their fur and different skeletal structure there is an essence that is the same, since we too are animals.

I added how badly we need to embrace that unity, and then it all makes perfect sense. We are a destructive species because our consciousness believes in destruction, believes in taking without compensation. If we come to believe in harmony, then we will be in tune with our environment.

Anita took this concept to another level. She's been reading that it's actually the trees who are farming humans, and not the other way around. They feed us and exhale what we need to breathe so we can die and fertilize the ground and feed them. It gives new meaning to "return to the root." Anita happily wanted to assure us that trees are our brothers and sisters looking out for us, but I suspect she has an ulterior motive....

Deb recalled that that was a premise in Michael Pollan's book, *The Botany of Desire*, that plants are really raising us. The ecstatic movie *Fantastic Fungi* also made a case for it. But hey, we are all in this together. We don't want to swap one imbalanced outlook for another, except maybe by way of compensation. We're

all raising each other. We live in a complex web of interaction and mutual dependency, where the closer our giving and taking are to equality, the more harmonious all the outcomes will be.

I also got the sense from this verse how strongly oppression was felt in Lao Tzu's time. People were being treated like farm animals, and had very little freedom in their daily lives, so they had to find it in their hearts and minds. It was the only option. We moderns are fortunate to have had a lot of freedom to explore outwardly, yet to some extent that has undermined our inner development. With our pandemic and corporate fascism firmly entrenched, we are getting more of a look at how a life without exterior escapes is going to look. I guess it means turning to interior escapes through fantasy computer-generated worlds, which I find creepy. QAnon may be merely the opening salvo of a species utterly detached from conventional reality. It *might* work....

The thought got us talking (remember, all of us in the class are old, and kind of attached to the planet we grew up on) about the joys of being aware and appreciative of the world we imagine we live in. Deb reminisced about Andy's idea from last week, about all the simple, ordinary things Brian Doyle listed in his book as being miraculous. It made her more aware of what she might have taken for granted before, while now realizing more than ever that being aware is such an important thing.

Andy made the point that awareness is not something we're *trying* to do, it's just something we do. It's like our heart beating. He mentioned one thing that stood out for him on the list was *tent flaps*, telling us, "I immediately remembered the smell of tent flaps, that mildewy canvas smell. I could have gone to my grave not remembering a tent but there it was, fully vivid in my memory. We are filled with all these things, given to us by the Absolute. It's the world coming to you. We don't have to go out and make them appear. They're already there."

The class had a long conversation about how much more aware children are than adults, even though adults tend to think we are the ones who know what's going on. Adults are more wrapped in their firmly established and limited perspectives, where children are taking it all in, fresh and vivid.

We have a broadside of Brenda Hillman's fabulous poem *The Late Cold War*, which begins:

A man says he doesn't understand my poetry

Later Hillman adds:

The man says poetry should be simple enough for school girls to understand

But sir, school girls understand everything

I love it!

Susan just sent a timely synchronicity: "I've almost finished reading Van der Post's book *A Story Like the Wind*. I've been reading it for several months, savoring a few pages before I fall asleep. These paragraphs from last night's reading made me think of the verse from last night's class":

She found herself holding her breath, overcome by the weight of the mystery of things pressing upon her. For the first time, perhaps, she fully understood François's deference, if not reverence, for the life of the bush, which perhaps, not surprisingly with her metropolitan background, had at times appeared exaggerated. Standing there with the day exploding in flame and dew-smoke around them, the coming of light welcomed by a bird-hymn of glittering intensity and volume, the mysteries of life acquired new dimensions. It was no longer



confined to sky and bush where she would eagerly acknowledge it, but was suddenly shown to be also deep in the darkness of the earth out of which that little spider had issued as an ambassador of another world. Yet all belonged together as did also both she and François. (pp. 324-5)

“I love how François grows up so tuned into his environment and what an environment it is! He has such good teachers too. I have enjoyed living in his world and he inspires me to look at my own world with new eyes and ears and all the senses.”

Jan brought us back to the idea of not meddling, which she’s applying with her family lately. In her conversations with her mom, who is pretty confused these days, Jan stays available and makes suggestions, but when she asks her mother what she is going to do, she answers, “I’m not going to do anything!” Which is by far the best option sometimes. Jan is happy to let that be the final decision. Meddling is almost sure to make things worse than they already are.

