

# THE WHEEL WILL TURN

*REFLECTIONS*



*ON A QUIETIST REVOLUTION*

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The Wheel Will Turn  
*Reflections on a Quietist Revolution*  
by William Martin

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## **A Revolutionary Turning**

I have wandered with the Tao, consciously, for forty years; unconsciously for the whole seventy plus years of my life. I have called it by several names over the decades but have come to appreciate the mysterious truth of Lao-Tzu's opening words in *The Tao Te Ching* - "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name." So I no longer feel the need for names. When pressed to give a name, I just call it, "Tao" - simply the Way Life Lives Itself.

The sixth century B.C.E. Chinese Sage, Lao-Tzu, expressed his understanding of this "Tao" in a short book of wisdom poetry titled, *The Tao Te Ching* - literally, "The Book of the Way of Natural Virtue (Power)" He understood that all life unfolds according to a natural virtue, a "Te" that flows within and through every part of the Cosmos, from the tiniest sub-atomic particle to the greatest galaxy; from the one-celled creature to the human being; from the pebble to the mountain; and from the droplet to the ocean.

Although human beings have a natural "Te," Lao-Tzu observed that they have used their growing intellect to twist this virtue and succumb to the illusion that they are apart from life rather than a part of it. His little book is poetic, wise, full of paradox, but most of all, it is revolutionary, subversive, and dangerous to the established society of his time, and to our own.

Lao-Tzu was branded as rebellious, lazy, unpatriotic, dangerous, and foolish. Yet his little book remains today, two thousand six hundred years later, one of the most published books in human history. It presents life as a gift that requires no effort to enjoy. It turns leadership upside down. It promotes a simple economic life rather than constant capital gain. It values the natural world and sees the human being's place as an integral part of that world, rather than its steward or master.

This Tao has been ignored by humankind for millennia, and humankind are beginning to understand the effects of that ignorance. The Wheel of Tao is turning, as it always does, to bring balance, to diminish excess, to restore what is lacking, and to continue to unfold its mysterious Way. Understanding the nature of this unfolding, we can flow with it, finding our own natural power and energy. With this power and energy we can bring about a world of joy and abundance.

If we continue to misunderstand, resist, attempt to control things, and seek more and more wealth and dominance, we will be swept aside as a dam of sticks is swept aside by a Spring flood. Balance will be restored, with or without us.

This series of essays arises from my growing understanding of the activism that lies within the quietist heart of Taoism. We are never encouraged to manipulate, control, or force the events of life, but there are times when the energy of change and transformation will not be stopped. At those times we are wise to align ourselves with this transformation, seek to understand it, and let it live itself through us. Everything we have believed about life and death, success and failure, will be called into question. We will not be called to forge a new world. A new world will be born. We will only be called to become a conscious and active part of it, or continue to live in our illusions until we finally fade, or are swept, away.

I hope these few explorations of themes from *The Tao Te Ching* will be of help as together we seek to swim with the Stream of Life. It's going to be the ride of a lifetime and I don't want to miss it.

William Martin

Somewhere in the mountains of Northern California

## **For Our Children**

*Embracing this path*

*we are like newborn children.*

*We are in natural harmony with all creatures, bringing harm to none.*

*Our body is soft and flexible, yet strong.*

*Our vital passion is not limited to sexual intercourse,  
but empowers all of life.*

*Our harmony and focus allow us to work all day at a single task and not grow tired.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 55 - trans. William Martin

What shall we tell our children about happiness, contentment, and joy? To what shall we point and tell them, "This. This is the good life. This is what I want for you to have?" Shall we direct them along the well-traveled road our culture has paved? Do we want for them tens of thousands of dollars in educational debt, hundreds of thousands of dollars in mortgage debt, and a life tied to a series of jobs that bring alienation, stress, and dissatisfaction? Does the dream our culture touts really offer what we want for our children? As Joni Mitchell sings so tellingly, "I've looked at life from both sides now..." And I have seen society's illusions fade and its dreams turn to dust. I want for my children, and for myself, something real and whole. I want them to have a life of direct experience and joy.

So I tell my children this: You don't have to earn a living to be happy. Living is a gift and is not something anyone ever earns. Work is something that is natural and satisfying and I wish for you good work all of your life, but I hope you never have to have a job. A job is an artificial creation that removes life from its natural flow and tricks you into thinking that you must trade your life for money. Then, the deception continues, you can use the money to buy back a small portion of your life to spend on amusements, distractions, and diversions. This is not the way the Tao flows.

You don't need much money to live a joy-filled life, really very little. Keep your entertainments simple and truly enjoyable. Make music, tell stories, dance, laugh, play games and make love. I live with an income my society calls, "poverty level," and I've never wanted for anything. I live

joyfully, am comfortably housed and well fed. I do work that I love, live with the people I love, and would not trade my life for any other.

Good work begins with growing food, building houses, crafting beautiful furniture and possessions, writing, reading, creating beauty, and nurturing compassion. This is the proper work of human beings. Stay close to the land and grow your food or support directly your neighbors who do the growing. Build your own house with the help of your friends. Make your own pots, pans, and bowls or get them from your friends who make them. Apprentice yourself to anyone you wish to learn from; a scientist, farmer, carpenter, potter, painter, healer - anyone who seems to be doing work that is supportive of simple happiness. If more education is required, find a way to acquire it without being ground to bits in a degree mill.

Above all else, my son and daughter, don't trade your life for the trinkets your culture tries to sell as treasure. It's a sham, a lie, a massive con game. Joy is everywhere, real work is available, and life is your birthright. You didn't choose it and you don't need to earn it. Simply - and I do mean simply - enjoy it.

## **Wandering**

In the brief blink of the cosmic eye that humanity has existed, has it contributed anything of lasting value? For all of its effort and enterprise, what has it accomplished? Presented with the opportunity to create an Edenic paradise, it has chosen instead to build shopping centers, parking lots, highways, automobiles, television sets, and enough weapons of mass destruction to destroy the Earth a dozen times. It has despoiled the planet and condemned the majority of its members to lives of grinding poverty, violence, and desperation.

It has diverted itself with entertainment and indulged itself with transient pleasures. For each triumph of imagination in space travel it has brought forth more terrible and sophisticated weaponry. For each advance in medicine it has introduced new carcinogens and toxicities into the biosphere. For each enlightened spiritual teacher it has produced ten rapacious billionaires ensconced behind walls of concrete and law.

The natural empathy within the human spirit has been denigrated as weakness. The natural desire for the common good has been curbed by labeling it as “socialism” while fostering xenophobic fear and self-seeking individualism. The human gift for crafting beauty has been replaced by factories producing meaningless trinkets, fashioned by wage slaves, trashing the environment, and enriching corporate coffers.

Is there any hope or promise left within the human psyche? Is there a place remaining for goodwill, sympathy, sacrifice, and compassion? Is there a Center somewhere other than the Marketplace? Have we dammed the natural flow of Tao so completely that it now has no choice but to go under, over, and around us, leaving us stranded in a desiccated desert river bed?

These are the questions asked by wandering Taoists. We wander because we are thirsty for the river we know is flowing underground beneath our feet. We search for the hidden places it springs into the open on its journey to the ocean. Around us people are drinking sand, sold to

them as water, and we can no longer remain quiet and continue to make believe that it will quench our thirst.

Perhaps somewhere tucked away within a mountain valley there is a source of water that will moisten and regenerate the human spirit. It could be that we will perish before we discover its location. Still, we have no option but to wander, leaving behind the dry and shriveled promises of our politicians and our nabobs. Let them vote themselves to office, grant themselves favors, feed on their trinkets, and drink their gold dust. Or, if they wish, they can join us in our wanderings. But we can stay no longer and pretend that this distorted game is getting anywhere.

## Consciousness

*Keep your mouth closed,  
come inside yourself,  
lose your sharp edge,  
loosen your bonds,  
see things softly,  
let things settle.  
This is your true self.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 56, trans. William Martin

To be in relationship with the Tao as Lao-Tzu suggests is to have our consciousness altered; transformed to the degree that our experience of life takes on a luminousness and peace that is impossible to understand in conventional social terms. It is an experience in which our conditioned sense of identity, though it doesn't disappear entirely, takes a back seat to something Lao-Tzu called our "true self."

This true self is a state without tension, anger, confusion, fear, desire, or convoluted thinking. Sounds dull, I know. But it is anything but dull. It is kaleidoscopic, full, whole, clear, and wonder-filled. It is not an "altered" state of consciousness. On the contrary, it is our so-called normal state of consciousness that is altered - skewed and twisted by delusions and illusions about what is real, important, and necessary.

I only occasionally glimpse this state. These glimpses, however, are accompanied by a sense of, "Yes! This is what 'Real' is!" And, at those moments, I know that this is not something I can create by trying harder, nor is it some sort of reward for being good. It simply is. It is "what's there" all the time, discernible whenever the effort to cling to my thoughts and fears drops away.

