

When the Tao Encounters the West

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There are times when Unitarianism appears truly remarkable and unusual to me. I experience this especially when I try to explain to others the diversity of our membership, and the plurality of the beliefs we explore and practice; beliefs that range from secular humanism, to belief in god, to agnosticism, to the earth-based spiritualities and ritual life of paganism. They marvel at the rich complexity of our religion; they wonder at what can possibly hold us together.

Ministering in the context of this diversity is one aspect of our living faith that I particularly value and revel in; I would have it no other way. Just consider the array of Sources we claim for our spiritual and moral practice and exploration: immediate experience of intuition and conscience, the wisdom of world religions, the living examples of prophetic women and men, the findings of science, the light of reason, the wisdom of the earth. By my lights, as a community of pluralistic belief, this is what contemporary Unitarianism is all about, and why I value it so much. No source of wonder, no site of wisdom, no teaching, no truth is ruled alien to us and forbidden; rather, we are invited to approach and explore each and all with gratitude and to drink deeply from their wells of truth, justice and awe.

When I speak about the Tao today, think how we describe what we call the First Source of our living tradition and the Seventh Principle that we covenant to affirm and support: listen—“direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder...which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which...uphold life”; and, from the Seventh Principle—“respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I would put to you that these are contemporary Unitarian descriptions of the Tao. Compare them with these words from the *Tao Te Ching*, given to us by Lao-tzu sometime in the 6th century BCE: “There was

something formless and perfect before the universe was born. It is serene...Infinite. Eternally present...It flows through all things, inside and outside... mystery and manifestations arise from the same source...It is the mother of the universe. For lack of a better name, I call it the Tao.” And to paraphrase Zhuang Zi, the 5th Century BCE Taoist philosopher, “at a fundamental level, everything belongs to the Tao, or the Way. Everything has its root in the Tao. In this sense, all are One.” But then he adds: “a way [or tao,] comes into being through walking upon it. Originally there were no ways [or paths] in the world. A way emerges only after we walk it.”

(from Chenyang Li, *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy*, 1999, pp. 15, 21. Hereafter *Tao*.)

In both sets of descriptions—contemporary Unitarian and classic Chinese—the Tao is described as mystery, source, and abiding presence; it upholds all things; it is the “interdependent web of all existence” which can be known, experienced, and appreciated if we walk its path or way. Keep in mind here that, when describing the Tao, we resort to *mystical language*: mystery, source, root, wonder and all are One. As well, we use the *language of practice*: encountering it provokes us to spiritual renewal, compassion in human relations, and respecting all existence. “A way emerges only after we walk it,” or practice it.

This understanding of the Tao: as way, or path *and* as abiding source and root of all things, is not limited just to what we call Taoism; all major Chinese religions—Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism in China, refer to the Tao and are rooted in it as source of veneration, study and ethics. As well, these religions significantly influenced religions in Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia.

But how, at least according to my speculative assertion, how *and why* did Unitarianism in North America end up expressing *Tao-like* language in its Principles and Sources?

You’ve heard of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. They were two of the most important thinkers and writers to influence the development of Unitarianism in North

America. Their most significant work, like Thoreau's *Walden*, and Emerson's *Essays* was done before the 1860s. Of Thoreau, the prominent 20th century Chinese scholar Lin Yutang wrote the following: Thoreau was the "most Chinese of all American authors in his entire life." [I could] "translate passages of Thoreau into Chinese and pass them off as original writing by a Chinese poet without raising any suspicion." (see David T.Y. Ch'en, "Thoreau and Taoism," in *Asian Response to American*

Literature, ed. by CD Narasimhaiah, 1972, pp. 406-16. Hereafter TT.)