Jan talked about going with the flow, which in terms of relationships would foster not imposing what you think is right or how someone should handle anything, but letting that come out of their own nature. She’s noticed how people don’t often go back to the individual and ask what’s right for them, they would rather convert them to their point of view. Jan is more interested in gaining insight on her friends and family based on what their nature is—and she kind of wishes they would feel that way about her, too.

I suggested that not meddling doesn’t mean we can’t have influence. People sometimes appreciate our thoughts, but don’t like to feel pressured or manipulated. If we subtract the need to change people from how we relate to them, it invites them to be more open and accepting of new ideas we might bring up. It seems like this brought us to the happy medium of Taoist philosophy on the

personal level. Bill echoed that it is all about finding the natural flow of the Tao.

Anita admitted that in communications with family members it's hard to have an understanding of their true nature. It's well hidden. I suggested it's a good thing to know that we can't confidently be aware of another's true nature. Heck, we don't really know our own very well. Anita concurred. Her solution is to give examples, making it clear they are what she would do, and taking pains that they aren't seen as any kind of directive.

Jan has also noticed that it can be our moral code, which is something apart from the people involved, that interferes with successful communication. Somehow we need to be open enough to keep the other person free of feelings about being judged or directed. I added they may well be quite touchy, possibly with good historical reason, so we can all work on being present without rendering judgment. The verse's advice fits perfectly here: don't rule or engage with others either by direct methods or deception. We're not waging war, we're making friends. A hands-off policy works best.

We initiated our closing meditation with the amusing Merton/Chuang Tzu story *Owl and Phoenix*, p. 95-6 at <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

This is a good one..... most thought provoking. I pondered over le Guin's note.

I could not decide between the two versions I produced so have sent them both.

Because coercion  
always ends in bad results,  
best leave well alone.

A good ruler will  
provide an environment  
where all self adjust.

PS I particularly like Stephen Mitchell's final couplet. It's thought provoking and clever. I'll probably remember it after the rest is forgotten.

‘Let go of all desire for the common good,  
and the god becomes as common as grass.’

57 alternative version

Let go of desire  
for control, law and order  
and the common good.

Then a miracle  
occurs and the good becomes  
as common as grass.

\* \* \*

Bill sent a link to an interview with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, noting what a generous person he is, and how closely this matches our discussion.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/23/magazine/yo-yo-ma->

[interview.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20201124&instance\\_id=24415&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=104915768&segment\\_id=45301&te=1&user\\_id=ca5c5fb2fd2e243d49d5300ad23eb7f4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2020/11/20/yoyo-ma-interview/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-yoyo-ma%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-yoyo-ma%3Ahomepage%2Fstory)

## **Yo-Yo Ma and the Meaning of Life**

Nov. 20, 2020

The immensity of Yo-Yo Ma’s talent is such that he would be globally admired if all he ever did was appear onstage or in a recording studio and then vanish after the last notes faded from his cello. That Ma has instead used his gifts in the service of spreading humanistic values — via cross-cultural musical collaboration, civic engagement and huge amounts of heart — means that his connection with the public goes far deeper than mere admiration. Ma’s compelling instinct for compassion has been on much-needed display during this pandemic year. In the spring, he streamed a performance series, “Songs of Comfort,” on YouTube and social media. During the summer, he broadcast a performance of Bach’s Cello Suites in honor of those lost to Covid-19. And on Dec. 11, he will release “Songs of Comfort and Hope,” an album recorded with the pianist Kathryn Stott. “People need each other for support beyond the immediate staples of life,” Ma says. “They need music.”

**Do you think music is fundamentally good?** That’s a good question to ask and very hard to answer. It’s as if you’re asking me “Are people fundamentally good?” I don’t think people are fundamentally *bad*. But in the interaction of figuring things out or wanting more of something or less of something, then complex things come into play.

**I ask because your work is rooted in the idea of music as [a value-positive, ennobling thing](#). But music is also used in every possible awful context. Can we delineate music from the intentions of the people using it?** Music connects human beings.