A meditative practice of some type is taken for granted by Lao-Tzu as the foundation for Taoist awareness. What kind of meditation? There is the rub. All Eastern spiritualities - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, and the contemplative branches of early Christianity - have strong

and complex meditative traditions. A person could try a different type of meditation every week for years and years and still be merely trying harder and harder by adding thoughts upon thoughts. But the essence of Taoist meditation is simply a natural quality of being.

In Chapter 56 of The Tao Te Ching, Lao-Tzu presents a basic primer in Taoist meditation. It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing. Simply:

*Keep your mouth closed:* - stop talking, to others or to yourself.

*come inside yourself:* - let the outside world fade into the background.

*lose your sharp edge:* - don't try to figure anything out or analyze anything.

*loosen your bonds:* - relax all of your muscles.

*see things softly:* - don't concentrate on anything specific.

*wait for things settle:* - let thoughts, efforts, needs, wants and fears slowly quiet down.

This, Lao-Tzu says, is practicing your true self. You may not notice it at first, but if you make such a practice a part of your life, you will begin to recognize that there is a "Something" beneath everything else. You will discover it at the most surprising times: in the quiet of a garden; rushing down a ski slope, walking down a city sidewalk, drinking a cup of coffee, or sitting by a river. There's nowhere you have to go for it, and nothing you have to do in order to attain it. It is you. It is your deep and true identity.

## **Honoring the Tao**

*The Tao expresses itself  
in each and every being.  
Its very presence nurtures us.  
We are shaped and perfected by it in the living of our lives.  
Therefore each and every being honors the Tao  
and delights in its presence,  
not because they are commanded,  
but because it is their very nature.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 51 - trans. William Martin

The Tao does not expect, demand, or want honor. Yet I am committed to honoring the Tao with my life, my thoughts, and my actions. Why, you ask? Because it pleases me to consciously let the flow and energy of Tao live through me and as me.

This honoring is quite different from what I have been taught to understand about “honoring God.” My conditioning regarding God is that honor is expected, demanded, and expressed through correct behavior, correct worship, and correct thinking. I honor God by doing good and refraining from doing bad. Otherwise I am “displeasing” or “dishonoring” God.

Nothing could be further from the experience of honoring Tao. Because the Tao is “Everything and More,” it needs nothing - no worship, no prayers, and no sacrifices. It gives neither punishment nor reward, but its presence and power is in all things and all beings without exception and without condition.

When I realize that the Tao permeates every atom, every sub-atomic bit of energy in this body I call mine, I find myself sitting a bit straighter in my chair. I move with deeper awareness of an internal grace, though I doubt it would be apparent to an observer. I let my thoughts flow rather than constricting them with fear and drama. I see the moment with gratitude and appreciation. I feel a small portion of a samurai’s strength and courage in the face of battle.

In honoring the Tao, I honor myself. In honoring myself, I honor Tao. This sense of honoring is of benefit to me. It enables my life to flow without unnecessary restriction. It really makes no difference to the Tao whether I do this or not. It remains the Tao expressing itself as me - a me who is content and grateful, or a me who suffers and resents. It is the Tao in either case, but “my” experience is markedly different.

This feeling grows out of several Taiko Drum performances I have attended over the years. I am always thrilled by the energy, dedication, and concentration that these Japanese musician/athletes possess. The primal rhythms of their drumming stir an energy in me that is latent but not often felt. I am older now and am unlikely to take up Taiko drumming, but that same energy remains as a potential in my life as it is in theirs. It may manifest in more subtle ways, but the willingness to honor my remaining life with full attention and dedication is as available to me as it is to them. The drumbeat of my life may be quieter but nonetheless it will be my own. This is how I honor Tao.

## **Curmudgeon**

*This path is a paradox.  
It is soft, yet there is no better way to overcome the stiffness that causes so much suffering.  
We know that tenderness is superior to hard-heartedness,  
yet our minds are trained to keep us stubborn.  
If we accept things as they are,  
we can handle every situation.  
If we open our our hearts  
to all that seems painful,  
we end our suffering.  
No wonder it seems paradoxical.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 78, trans. William Martin

I'm not a curmudgeon, though I used to accuse myself of being that. I'm really not. A curmudgeon is a grouch, a complainer, a crabby old guy who sees nothing good about anything. That's not me. I'm basically a happy, even-tempered, easy-going person with no real complaints about my life. (You know there's a "but" coming, don't you?)

But, I am also willing to look at elements the society and world in which I live and say, "This is insane!" The thrust of Lao-Tzu's teachings in *The Tao Te Ching* was social criticism; an observation of the ways people choose to make their society unhappy and destructive by ignoring the movement and natural rhythms of the Tao. He didn't make these observations because he was grouchy. On the contrary, from what we know he was accused of taking too "carefree" an approach to life, of not being serious enough or productive enough. But he was conscious of the forces that propelled his society in unnatural, hurried, and aggressive rhythms. He came to a point where he was no longer fooled by the subtle games of a dysfunctional world and he taught and wrote of an alternative path - a path, not of unhappy complaining, but of simplicity, joy, and contentment.

It is difficult to navigate this path. It requires the ability to see clearly yet not become discouraged; to acknowledge that the world is on the brink of disaster yet not become

immobilized; to live in the midst of collective insanity yet not go mad. These abilities are not easily cultivated. It is easier to acquiesce to societal beliefs and repress any feelings that are discordant with these beliefs.

I stumble often as I travel the Tao. I sometimes fall off the path into a trench of depression. Then I am vulnerable to the voices in my head that accentuate feelings of uselessness, impotency, and futility. “What’s the use?” At other times I veer off into self-righteous anger in which my critical voices have a field day pointing out everything that is wrong, leading me into rant and rage. The upshot of either depression or rage is that I lose the ability to enjoy life and am diverted from helpful and effective action.

Lao-Tzu did not try to fix his society. He called people instead to create, first within themselves and then among themselves, an alternative society; an entirely different way of being in the world. We are not to stand apart from things and change what is wrong with them, as if we were “here” and what’s wrong is, “over there.” We are a part of things and must learn to live in awareness of that. Do our assumptions, attitudes, and actions grow out of a gentle and courageous awareness of the Yin and Yang of life ? Or do we conceive of our life as a battleground, full of enemies and booby-traps; a life in which we must carve out our existence in anger and aggression?

The basic assumptions we hold will determine the fate of our society and our planet. If I want to be at peace and of help, I’ll have to pay consistent attention to the attitudes that drive my actions. I’ll have to learn to find sanity and peace in an insane and violent world. Only by discerning the rhythms of the Tao can I possibly hold that paradox in place.

## **The Source**

*Stop your thinking and be at peace.*

*Watch the drama of life, but contemplate its return.*

*Everything returns to the common source,  
and returns to peace.*

*If you don't find the source, you can't know peace.*

*When you find the source, you naturally become serene, peaceful, joyful, kind, and honorable.*

*Knowing the wonder of the Tao, you are adequate for both life and death.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 16, trans. William Martin

Nancy and I took a getaway trip last week and spent two days in Mt. Shasta City, a small town nestled at the foot of 14,000 ft. Mt. Shasta, one of the most majestic, spiritual, and beautiful peaks in the world. In a small city park on the outskirts of town, the headwater spring of the Sacramento River flows out of the rocks with cold clear water that tastes so good and feels so nurturing that we felt that we could almost live on it alone. The water one drinks from that spring is glacier water that has spent fifty years beneath the earth since flowing from the slopes of the mountain.

The Sacramento River flows from the headwaters down through the canyon for about forty miles and empties into Lake Shasta, an artificial lake created by the construction of Shasta Dam in the 1940s. From there it flows out into the Sacramento Valley where it nurtures countless acres of farmland and hundreds of thousands of people before emptying into the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Along the way it touches all the trappings of human civilization - fear, pleasure, desire, gain, love, and loss.

Those of us who live within its watershed are seldom aware of the purity and generosity of its source there in the little park of a mountain town. Anyone can sit by that spring and fill as many jugs of water as they can carry, free and clear. It is only farther from the source that it begins to become a commodity - sold, bartered, fought over, and contaminated by human fears.

Sitting by the starting point of this river, I felt as if I was connected with a deeper Source. The clarity of the water seemed to spark a clarity within me that reminded me how easy it is for my mind to become confused and off-balance when I lose awareness of the Source from which I emerged.

This Source is not some separate deity I need to please, but is simply the fountain from which all things flow - pure, natural, and clear - the Tao. This flow of Tao emerges from the dark mystery of the Cosmos and becomes All That Is - the galaxies, the stars, the planets, the dark and light energy of creation, the Redwood Tree, and you and me. Its flow is pure and clear, but the human mind is clogged with fear and has, in general, forgotten the Source.

Connecting with this Source is not a simple intellectual exercise. It must be a felt experience. It must be found in the taste, touch, aroma, sight, and sound of natural phenomena, those things that retain a bond with the flow of Tao unhindered by the constructs of the mind. Natural beauty is essential for a human life, whether that beauty is found on the slopes of a mountain or the shades of a summer garden. Somehow, in some way, the Tao must be seen and felt. It remains our Source whether or not we experience it; but how sad is the life that has lost touch with this Source from which it emerged and to which it will return.