In an essay on "Thoreau and Taoism," David Ch'en has shown conclusively why this might be so. Ch'en has closely studied both Thoreau's *Walden* and his *Notebooks* and *Journals*. He found that two hundred and twenty-five pages of Thoreau's handwritten notebooks consist of Thoreau's translations of books about Taoism and Confucianism that had recently been published in French by Georges Pauthier. Thoreau wrote in his *Journal*: "If I make a huge effort to expose my innermost and richest wares to light...after months or years I may discover the wealth of India, and whatever rarity is brought overland from Cathay." (quoted in TT) Those rarities, Ch'en asserts, included Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, and writings of Lao-tzu's disciple Chuangste. In *Walden*, Ch'en finds rich and striking, at times line-by-line parallels between these classic Chinese Taoists and Thoreau's use of paradox, symbol and parable, parallels in their love for the simple and primitive and a distaste for conventions, for the way they embrace pacifism, and how they observe that the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Above all, they shared a near rapt veneration of Nature; a mystical rapport by which they identified with the Tao, and the need to re-ally themselves with Nature every day. "When Thoreau speaks of the scriptures of the nations," Ch'en concludes, "he more often than not has those of the Chinese in mind." (TT)

Like Thoreau, Emerson, too, was keenly interested in Chinese religion and philosophy. Li-jen Chen (National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan) has noted that in his personal *Journals* throughout the 1830s and 40s, Emerson copied out numerous sections of books that introduced

the works of Confucius and Mencius to Western readers; and that these quotations and commentaries resurfaced in his *Essays* and later *Works*. (see Li-jen Chen, "The Concept of Heaven in Confucianism and Emerson's Transcendentalism," *Intergrams*, 4.2-5.1 (2003). Hereafter: Chen.) As early as 1830, Emerson noted that the Golden Rule originated with Confucius, and that Confucian classics contained "Promising definitions of Nature, Law, and Instruction."

"For Emerson," Chen writes, "Confucius was the greatest thinker in Chinese history." The reasons for this estimation by Emerson are not surprising; they shared a common belief in the innate goodness of humanity; a belief that Nature, or the Tao, manifest eternal laws and power (what Confucius called the Ordinance of Heaven) working for good in the universe; that these laws and power could be intuitively known by all (because they are part of our subjective nature); that we can become "sages," we can transform ourselves, through sincere "self-cultivation" that enables us to care for all humanity, and thus become co-workers with the Tao. "Confucius once defined his central idea *jen* or humanity as "*ai*" or as caring about people. The value of human life," he taught, "lies in the creation of a community in which one cares about, and is cared by, other people. Being cared about by fellow human beings is a source, if not the only source, of the meaning of life. Life cannot be meaningful without this kind of care." (see *Tao*, 61, 144-5)

Where Thoreau found inspiration and validation for his mystical, ecstatic naturalism, in the works of Taoist sages, Emerson turned to Confucius, and Confucian philosophy to authenticate his emphasis on self-cultivation as a way toward a civic ethics of engaged care for others. The goal of that kind of ethic was the reformation of society so that it would accord with the inherent laws of Nature or the Tao. Nature, he wrote, is the way things are, it provides us with the standards of beauty and justice; we must be of the same quality with the universe...a small scale of the universal life. (see Chen) And in his life, his advocacy for women's rights, the

abolition of slavery, and the reformation of education and mental health, Emerson worked to create a community of care inspired, in part, by his encounter with classical Confucian thought.

I think that Thoreau's ecstatic naturalism and Emerson's emphasis on civic ethics guided by an educated, caring community have profoundly affected the development and ethos of our Unitarianism. In a very real sense we are their heirs.

On this Valentine's Day, this First Day of the Year of the Tiger, I'm thinking of two people, two islands, two banks, two shores separated by ocean, river, lake and singular individualities. And of how, this day, we would build a bridge between them. Let us be thankful for the rich array of Sources from which we draw so that our religion is ever living. They invite us to be bridge builders; to be the kind of people, like Thoreau and Emerson who brought the Tao to us, the kind of people who step from one island, one bank, one shore line and person to another.

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