It brings people together. You can also describe it as energy: sound that moves air molecules. So a marching band will energize an athletic game or bring people to war. The bagpipe is used for war, for entertainment, for funerals, for weddings. Music is not one thing. It's something that people react to. But your question — “Is that good or bad?” — it depends on circumstances and individuals and timing. The invention of something starts out being more or less value-neutral. Agriculture: Nothing bad about it. But if you're able to grow a lot of vegetables and I can't grow any on my land, I might want to get some of your vegetables.

Ma performing his “Songs of Comfort” online series last spring. Screen grab from Instagram

**Here's something I've been thinking about, particularly over the last four years, and I'll raise it with you fully aware that my engagement with music is minuscule compared with your own. Don't say that. I know you like music. You're interested. You think about it. So don't assume I know more than you. I'll accept that! All right, I've been wondering if in the past I had too easily allowed myself to believe that engaging with music — or culture more generally — was also a way of engaging with politics. In the sense that doing so was implicitly promoting humanistic values or empathy. Now I can't help thinking that was at least partly a complacent waste of time, and while I was doing that, some parallel Neanderthal was probably spending the equivalent time figuring out how to advance odious politics. Is my rambling making any sense to you?** Of course it makes sense. It's about whether you believe in a utilitarian world or you believe that if you look out on the night sky, you see the infinitude of variety in nature and the unreachable wonders of what it is and how we fit in. Morons are generally not thinking about the infinitude of the universe. They're thinking of a

different world. And you have to be able to extract certain truths. When you write something that's beautiful, you think you've found a bit of truth. It flows. It sings. You can do that, David. Is that useful? I know [the lady](#) who spent 20 years helping to find the so-called God particle, the Higgs boson. Is that useful? I just read this piece that says that Newton, because of the bubonic plague, had to leave university and went back to the family farm, and during that time he developed all these incredible theories that we are the beneficiaries of hundreds of years later. Is that useful?

**Physics is useful. Is spending years overvaluing the political utility of art?** All I'm saying is, if you dropped out and just focused on politics, then where are you drawing from? Where are your inner resources? What's going to keep you going for 50 years? And do you know that you're actually going to make more of a difference by focusing on politics than on the culture you're passionate about? You don't know what you might help make happen. Our world is full of the result of unintended as well as intended consequences. The two naturally go together.

**What was your own evolution with [music and politics](#)?** I think of it almost in terms of young children and how they engage in the world. Growing up is becoming familiar with a series of rolling concentric circles. You're kind of circling your space, your home, your family. You're exploring all around. So to your question, becoming a parent was a huge thing. Once you have a child, your sense of time completely changes. You start thinking about a longer stretch of time, where you have to be responsible for another person's life. You have to think differently about responsibilities. If you have a parent who becomes ill and you're there, that's a familial responsibility. A friend is in trouble; you help the friend. These are extensions of that concentric circle. New neighbors move in; you try to welcome them. It's all the connections we make in life. Once you're connected, you feel responsibility. And "connected" means that it's a circular loop. I

know *you*, but you have to know *me*, too. There's an energy circle that goes back and forth.

**And you believe culture can drive that?** That's right. I knew fairly quickly in my career that you had to create memories. In order to have a career, you have to make sure that somebody remembers your name — as opposed to “Oh, that Asian dude who does the violin-type instrument.” It's about connection. And culture — I used to ask people, “What is culture?” It's so complex. My latest try for “culture” is that it's everything that humans have invented that helped us survive and thrive. Think about language, think about agriculture, think about navigation, think about engineering. Think about politics: We *invented* our nation. And guess what? The people who invented our nation — they were younger than you. That's my vote for giving custodial responsibility to younger people sooner rather than later. They're willing to sacrifice certain things in order to have an authentic life in what they buy, whom they buy from, how they live. They're going to live through moments of change that I know I'm not going to be capable of helping with, but I can be a cheerleader. That's one way of looking at responsibility. It's not about: “Oh, I have to care about society. I'm using culture.” It doesn't need to be defined as “I'm going to play for you this piece of music.” It's not that. It's more like you and I talk, and a connection is activated. Because you're a thoughtful person, I'm going to get something from this conversation that is going to help me build a mental structure: “I met this guy, David, who's interested in a broad number of people and really does his homework and is a modest person, but he cares a lot and is curious.” That's a good frame to remember somebody by. That's important.