## **A Declaration**

*If we pretend to be free,  
but do not recognize our own suffering,  
we remain in bondage.  
Only when we recognize the bondage  
created by our own mind,  
will we be free at last.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 71 trans. William Martin

## A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for a people to dissolve the ties which have connected them with a certain society, and to assume a station to which the Laws of Nature entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of humankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold it to be self-evident that all human beings are free sojourners in the Cosmos, from which they came, and to which they will return, and are entitled to live their lives within their proper place in the web of life on planet Earth. Inasmuch as our current society has become inimical and hostile to the the natural satisfaction, happiness, and well-being of life on this planet, we declare that we will no longer be subject to the dictates of this society.

Whereas society is dedicated to the pursuit of ever more material possessions at the sacrifice of the planet's resources and the welfare of the poorest among us; we declare that we will no longer participate in the amassing of, or producing of, goods beyond that which is needed for life's simple basic comforts.

Whereas we are, through sophisticated media, bombarded with fearful propaganda designed to manipulate us into supporting war, oppression, and an unsustainable exploitation of the world's resources; we declare that we will no longer believe nor give our attention to these messages of fear, hatred, and division.

Whereas our own minds have been trained to be vehicles of our own oppression; we declare that we will no longer blindly believe nor follow the dictates of our conditioned thoughts. We will dedicate ourselves to gaining clarity, insight, and wisdom rather than being led about by muddled fearful thinking. We will no longer be enslaved by voices that seek to have us believe that which is not true. We will submit ourselves only to our own inner authority which we believe will guide us to a life of cooperation, compassion, and simplicity.

Whereas we realize that taking these positions may cause us to be seen as unpatriotic and subversive troublemakers; we declare that we will learn to band together in creative new ways, supporting each other, encouraging each other, and guiding each other as we cooperate to bring into being a new world.

To realization of this new world, we pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

Posted on this 4th Day of July in the year 2015

## Opinions

*Life has no opinions.  
Everything has its place  
and lives its life under the sun.  
Therefore we welcome everything and everyone  
without distinction.*

*Life never tires of doing new things,  
and breathing life into new forms.  
If we cling to our opinions,  
we separate ourselves from life  
and become exhausted.*

*Stay at the center of Life.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 5 - trans. William Martin

As I write this essay, the media is inundated with debates over the use of the Confederate flag, and also with news of a Supreme Court decision validating gay marriage. A friend commented that his Face Book posting page, “is starting to look like a battle between the Confederacy and a Skittles factory.” I’m not a big Face Book user, but I check in with my family and professional pages often enough to know what he means. Whether your hot-button issue is marriage equality or racist symbolism, you can post your opinions on Face Book and be assured of stirring up responses.

In the midst of the polarized cacophony of these confusing times, I often get the question, “What does the Tao say about this or that?” But the *Tao Te Ching* is not some sort of authoritative arbiter of policy and belief. It does not take a position on the issues that seem so important to us. To take a position implies the ability to stand apart from a situation and judge it. The Tao does not, can not, stand apart from anything because it IS EVERYTHING. It cannot judge because everything IS IT. Judgments and opinions are a quality of the human mind. For we humans they have a certain importance and we are not wrong to have them. The Tao, as Bill, has opinions, but the Tao, as Tao, does not. The Tao as Bill cares about issues, but the Tao, as Tao, does not.

The Tao is not some “god” standing outside of a human situation thinking, “Oh, gee, I wish they’d let me flow the way I want to flow.” The Tao flows regardless. The only ones who care are those within the situation whose personal experience is affected by their ability or inability to discern and align with their natural channels of authentic living. It is as if the Tao contains within its infinite flow a spring of fresh water that we can drink of, or not. Either choice is fine with it. We will remain part of Tao whatever choice we make, but our experience of life will be quite different as a result of our choices.

Though our opinions are natural, they are often not particularly helpful. They tend to block the natural flow of caring rather than enhance it. It helps to let the noise of opinions drift away and be replaced by a quiet awareness of appropriate action. We don’t need to get caught by internal or external arguments that only create a sense of self-righteous separation from others. We can simply align ourselves with the particular circumstances or our own life, at this moment, in this place, and let our natural empathy and compassion replace the forced caring and social niceties of our conditioning.

The terrorist who killed nine people at a bible study in Charleston did not, on his own, form his opinions and judgments. His conditioning began, like ours, deep in his personal and social history - actually originating in the evolutionary moment when the human brain began to construct within itself the illusion of separation from the Oneness of Life. Was he responsible and should he be held to account? Of course. Should we take a courageous look at the societal factors that influenced him to take such terrible actions and seek to make changes? Of course. But we must remember that we are not doing the “Tao’s Work.” We are doing the work of human beings as expressions of the Tao. There is a vast difference.

Lao-Tzu felt that, if the human brain was freed from its habitual convoluted thinking, its natural abilities would express empathy, caring, and acceptance. In the meantime, he said, the Tao itself simply flows along, giving birth to and balancing the Cosmos. If humanity continues to create an “eddy,” - a backward swirl of current that creates a whirlpool of suffering - the Tao will simply keep flowing until the snags are washed away and the eddy rejoins the river.

We have the option of mindfully confronting the conditioning that has created this eddy of suffering. We can choose to return to our true nature and find a flow of authentic compassion. Conversely, we can continue to rant, rave, and kill for our opinions until the force of the Tao washes the whole thing away for good. I care about this. You care about this. The natural flow of Tao within us can facilitate our own compassion and caring. But the Tao, as Tao, does not care. It will dance its eternal dance and flow eternally out of and back into itself with or without us. Our experience of life and our destiny as a species is up to us.

## **To-Do List**

*The power of the Tao is experienced  
only in the present moment.*

*It is only in the present moment  
that we can see the way ahead.*

*In the present moment,  
events can be used for harmony.*

*Forcing things to be other than what they are,  
only brings us misery.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 55 - trans. William Martin

“Those who fail to plan are planning to fail.”

Like most maxims, this old favorite has a ring of common sense. It also rings of stress, anxiety, and suffering. A plan can never fully succeed. If one seems to, it is only for a moment. All plans eventually crumble to dust.

The options in modern life seem to be limited to a bipolar "success or failure." But real life is never defined by these polarities. For a modern twist on an old Zen/Sufi tale, let me tell you of a farmer who planted twenty acres in almond trees. He worked diligently for five years in the small orchard and it produced a bountiful crop at a time when the almond prices were at their height. “What a success you are,” said his neighbors, “certainly the result of good planning.” The farmer replied, “Who knows?”

The next year a blight destroyed the orchard. “What a failure,” the neighbors said in judgment, “you should have been prepared for this.” The farmer replied, “Who knows?”

The farmer’s family worked hard for another year, cutting back on expenses and living simply, enjoying each others company without many distractions. “What a close family you have,” the neighbors said, “you must be very proud.” “Who knows?” the farmer said.

Then the farmer's youngest daughter ran away with a wild young man who drove fast cars and played computer games. "How terrible for you," the neighbors said, "to have your daughter fail you that way." "Who knows?" the farmer said.

A year later the daughter came back to the farm having married the young man who now owned a tech start-up company worth one billion dollars. The couple wanted to make up for their inconsiderate behavior by building a new modern house for the farmer and his wife. "How wonderful," the neighbors chortled, "you have it made now with a rich son-in-law." The farmer said, ... well you know how the story goes.

Life is not a bipolar game of win/lose or success/failure. It is an organic, flowing, growing thing. It is unpredictable. The happy person is the one who spends a minimum amount of time in necessary planning and a maximum amount of time savoring, enjoying, adapting, and flowing with events.

The part of the mind that can conceive and build a bridge is a wonderful thing. But that part of the mind is not capable of "building" a life. The elements of life do not "fit together" as do the elements of a bridge. Life is organic and the brain is organic. The parts blend together in a wondrous "here and now" with no effort yet with incredible energy.

Our deepest mind, that which I call our "Tao Mind," is spacious and free enough to let the "bridge-building" mind plan and build its bridges, at the same time allowing life to grow organically and the human spirit to continue to dance with the winds of the Tao.

Of course setting my mind to certain tasks with some sort of rational step-taking can be helpful. But I've given up goals, objectives, and all the other so-called "essentials for success." They've never served to bring anything but a sense of falling short, or if achieved, have never brought the peace or contentment they promised. Now I just use my intelligence, my gifts, and my awareness to move through the day in whatever manner seems to be satisfying and helpful. Sometimes the day crashes around me, but overall I am amazed at the things I "accomplish" without a plan, goal, or objective.

Planning is overrated, modestly useful at times, but never able to bring lasting satisfaction. The moment I devise a plan, a universe of awareness disappears. Whatever I meet, I try to make it fit somehow according to the plan. Alternative routes disappear, people become “resources,” creativity becomes “productivity,” and creative arts become, “products.”