**There have been arguments in the air lately about cultural appropriation. I'm curious how you see them, because you're someone who has obviously thought hard about how to engage with other cultures.** Look, my favorite subject in college

was [anthropology](#). Studying early cultures was interesting because so much of this conversation that we're talking about is stuff that comes from essentially the last 500 years. Anthropology gave me a method of looking at value structures of different societies. These things take me into beyond the contested 300-to-500-year era that we're all really focused on.

**So you see contemporary cultural arguments as blips?** In order to try to understand, I'm trying to gain perspective. The anthropological part of that is that you start out from a position of beginner's mind. No judgment. Tell me about yourself. What's important to you? I just want to know. I'm not going to be judgmental. Later on, I can go back and think: Who is David? What made him curious? Was he born that way or did something happen in his life? And how did having children change him? Because he said something about "the last four years" — his kids are 3 and 5. So is that sort of family, child-related?

**Are you asking me for real?** Yes!

**The change comes from having kids and then looking at the way politics is going and thinking about what kind of world my girls are going to grow up in and what I can do to make it better.** Exactly. I'm a [grandparent](#). Teddy and Oliver are both preschool age. Teddy's going to be 83 years old in the year 2100. I will be long dead by then. But what kind of world is he going to live in? It'll be past the singularity moment. Are there going to be 500 million people already washed under the ocean? Are we going to live with this fractured sense of the world? This is my two little grandchildren. It's not an abstract thing.

**Are you confident that your work is helping bring about the world that you would like your grandkids to live in? Not that you'll necessarily get the result you want, but that you're doing what you can to achieve it.** [Pause.] I don't know. That's the kind of question that I ask myself.



Ma during a performance of Bach's Cello Suites at Carnegie Hall in 1991. Ted Thai/The Life Picture Collection, via Getty Images

**I can't tell if the way you answered my earlier question about cultural appropriation — by talking about anthropology and getting beyond a post-enlightenment perspective — is just how your mind works or was a noble way of sidestepping a potentially controversial subject.** Well, subjects are controversial for a reason. This is something that people have to argue out. I can tell you, my mind is very weird. The bushmen of the Kalahari desert — I actually studied them, and I loved [that group](#). I spent time there. And the thing — I'll give you the fast takeaway — is that they did trance dancing. They did this dance for hours. Women in a circle clapping; they got into trance. The next day, I interviewed the women and said, "Why do you do this?" They gave me the answer, "Because it gives us meaning." Their answer has been my answer for culture since that time. I'm not a crackpot person. I am absolutely a science-based, evidence-based person. But because of the practice of music, I delve into the inner life of whatever we are. I don't have any answers, but I keep poking around to try to figure out a little bit more. So in terms of cultural appropriation, I just want to say that academia has certain standards. Business has certain standards. The arts have certain standards. Politics has certain standards. They're very different standards. If you tell me something that's precious and I then take it as my own, when I use it I need to give credit. We do that in academia. We don't do that in the arts. Acknowledge where it's coming from and share in the wealth.

**During the pandemic, people, as always, turned to music for solace. Have you noticed common denominators in music that comforts?** I've been asking myself all my life, "What is the purpose of music?" It's like trying to find the meaning almost

every day, because the purpose yesterday may not be the purpose today. What the pandemic has crystallized in my mind is that we need music because it helps us to get to very specific states of mind. It's not like, "Listen to my music; it will help." But rather, everybody wants to get to certain states of mind during the day, during the cycle of the season. And during a pandemic, with the alienation of not having social contact, music is also that *physical* force. It's energy. Then you get to more complex things, like how certain songs elicit memory. Certain smells can get to an immediate childhood memory of your grandmother's baking apple pie. Music can do the same thing. Your first kiss. Your wedding. And unfortunately, during this time, we've lost a number of friends, and you have virtual memorial services and you play music for that. All of which is to say that you do whatever is needed with music. We need music to make us feel at equilibrium through hard times and good times.