Still need a "To Do" list? Here's one:

1. Show up.
2. Pay attention.
3. See what happens.

## **Real Life**

*Because the present moment is all we have,  
we do not constantly seek  
a faster way of doing things,  
or a better place to be.  
We use our cars only when necessary,  
and our weapons lie unused.  
We enjoy our food,  
our homes,  
our families,  
and every aspect of our lives.  
We die content  
because we have truly lived.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 80, trans. William Martin

My father was raised on a small ranch in the Little Shasta Valley of Northern California. He roamed the hills and fields of the ranch as a boy with a .22 rifle in his arms and his dog beside him. He would have been content, actually deeply happy, to have taken over the ranch from my grandfather. The Great Depression intervened and the ranch was lost when the local bank failed, taking with it all the Martin reserves. Another bank took over the ranch and sold it ten years later for a considerable profit. My father grieved his lost rural life for as long as he lived. He went to the University of California and became a pharmacist, a profession that he did not really enjoy but that gave him the financial security that had become his priority. To his dying day his heart longed for the ranch - for the solitude, the earthy work, and an immersion in the natural wildness and beauty of real life.

Lao-tzu lived in a time of social unrest in which the rural traditions of China were giving way to urbanization; to the amassing of power and wealth in the hands of a few and the exploitation of the peasant farmer to provide for the cities at the expense of his own community and family. Even 2,600 years ago, the accumulation of wealth was the priority and the movement of goods vast distances was essential to this accumulation. Jobs replaced natural work and the flow of

resources began to siphon to the top rather than circulating within the local community. Confucian philosophy supported this consolidation of power in urban areas while Taoist followers remained distrustful of any authority outside of that which emerged naturally from rural and forest environments.

Like my father, Lao-tzu grieved a lost rural ideal. He understood the basic need of human beings to live local lives. He saw the growth of restlessness in people as symptomatic of a loss of center, of no longer being grounded in the real world. The above chapter 80 is one of his most famous and poignant expressions of this locally rooted life, already on the road to extinction in his time. Lao-tzu and my father both knew something important. They were not simply dreamers, unable to accept the inevitable “progress” of civilization. They understood that something precious and essential was being traded at the marketplace for handfuls of trivial trinkets.

People tell me, “Bill, you must be realistic. You must understand the real world.” I do understand the real world. The real world is sun and rain, wind and water, earth and fire. The real world is food and community that is tangible and local, not virtual and Cloud-hidden. Work in the real world is that which emerges from, supports, nurtures, and sustains the local community. It is not hourly labor for mega-businesses who have taken our lives and given us jobs in return - for which we are supposed to be oh, so grateful. (Unless, of course, they can find a way to outsource those jobs.) In one sense people are right. I am seriously out of touch with the world as society imagines it to be. But I am filled with a longing to be in touch with the world as it actually is.

A few twists of fate in slightly different directions and I might have owned a small farm. Who knows? I will never literally be able to live that life but I will do everything I possibly can to capture for myself the sense of place, work, and belonging that such a life once gave. I will also support others who are seeking the same ideal. Many people are beginning to understand what Lao-tzu knew so long ago. They are rejecting the cultural dream that has turned into a nightmare. They are building local community based systems in countless innovative ways.

Just one example of this is Community Supported Agriculture. In CSA, a group of community members join together to provide financial and volunteer support for a local sustainable farm. Members of a CSA pay a monthly or yearly fee to the farm and in return share in the bounty of that farm. Members also share the risk of a poor growing season due to weather, pests, or other factors. It is truly a “we’re in this together” approach to agriculture and community. Here in Chico, our CSA is a wonderful group of people called GRUB. (Growing Resourcefully Uniting Bellies). Lao-tzu would smile. Resourcefully uniting bellies was high on his list of virtues.

I leave you with some questions. (To which there are no easy answers.)

*What is real life?*

*What is natural work? How is it different from a job?*

*What is important?*

*What is not?*

## **Blame**

*Those who have blame others  
are not teaching this path.  
Those who teach this path  
do not cast blame*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 81 - trans - William Martin

Along with an increasing sense of societal woes and global uncertainty, I notice a corresponding increase in conversations, especially internal ones, that fall in the category of, “Isn’t it awful, and ‘they’re’ to blame for it.” There is a persona within my psyche that loves such conversations. They contain a great deal of energy and, as a bonus, a seductive glow of self-righteousness. However, they always leave me with a depleted feeling once the the conversation is over. Too often the energy that might have been available for practical and personal action has been dissipated by the conversation itself. The, “Isn’t it awful, and ‘they’re’ to blame,” process creates an illusion that I have actually taken some action.

A wise friend once told me that it can be exciting and helpful to dive into an action that naturally arises in my heart and do it with all my mind and energy, but to always keep two guidelines in mind: “Never blame anybody and never recruit anybody.” This advice parallels Lao-Tzu’s wisdom in chapter 81 - “Those who teach this path do not cast blame.”

So much of life seems out of control that it is easy to let our conditioned mind lead us into the assumption that we must wrestle life back into some sense of “way it should be.” I empathize with those who are on the streets voicing a sense of outrage; I sometimes join them. I understand the need to point the finger at institutions and policies that have morphed into destructive and mindless forces. But sooner or later the focus must return to my own heart and soul and manifest itself in a transformation, a revolution if you will, in the way I go about my life. I want to live the life I want the world to be.

Yes, that's it. *I want to live the life I want the world to be.* It is grammatically a bit twisted, I suppose, but for me it touches the essence of what revolution and transformation are all about. I don't want to make the world into what I want it to be. I'm weary of trying to make other people be who they're supposed to be. They are just who they are, and usually want me to be who they think I'm supposed to be. It's a losing circle. Instead, I want to go ahead and live my life as I want the world to be.

Living as I want the world to be is empowering for me. It removes the feeling of being a helpless victim of external powers and puts the responsibility back onto my moment-to-moment, everyday decisions and actions. It asks me to look at my own, seemingly trivial, choices and summon the courage to make the choice of a simpler, slower, and more human way of being. It removes me from the blame game and the massive waste of energy such a game entails.

Simply choosing, each moment, to live the life I want the world to be is the only sane approach to revolution. There will be occasions when such a moment-by-moment choice will involve stepping out into social action, but even then the energy will be contained in the moment, not wasted in blame and frantic efforts to get people to behave. They will simply be statements of how I want to live. It is something every single one of us can do - live the life we want the world to be. Here's to that life!

## God Talk

*This path existed before the cosmos was born.  
Within itself it is unchanging and tranquil.  
It is present everywhere and is the mother  
of everything that is,  
living in every atom of the universe.  
Everything comes from it  
and returns to it.  
It has no name,  
but since we insist on words,  
I'll call it, "Tao."*

From The Tao Te Ching - Chapter 25; trans. William Martin

Lao-Tzu was called an atheist by the religious orthodox of his society. He did not honor the rituals, rules, and gods of the folk religions of China, nor did he honor the quasi-religious doctrines of Confucianism. He seldom spoke of gods or of "God." In truth, however, he was not an atheist, but for him the existence of God could not be a topic of conversation. To talk of God or gods would be to diminish the Oneness of the Tao. The famous line from the traditional beginning of Chapter One of his Tao Te Ching, states: "The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name."

He continues in Chapter One to say that the naming of anything separates that thing from all other things; sets it outside the Oneness of the Universe. Naming creates separate forms - not a bad thing to do in many cases as it creates one way of relating to existence. However this creation of separate forms through names and categories is dangerous. It tempts us to believe that something, anything, might actually be separate and apart from everything else.

Some have seen the word, "Tao," to be a way of saying, "God," but that is misleading. It is not simply another word for God. Using the word, "Tao" was, for Lao-Tzu, an attempt to avoid the dangers of naming God. In Chapter Four of The Tao Te Ching, he says of the Tao, "If you ask me where the Tao came from, I do not know. It is older than God." For him, the Tao is the eternal

Unity out of which emerged all the forms of the Cosmos, including the human ideas and concepts of, “God.”

The moment we utter the word, “God,” we create an illusory concept around which people will rally, preach, proselytize, argue, crusade and kill. I have come to believe that to continue to make such utterance is simply too dangerous. For me, the cosmos is numinous, mysterious, and sacred but when I am asked, “what is the source of the universe?” I reply like Lao-Tzu in Chapter 25, “I really don’t know, but if you force me to call it something, I’ll call it, ‘Tao.’”

Does naming it help us relate to the numinous mystery of life - give us a way of connecting? I used to think so. I even spent some years of my early life as a minister, making "God-talk" my profession. It’s very difficult for me to do that anymore. Personifying God, talking about God, and trying to please God seems to cause as much harm as benefit. Once we have given a name to God, we have created an idol which will inevitably turn and devour us. An anthropomorphic God is a creation of the human mind and cannot represent the Great Mystery without the risk of doing terrible damage.

Does that leave me in a completely impersonal universe? Is the human heart, as some contend, made for relationship? Indeed I am made for relationship and the universe is far from impersonal, for I am personal and you are personal. We, at this moment through writing and reading are in a personal relationship. In the flow of the Tao we are as important as are the uncountable galaxies, for we are literally made from them. We are made of the dust of exploding stars and we float in the same Mystery as do those stars. Whatever the Tao might be, we are part of it and can never be apart from it.

So, like Lao-Tzu, I have lost the need to speak of God. Such speaking simply brings separation and discord. I only need to breathe, see, touch, taste, love and savor the Mystery of my life; and allow others do the same.

## Rules

*With the Tao, we are naturally kind.  
When Tao is lost, we make rules of kindness.  
When kindness is lost, we make rules of justice.  
When justice is lost, we make rules of conduct.  
When all these rules are not obeyed,  
force is used to keep control.  
Rules are substitutes for virtue and compassion,  
and leave us confused and shameful.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 38, trans. William Martin

Lao-Tzu is known by some historians as, “The first anarchist.” The word, “anarchy” is derived from the Greek: *an* (without) *arkhos* (ruler), and literally means, “one who governs him or herself.” The modern usage of the word has come to imply a state of disorder and chaos without an authority to impose order. Lao-Tzu, however, believed that chaos and disorder were actually caused by the imposition of authority from a source outside the hearts and minds of the people. He felt that true order emerges from the Tao and thus has the characteristics of the Tao: flexibility, fluidity, always transforming and changing, and always responding to the situation of the moment.

Unlike many modern political anarchists, Lao-Tzu would not advocate the active destruction of social institutions nor the violent overthrow of governments. Instead he suggested that social institutions and governments that did not emerge from the nature and needs of people, would best be ignored, bypassed, and contravened. In several chapters of advice he gave to “leaders,” he said that the best leader did not lead at all, but simply carried water for the people as they went about the business of creating the adventure of their lives. The Tao, he said, has this quality - it “gives birth without possessing, acts without expectations, and leads without controlling.” (Chapter 10)

If people begin to connect with each other at an authentic and fundamental level, they will form more natural communities. No longer moving in lock step to the unnatural rhythms of

consumption rather than appreciation, jobs rather than work, and distraction rather than enjoyment, they will form a new order of life. In such an order, rules will be transformed into guidelines for the benefit of people, not frozen in eternal edicts for the control of people. These guidelines will not be codified, established, or written in stone or on any other medium. They will flow like water, adapting themselves to whatever circumstances they meet. Like the Tao, they will support people without controlling them.

I have little tolerance for those who make, bend, twist, and use rules to keep people in line while going about the business of the accumulation of wealth and power with no thought of community responsibility. They are one more reason I am growing impatient with rules; rules that neither protect nor benefit people but merely form the framework by which power is obtained and maintained.

Am I going to run red lights if I have the whim? No. That would be stupid. Such lights are of benefit to my safety. But I'm going to look both ways, even at a green light because the superabundance of rules in our society naturally creates a backlash of rule-breakers and someone just might say, "One more damn red light... not this time!" I'll be careful. But I am not going to look the other way when laws begin serve structures rather than people. profits rather than justice, and oppression rather than freedom.

Does it sound as if I am an anarchist? a troublemaker? a rebel? a rabble-rousing agitator? If so, it is simply that my understanding of life is coming more and more to be formed by how I read the Tao. And the more I read Lao-Tzu, the more I see in him the intricate paradox of a "non-violent, compassionate, anarchist."

Exactly what am I going to do? I don't know. Like all free persons I am making up my life as I go along. I'm creating my life as a part of the flow of Tao. I don't know what comes next, but there is a transformation in progress and I want to play my part because I know that, without the Tao, we will simply replace one set of rules, laws, and controls with a new set. I want to be part of something entirely new.

## **Propaganda**

*The great teachers of this path taught with humble simplicity.*

*No cathedrals, no books, no ado at all.*

*Just one person talking to another about ordinary life.*

*Today the people babble*

*about everything under the sun,*

*seeking to gather crowds*

*and control circumstances by their clever words.*

*Everyone is cheated.*

*From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 65 - trans. William Martin*

Oh, the noise, noise, noise, noise! Everywhere we turn we are bombarded with the most sophisticated and manipulative propaganda in the history of humankind. Gathering and controlling masses of people is the essence of modern social, economic and political life; and the time-honored method of gathering and controlling is propaganda - the packaging and dissemination of information in a manner that shapes public opinion and action toward ends that are not necessarily explicit in the message itself.

For propaganda purposes it doesn't matter what people's opinions are. It only matters what they do - what they buy, what they support with their time, attention, and energy, and how they vote. (Thus the common phenomena of voters choosing contrary to their interests and stated opinions because of the unconscious hook of some subtle emotionally-charged piece of propaganda.)

Propaganda depends on the breakdown of natural connections to the local environment, local economy, and local relationships - thus creating an individual completely separated from all sources of interconnected awareness - someone who depends completely upon him or herself as the measure of all things in all situations. This individual, in a seeming paradox, becomes a member of a "mass society" in which the "mass media" plays the role of information giver and opinion former. Thus those who would seek to control society depend on creating an atmosphere of individualism and isolation in which their message can be delivered without being questioned. Only an isolated individual can be a member of a mass society.

Notice the isolating nature of modern media - a screen of some sort, with earphones or surround sound, which demands individual focus and shuts out the surrounding environment. In this situation, content is poured directly into the individual's mind without the filter of a broader environment. No context is supplied and the content enters the brain without evaluation. That we think we are evaluating the content does not matter. The content has already been accepted by a deep part of the brain as "real" and it is from that part of the brain that unconscious action emerges. Since the isolated individual seldom has any other context for action other than media and friends whose primary context is also mass society and mass media, the set up for propaganda-driven action is in place.

The essence of propaganda lies in the tying of emotional images and words to an economic or political idea that, in reality, has nothing to do with the images and words used. Picture a political advertisement showing lovely children playing on green grass, (in slow motion, of course) with a background of soft music and a concerned parental voice saying, "I want my children to have a secure future, a good education, and the chance to live a happy life," (more images of children playing, going to school, sitting in parent's laps) "I worry (notice the emotion-laden word, "worry.") that they will lose the security I've worked so hard to build for them." At the end the message is tied to: vote for....

This mini-drama has evoked childhood, security, family, happiness, education, and worry. Nothing of substance has been said, and the money behind the ad very likely does not give a rip about your children, their education, or their security. In fact they may very likely cut education funds, cut support for needy children, and siphon your hard-earned money into bail-outs, wars, and exploitation. But that doesn't matter - your emotions have already been subtly skewed to see happy children and your own fears as tied to your vote for whomever. The very same advertisement could, of course, be used to sell almost anything.

The Taoist has some immunity to propaganda because neither of the characteristics necessary for it to be effective are present. He or she is neither an isolated individual nor a member of a mass society. He or she is in continuous contact with the immediate local environment. The Taoist's natural individualism is a threat to the viewpoint of the propagandist who needs a person to

identify with the mass and chastises him when he refuses, calling him “irresponsible” or “uninvolved.” A person following the movement of Tao is able to refuse a mass identity because he has a deeper and more connected identity. His independence and freedom are rooted in this connection. The so-called freedom of an isolated individual is an illusion. Without connection there is no context other than that provided by mass media by which to act. This is not freedom, but manipulation in its most insidious form.

It will be a god-awful long political slog through the ever-extended election season. Every fear, scary story, hateful message, and hidden longing will be stirred by billions of dollars worth of sophisticated propaganda masquerading as democracy. Don't pay any attention to it. Turn it off, tune it out, drop it off your radar. Pay attention instead to life around you. See your community through the compassion which is natural for you. Let go of your fears and self-protective conditioning. Touch, taste, listen to the music of nature. You may decide to vote for someone because you have listened to life, not media. You may decide not to vote at all. If so, let that act not be one of apathy or despair, but of deep commitment to Something New. Something that will be a step toward a transformative revolution of community and compassion in our world.

## **Communism, Capitalism, and Community**

*When the rich gather trinkets  
and governments build weapons,  
while the needs of people go unmet  
and the poor have no hope,  
the land has forgotten the Tao  
and ruin will surely follow.*

From Chapter 53 of The Tao Te Ching, trans. William Martin

Communism, as experienced through the Russian revolution and the Cold War was tragically flawed. Marx and Engels were brilliant thinkers but they built their hopes on a theory of economics alone. The socialist revolution in Russia was violent and simply replaced one set of tyrants with another - because just imposing a new economic system from the top down does not deal with the pervasive sense of alienation and fear that has come to dominate the human personality. The Russian population was set up for the tyranny of Stalin and never recovered.

We do not have to accept Capitalism as it has been presented to us in order to enjoy free enterprise, meaningful work, or individual accomplishment. Capitalism is not the source of our prosperity. Our own spirits and natural compassion is the source. Actually, a community-based life is more hospitable to these things than the so-called “democratic” system that now enslaves us.