**People have drawn so much from [Bach's Cello Suites](#) this year. Those pieces were originally composed as study exercises, and yet they've become these icons of catharsis. What's their magic?** A couple of things. Bach wrote the Cello Suites in the only time that he was not in the service of the church. It's something like 1720 to '22. This was a time when he didn't have to write cantatas for Sundays. He could experiment further. So the way I look at the Suites — and this is a roundabout way of getting to your question — is that I imagine Bach saying to himself: "Hey, I play a lot of instruments. I play the organ, I play the piano, I play the oboe, and there's the cello. I'm going to figure out what I can do with the cello." He says, "I'm going to learn everything about the instrument." He writes the first suite, second, third suites. What does he discover? "Wow, I now know exactly how the cello functions." Then he says, "Now, because I have an experimental nature, I want to figure out what the cello *can't* do." One thing the cello can't do is hold many notes at once. So he says: "OK, how

am I going to do that? Maybe I can figure out a way to invent something. *Aha!* How about if I use the listener's ear to fill in what I can't do polyphonically? I give you one note so it's in your memory, then maybe I leave it, but do it in such a way that in about seven seconds I have the following note but you still remember the first note." He does that with different voices, and especially with the bass line. And starting with the fourth suite, he gets more and more inventive in creating larger structures — sort of like a universe filled with neutron stars and galaxy black matter. Sort of like saying, "I can get you into a different world by fiddling with my permutations and your subconscious reception of them." The fourth, fifth and sixth become more experimental. The fifth one, he tunes down the cello by a note, so he gets richer chords. The sixth one, he actually writes for a five-stringed instrument instead of a four-stringed instrument, the [viola pomposa](#). He's expanding the range of the instrument and literally changing it. **Where does emotion come into this? What does this have to do with healing or solace?** Let's say if you're depressed and you're stuck, you're essentially kind of paralyzed. Your neurons are operating at low level and low capacity. Music is a stimulus. You respond to it, but you're responding subconsciously to something that makes your brain active.

**So the ingenuity of Bach's music fires the neurons, which causes positive feelings?** Exactly. In a way, it's the Socratic method: Musically, the Suites are asking, "How would *you* find an answer?" Maybe that's all a fantasy of mine, but the evidence is that people find something in this music. I know I do.

Ma recording with the English Chamber Orchestra in London in 1979. Clive Barada/ArenaPAL

**Do you think about your public presence at all in the context of being Chinese-American? We are in this moment of rising**

**anti-Chinese racism in the United States, and your persona seems directly in contrast to negative stereotypes about Chinese-Americans. Is that intentional?** You're asking a pretty broad question vis-à-vis the United States. It's almost like six or eight different countries of very different characters that have been stitched together to form the United States of America. But here's one way of answering: When I started playing concerts on a regular basis in my early 20s, in Europe the most often asked question was, "How can an Oriental like you understand music?" That was a bit of this stereotype of the Asian with a slide rule. Being a musician at that time was an anomaly. Now the numbers of Asians in orchestras, it's fairly large. When I started out, [Seiji Ozawa](#) was the conductor of the Boston Symphony, and I always credit him with breaking the mold. He was a long-haired, hippie-ish kind of conductor. He was a cool guy. Because of him, I'm almost second-wave. It was easier. Now people are talking about, "How does it feel to be one of very few African-Americans in a major orchestra?" — [Anthony McGill](#) is now being featured. He's a great artist. He is such a beautiful soul. There are fabulous African-American musicians, but I think the environment needs to be more comfortable.

**More broadly, how do you think about the specific environment in which you're playing music?** For me as a musician, I try to be aware of where I am. As a performer, my job is to make the listener the most important person in the room. The only way to avoid burnout is to care about where you are. My good friend [Manny Ax](#) would always say to me that it doesn't matter what you did yesterday; if you're here today, that's what counts. Being present. Caring. You're working with living material. That goes back to memory. The living material is only living if it is memorable. Not only that it's memorable but that you pass it on. That is what I'm thinking about with every single interaction. Whether it's a kid, someone on the street, in a concert hall or with

you, David. It's the same thing: How to be present. Because if you're not?

**Then why are we here?** That's it. You are acknowledging someone's existence by being present. It may take a lot more energy, but boy, is it much more rewarding. It makes me happy. It makes people happy. It's wonderful.

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