We are creatures who are designed for community. Most of our evolutionary history was played out in small wandering tribes or small settled villages. We naturally cared for each other and found our own unique place within our family/tribe/village. We depended on cooperation and empathy in order to survive. Sharing, caring, and mutual support were not moral virtues but natural virtues - part of the essence of who we were. We had to be taught, educated, and conditioned by massive social forces over a period of hundreds of years in order to become as isolated, individualistic, separate, and fearful as we have become.

Just for example: homelessness would be unthinkable in a community-based life. Everyone would participate in the good times; everyone would pull together in the bad. Damaged personalities (far, far fewer than in the current system which itself inflicts most of the damage) would be the responsibility of the whole community and would either be nurtured back to health or gently and compassionately controlled so that they did not further damage themselves or others in the community.

Don't fall victim to the all-too-easy dismissal of these ideas as "commie/socialist utopian fantasy." That dismissal is the way culture has kept us in line for generations. "It ain't perfect, but it's the best we've got." Nuts! The illusion that it's the best we've got simply keeps the whole system in place to the benefit of the very few. We all know, deep inside, that something far more equitable, joyful, satisfying, and authentic is possible. But we must stop believing the lie that fundamental change is impossible.

Soviet Communism failed. Capitalism has failed as well, but it is tragically about to destroy the planet in its death-throes. The Tao will return humanity to small community-based living - peacefully or apocalyptically, depending on our choices. The more we as individuals find ways of choosing community in the present moment, the more chance we have of seeing a peaceful transformation. The more we participate in sharing, nurturing, helping, healing, and caring the more joyful our experience of life will become.

Ken Cohen, Qigong teacher and author of *The Way of Qigong*, was asked recently if he saw the human species as evolving. His answer stunned my conditioned illusions but, upon reflection I found that I agreed with his answer: We are not evolving; we are devolving.

Evolution requires interaction between humans and the natural environment. We are no longer in relationship with the natural world, but with the objects and images of our own making. We are in an ever-tightening spiral of incestuous relationship with our own interior selves. The brain cannot lift itself by its own bootstraps. It cannot evolve without connection to the cosmos outside of itself, and perusing ideas about that cosmos is not enough. The human spirit cannot evolve without community, and a virtual representation of community will not suffice.

We can reassure ourselves that technology is only a tool, but history indicates that, once we shape our tools, our tools then shape us. Technology, originally a tool, is now the most powerful shaping factor in human experience. This is so very dangerous because this technology has redefined our social and communal context in a manner that is counter-evolutionary.

The basic definition of community is, " a group of people living together in a particular area or place." Despite its claims, technology is not building a global community. It is building the illusion of a global community. It is, in fact, displacing us from connection to the earth, the climate, our food, and our landscape and replacing these essentials with facsimiles.

When we believe the illusion that our community is virtual and not connected to a place, we no longer feel the same sense of responsibility to the land on which we walk. After all, when we wear out the resources here, we can always pick up our computer and move somewhere else - it's all the same in our virtual flatland.

There is no global community other than the one that walks upon the planet and draws its nurture from the Earth and sea and sky. Community is always local and real. Only when we realize that, will we be ready to understand and cooperate with the other local communities around the globe in a real, rather than virtual, global community.

One way of experiencing local community is through the Community Gardening movement. At the beginning of World War II, England was almost completely dependent upon imported food. Germany immediately exploited this vulnerability with a massive U-Boat blockade. Starvation, the German command felt, was the best strategy for the quick capitulation of the island nation. But an agriculturalist named John Raeburn quickly organized the "Dig for Victory" campaign and within a short time crops were planted in backyards, schoolyards, parks, vacant lots, golf courses, - everywhere there was a patch of dirt and a bit of sun. These "extra" gardens produced twice the amount of food previously imported. Americans followed suit with their "Victory Gardens."

In the midst of a severe drought here in California, I am awed by the number of pristine lawns that surround my apartment complex and the houses in my neighborhood. Thousands of gallons

of water pour daily from our diminishing aquifer to nourish non-native grass which is seldom, if ever, walked on or played on. For a moment today, I had a vision of these acres of lawn replaced by flowers and vegetables; not a helter-skelter arrangement of unlovely growth, but beautifully arranged plots of vegetables and flowers with seating areas, fountains, and play areas scattered throughout. It was a real landscape, filled with beauty and purpose. Instead of one hundred individuals with one hundred power lawn mowers isolated on one hundred separate lawns, I saw one hundred friends and neighbors working together to grow healthy food in a community garden - a garden we revolutionaries might look back upon as a "Victory Garden."

The website of the American Community Gardening Association is filled with inspiration, education, and resources for this wonderful way of building true community.

Use technology carefully, my friends. Don't let it replace the place in which you live and the people with whom you share a common life.

## **Fear**

*Fear clouds your mind.*

*Defending yourself saps your energy,*

*Having an enemy distorts your soul.*

*Seeing through fear is the only true safety.*

The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 46 - trans. William Martin

Fear drives the wheels of commerce and fuels the fires of war. It whispers stories to spoil our sleep, then sells us alcohol and sleeping pills. It tells us of great dangers all around, then sells us billions of dollars worth of toys, trinkets, and entertainments to distract our minds. It tells us we are isolated and alone, then warns us not to trust other people. When we become agitated enough, it points to people “not like us” and identifies them as our enemies, the reason for our fear, and makes us willing, even eager, to have our taxes siphoned into weapons.

Fear makes us vulnerable to manipulation by those whose interests lie in keeping us stirred up. If we begin to question status quo, we are quickly presented with foreign threats and terrorists, and told that we are in an endless war with monsters, not with human beings. Our weapons must be multiplied, crucial issues must be ignored, and our civil rights must be curtailed - all, of course, to keep us safe.

As Lao-Tzu says, the person who, “can see through all fear will always be safe.” This does not mean that we will never feel fear, but that we will “see through it” and not be at its mercy. We will be safe from control and manipulation by those who would use our fears to take our money, our time, and our very life energies for their own benefit.

How do we begin to see through these fears that have so clouded our minds? Perhaps by being aware of the following “inconvenient truths.”

1. We don't have to stay alive. We have a so-called “survival instinct,” that occasionally serves us. But that instinct has been hijacked and turned into an instrument of fear, leaping into action at

every headline, rumor, or twinge. In truth, that instinct will not ultimately save us. We are going to die. The question is: How shall we live in the meantime?

2. We don't need life to be always comfortable and convenient. We can be hot and sweat. We can do hard physical work and feel aching muscles. We can wear sweaters and coats against the cold and roll down car windows to let in a cooling breeze. (Do any car windows "roll" anymore?) We can walk more and drive less, even if it is "inconvenient." We can take more time with cooking and eating. A "more convenient life" is neither necessary nor satisfying.

3. We don't have to believe what we read and hear. All media is essentially propaganda - designed to get us to vote, spend, live, and work along certain well-established tracks. News media is no exception. Every nuance of wording in a 90 second news clip is crafted to hook either fear or desire. It may (may!) be necessary to get a certain amount of information from media, but we must be very careful and aware that we are never really hearing or reading the "truth."

4. We don't have to support sending drones to distant lands to kill faceless thousands on our behalf. We're capable of deciding for ourselves who our enemies are, or if indeed we have any at all. If we must have an enemy, let it be personal. Let us look each other in the eye and see if, indeed, this person is a monster. If necessary, today may be a good day to die and we need not be afraid. Let our conflict be filled with sorrow and regret over the shedding of blood. Unrealistic? Yes. But it is nevertheless a more authentic approach to conflict and self-defense than the impersonal and inhuman war machines we have collectively devised.

Seeing through our conditioned fears may be an important step on our evolutionary and revolutionary journey. How vulnerable are you to your fears? How do they leave you open to manipulation? A step towards understanding fear is one more step away from slavery.

## **Wasting Time**

*My father used to sit on a wooden bench  
beneath a pine tree,  
solitary in the field behind his cabin.  
He didn't read. He simply sat and watched  
the meadow grass, the trees, the mountains  
as evening came and sunlight faded.  
He would return to the cabin for dinner,  
rested, peaceful, and content.*

*I watch the students spread about  
outside the Campus Union.  
Walking watching small screens,  
sitting watching larger ones.  
Across the plaza my eye is drawn  
to a young man sitting  
beneath a Redwood tree.  
No screen that I can see.  
I wonder what he is thinking  
and what his mind might be creating.  
Then I spy the white ear buds,  
the mesmerized glaze, and realize  
whatever is in his mind  
is piped in from outside.  
Not for him to waste his time.*

*"Productivity R Us,"  
no wasted time, no siree.  
Waiting at the grocery counter?  
Check your email,  
pay your phone bill,  
text your friends.  
Don't waste your time with people;  
like the older woman with a toddler,  
probably her grandson, hugging  
her skirt in shy confusion.  
No need to note the fatigue*

*drawn in lines across the face  
of the overworked cashier.  
These people aren't important,  
you've got things to do,  
no time to waste.*

*When you really, truly, need a break  
there's cable, videos, songs, and games.  
Go shopping or to a movie.  
Take your ATV off-road  
enjoy the flora beneath your wheels,  
watch the fauna scamper out of your path.  
If you have to take a break  
don't just sit there, for goodness sake.  
That's a waste of time.*

## **Gladiator Games**

*Weapons are used with the utmost restraint,  
for they always bring harm to all.  
If we must use them, we act quickly,  
and return to peace immediately.  
Our enemies are beings, like ourselves.  
We do not rejoice in victories  
nor in the downfall of others.  
Victory is an illusion without true meaning.  
When a battle is over, we weep that this has happened.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 31, trans. William Martin

The Super Bowl came and passed and I hardly noticed. I didn't care who won. However, had either the Green Bay Packers or the San Francisco Forty-Niners been playing, I would have felt a strange sensation of "Us" playing against "Them." What's that about? Who gives a rip whether one group of over-age adolescent boys wearing a familiar uniform beat another group of similar boys wearing a different uniform? Obviously hundreds of millions of us do, and we spend billions of dollars and massive amounts of emotional energy as a result. It's a good thing we don't face any serious problems as a society that might need some of this money and energy.

Sports, college and professional, are the gladiator games of our modern empire. They keep us hyped-up and wedded to a win/lose mentality in which there can be only one "Number One!" Our genetic predisposition to "Tribal loyalty," gets shifted to uniforms, team colors, and regional biases and becomes the energy that fuels this billion dollar industry and gives focus to billions more in advertising revenue. In the Roman Empire however, the gladiator games were much more than entertainment. They were carefully designed to keep the civilian population in a continuous military mindset. Physical conquest of an opponent was presented as the greatest of achievements. A mass crowd with its energies stirred to the point of crying for blood is a crowd that can be counted on to obediently throw their taxes into the black hole of weapons and war. Without this amped-up population, the Roman Empire could not have dominated the world.

In our own society, massive amounts of money and effort are spent to cultivate the mindset that winning is everything. Professional athletes are paid ludicrous salaries to convince us of this, all the while entertaining us and distracting us. Our universities have also become trainers and managers of future gladiators. Sport has been transformed into war. The joy of play has been made into the serious stuff of commerce.

I feel the effects of these modern gladiator games at three levels. At one level I am distracted from the reality of my broken society; its injustices, its institutionalized greed, and its militaristic policies. At a second level I am distracted from the wonders and simple joys that merely being alive can provide. I am trained to look to entertainment, competition, and commerce to keep my mind occupied until bed time, when, perhaps, I can sleep until awakened to the next day's distractions - day after day, unthinking, herded, tamed, trained, and exploited; life's true pleasures stolen from me and stripped of their natural beauty, then sold back to me in packaged form. At yet a third level I am socialized to see the world in terms of "Us" and "Them," making it easier to turn my fears away from the actual causes of injustice and towards some external enemy.

Across from me at the Naked Lounge coffee shop one morning recently, a man and woman sat drinking coffee and conversing - not with each other, but with the "face time" applications on their smart phones. After a bit, they got up and walked out the door and down the street, each still holding a conversation with a tiny screen. I shook my head in consternation and turned my attention back to my computer screen, where I was slapped alongside the head by a Doonesbury cartoon.

Zonker and his nephew are walking outdoors in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. The sky is clear. The mountain peaks are majestic. Birds are flitting about. Zonker takes a deep breath and exclaims, "Isn't today a beautiful day, Nephew?" His nephew immediately opens his iPhone and says, "Just a second, I'll check."

Let's use our Science-Fiction imagination for a moment. Consider the world-shaking effects that would come with the arrival of visitors from the Andromeda Galaxy. To our amazement, these

visitors look like us, talk like us, and assure us that they are simply beings just like us who only want to help us have better lives through the introduction of their advanced technology. We are excited and intrigued.

Immediately these alien visitors begin to introduce technical devices and systems that, they say, will, “entertain, inform, educate, and connect” us in a manner that had never before been imagined. We are delighted and begin to quickly integrate these technologies into our daily lives.

However we are not so gullible that we don’t begin to ask, “Who are these beings and what do they really want?” After all, they are aliens and we’re not entirely convinced that they are benign and helpful.

So we investigate, question, probe, analyze, and then investigate and question some more. Eventually we discover that these devices are actually a sophisticated means of reshaping our minds, desires, habits, and opinions into a mirror of the Andromedans. We find convincing evidence that their ultimate aim is to eradicate our natural humanity and mold us into a planetary colony. Their goal is to extract our resources and wealth and use our labor to enrich their own culture. They want to put in place a vast network of technology to distract us and shape us into a compliant colony by severing our natural relationships with information, environment, and people. They want us to become passive receivers of information that is processed, edited, and out-of- context. They want us to become less able to deal with nuance and complexity, and to settle for - even demand - a condensed, sound-bite, video version of reality that will suit their alien colonial ends.

Were we to discover this, I’d like to think there would be a planetary revolution; a “keep your damn stuff!” movement like never before seen in human history. We would rise up to defend our planet and our freedom. We would tell them to go back to Andromeda. Wouldn’t we?

So, let's leave our science fiction scenario and return to our present-day reality. Where are the barricades? Where is the outrage? Where are the freedom fighters? Where are the defenders of Humanity?

A society that depends on competition, consumption, distraction, and diversion is a society of “Bread and Circuses,” just like the Roman Empire. But the gladiator games and the circuses will lose their power if we simply turn our attention once again to the Real World and stop believing that the world of winners and losers is anything more than an illusion designed to keep us passively compliant on the one hand, and stirred up by illusions on the other. Let’s rejoin the world in which the touch of a lover’s hand, the taste of a simple healthy meal, a glass of wine, and sitting watching our children play in the back yard are all the entertainment we need.

## **Withdrawal**

*Lively music and good food  
may capture our attention,  
but speaking of this path  
is not exciting.  
People would rather try to make things work,  
look for distractions,  
and listen to empty promises.  
We turn to this path  
only when we have exhausted all other paths.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 35 - translation, William Martin

Lao-Tzu, according to legend, mounted an ox and rode into the mountains, withdrawing his presence from a society he considered dysfunctional and harmful. His withdrawal was not an escape from reality. He withdrew because he believed that continuing to feed a harmful system with his energy could only continue to bring harm.

In order to successfully engage an authentic life, we must also withdraw our support of the harmful, useless, and unjust systems that have kept us distracted and believing that we have to settle for less. When a vision of the satisfying and joyful life we desire becomes stronger than our frustration with the current systems, we will begin this withdrawal. As it was for Lao-Tzu, it will be a movement toward something rather than merely a movement away from something. Instead of diverting our energies by trying to fix structures that are irretrievably broken, we will begin creating new ways of living that make the old ones irrelevant. Withdrawal is one side of the coin of revolution. The other side is engagement.

We withdraw from television and other distracting media and engage books, people, nature, and our own hearts and souls.

We withdraw from speed and urgency and engage slower rhythms that bring contentment and reduce our stress, tension, and frustration level.

We withdraw from driving and engage walking, bicycling, and public transportation.

We withdraw from spending on junk food, tons of trinkets, and amusements and engage a mindful spending on healthy food, carefully crafted possessions, and simple activities that truly bring us pleasure rather than expensive ones that merely distract us.

We withdraw from a political system that, contrary to popular myth, cannot be changed from the inside, and engage with new models of organizing ourselves as communities.

We withdraw from large institutions and corporations that we believe do more harm than good and engage with smaller local enterprises and craftspeople.

We withdraw from religious structures that do not satisfy and engage with authentic spirituality in whatever form helps transform our soul.

We withdraw from working more, to earn more, to get more; and engage in work that brings peace and satisfaction.

We withdraw our attention from Facebook and engage with the real faces of people around us.

We withdraw our attention from news sources that pander to our fears and desires, and engage with thoughtful media, books, and essays.

We can lend our lives, our fortunes, and our integrity to this quiet revolution. Quiet, but powerful, dynamic, and unstoppable. Or we can remain tied to the present system with our efforts, hoping to keep our distractions in place and stave off that which we know is inevitable for just a bit longer. The time will come when we cannot avoid the question and will have to choose. Bless our hearts. Let's choose real life.

## **To Protect and Serve**

*Using force to protect our power and position  
is contrary to the flow of Tao.  
This destroys the balance of things.  
It causes excess of riches for some,  
and poverty for most.*

The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 77 - trans. William Martin

As the way of the Tao recedes from our society, the application of force increases. Giant corporations are now filing multi-million dollar law suits against communities that dare to ban fracking. "It's unconstitutional to deprive us of our rights to profit," they cry and then proceed to use the force of law and ultimately the force of arms to protect these "rights." Mining corporations file, and win, multi-million dollar suits against - get this - countries! As an example, OceanaGold, an Australian mining company, is suing El Salvador for depriving them of profits by refusing to allow them to use cyanide and huge amounts of water to leach gold from the ground.

The case is being heard by the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes. Headquartered at the World Bank Group in Washington, D.C., this tribunal operates independently of any national jurisprudence. In fact, most international "trade" treaties include in the fine print, the ability of corporations to sue countries if they do not allow the exploitation of their resources.

As I write this essay, yet another grand jury has refused to indict police officers who used an illegal choke hold that caused the death of an unarmed man in Staten Island; this only days after the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri. People who have read my writings over the years know how reluctant I am to venture into "controversial" areas. I am a quietist by nature and I view the Tao as perfectly capable of doing its work without my pushing it along. However, there

is also within the Tao, a time for action to arise, and that time is dawning in America and around the world.

I know police officers who are dedicated to the motto, "To Protect and to Serve." They are dismayed at the direction their profession is being forced to take by economic and political power. "We're now being asked to 'control and subdue' rather than 'protect and serve.' That's not what I signed up for. I'm not going to war against my own citizens to protect investments." Yet police departments have little choice. They are increasingly being asked to "keep order" in order to protect the property rights of corporations rather than the civil rights of ordinary people.

I'm dismayed and I'm concerned. No, not concerned... frightened and angry. I've lived most of my life drawing great benefit from the status quo of my society. I've turned aside for decades, saying, "What can I do?" All the while living in comfort and safety. I'm seventy years old and I'm not going to do that any more. What's the worst that can happen to me now? I don't know exactly what I will do; that will emerge from each moment as it always has. The Tao does not encourage structured plans. But "the times, they are a changing" (as always) It's time to live the words I wrote fifteen years ago in *The Sage's Tao Te Ching, Chapter 23*:

*Being a sage is not all unruffled calm.*

*It is also a time of freedom*

*to express and feel*

*the truth of our lives.*

*To explore the passions*

*buried for years*

*beneath acceptable masks.*

*It is time to serve a cause*

*with energy and compassion,*

*to fall madly in love*

*and dance into the night.*

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*Crack yourself open!*

*What use is it to continue to hide*

*behind your facades and roles?*

*Why waste your energy playing games?*

*Isn't it time to cry your tears.*

*to shout your passion,  
to dance like Zorba,  
and to let your soul touch  
the Soul of the world?*

## **Tipping Point**

*This practice seems so passive and still.*

*Yet it is the seedling from which the great tree grows.*

*It is the single step that begins the journey of a thousand miles.*

From The Tao Te Ching, Chapter 64 - trans. William Martin

The darkness reached a tipping point a few days ago. Each morning now, the sun rises a minute or so earlier. Each evening it sets a bit later. The difference is hardly noticeable, but the wheel of Yin and Yang continues to turn back toward the light. Such tipping points are inherent in the movement of the Tao. Everything is in a dynamic balance and is constantly adjusting itself in an infinite intricate dance in which every movement leads to a counter-movement. The tipping point is that moment when the ebb and flow are poised for the return movement: ebb begins to flow, flow begins to ebb.

We are living in a time of multiple tipping points. The climate of our planet has already reached a tipping point and has begun the process of restoring a new dynamic of balance. Whether or not this new balance will provide a place for the human race remains to be seen. The gap between the very wealthy and the rest of the world's population has widened and is nearing a tipping point where the bottom of the pyramid of wealth will begin to crumble and new models of economic life will emerge. The consumer society is nearing the tipping point where the accumulation of trinkets and toys will be exhausted, as will the spirits of those caught in the treadmill of earning more to buy more.

I have reached a personal tipping point in the past year as well. There is a turning in my own understanding of the Tao and in the expressions that are emerging in my life. I have begun to paint in the Sumi-e tradition - a meditative use of ink and brush in monochrome tones. It is an art that somehow seems important in a culture of brash colors and sounds that assail the senses at every turn. It slows me down and reminds me of the intrinsic value of art and craft. My writing, both prose and poetry, is taking on a different tone. In many ways, Lao-Tzu's Taoism is quietist

and unobtrusive, but each chapter of The Tao Te Ching contains a revolutionary edge which, if lived out, would transform all aspects of society. The flow of Tao in me is tipping from a withdrawn reclusiveness to a revolutionary energy that is fueled by a sense of, “this has to change!”

I'm not sure where this shift of energy will lead me. My reclusive nature remains. I prefer to let my words emerge from silence and contemplation. But I will no longer let that serve as an excuse for ignorance of the seeds of social transformation that are beginning to sprout around the world. Nor will I let my fears and life-long desire for approval be the filters through which I pass my writing

Taoist life is essentially a quietist life. The Tao unfolds however it will, and aligning ourselves with that flow and not attempting to impose our will on life is the course of wisdom and satisfaction. However, the *Tao Te Ching* acknowledges that the flow of Tao does not act according to set rules and precepts; that there is a time for waiting and a time to take action. Could an active resistance to the actions of an out-of-control economic power ever be an “effortless and appropriate alignment with the Tao?” I hesitate to answer, because patience and waiting are always recommended, and as I said I am a poet, not a man of action. But I now know that the answer is sometimes, “yes.” The overwhelming power of money and greed will probably triumph, but only for a time. The Wheel of Tao will always restore balance. Insatiable greed will eventually destroy itself. There are worse ways to live and die than being part of the revolutionary movements of the Tao.

Let me describe a scenario that a few years ago I would have said was, “unimaginable.” It is not actually happening at the moment, but nothing about it is any longer beyond imagining.

Upper Bidwell Park, part of a legacy from the town of Chico's founder, is a magnificent area of about 2,000 acres of mesas, open meadows, canyons, streams, and swimming holes. Along with Lower Bidwell Park it is a source of community blessing and pride for the town.

In my scenario, an oil corporation has determined that there is a large shale oil deposit under Upper Park and begins to make plans to use Fracking techniques to extract it. The community

goes into an uproar. The Park is untouchable. The legacy stipulates that it is to be a park “in perpetuity.” But loopholes are found, campaign chests are filled with unlimited donations from what is now a “corporate person,” promises are made of jobs, taxes, and economic growth.

California is experiencing a drought and now an oil corporation wants to use, and poison, the water to extract oil. “Not that much water,” they say. “We’ll be careful,” they say. “Trust us, it’s for your own good,” they say.

But Chico is aroused and quickly passes an ordinance that bans drilling for oil within the city, which includes the Park. The ordinance is attacked in court and a lengthy legal battle ensues. “It’s our right to drill,” they say. “Not in our park,” we say. A California court upholds our ban and millions of dollars of oil money are sunk into an appeal to the Supreme Court. Our community is threatened with bankruptcy in legal fees, but a legal fund is formed by hundreds of other communities around the country who see their own fate wrapped up with ours. A true “movement” is under way.

Three guesses what the Supreme Court decides. Our city’s ban is declared, “unconstitutional.” Corporations have a right to pursue drilling for, “economic benefit.” Bulldozers and trucks begin to gather in the Upper Park. Thousands of us blockade the roads. Police and National Guard are called to “keep order.” Tempers flare and tear gas explodes. The tension builds and shots are fired. More troops are called to “stop the violence.” (As if these good people, my neighbors are now in the same league as terrorists.) Armored Personnel carriers and a tank are brought in to clear the road.

Suddenly, Tiananmen Square, something that could only happen “somewhere else,” is here. Who is that older man standing in front of the tank?

## About the Author



William Martin is the award-winning author whose work expresses the practical wisdom and humor of Taoist thought for contemporary readers. His books include *The Parent's Tao Te Ching*, *The Couple's Tao Te Ching*, *The Sage's Tao Te Ching*, *A Path and a Practice*, *The Tao of Forgiveness*, and *The Caregiver's Tao Te Ching* which he co-authored with his spouse. He also has independently published Ebooks, including *30 Days of Tao* and *Lost in the Tao*. He is the spouse of Nancy, the father of Lara and John, and the grandfather of Jillian and Andrew.

A native of California, Bill graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in Electronic Engineering. After four years working for the Navy as a research scientist, he returned to graduate school. He earned a Masters degree from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. He did not find himself fitting within the Christian Church clergy structure so, guided by his love of the *Tao Te Ching*, he began to seek his own way. He spent two decades in private practice as a Marriage and Family Counselor in Phoenix, Arizona, and taught counseling for many years at Rio Salado College in Phoenix. He has been a student of the Tao for over three decades.

In 1998 he and Nancy decided to simplify their lives so they sold most of their possessions, left their careers, gathered their remaining belongings into a 5X8 foot U-Hall trailer and moved to the Oregon coast. Nancy worked at a small Inn and Bill wrote a book.

In 1999, after a year of strolling along the beaches, walking through the forests, and feeling the intense joy of the natural world, they moved to Northern California. They walk, read, enjoy qigong and cherish their life together. Nancy is a bookbinder, restoring old books and creating fine bindings for new ones. ([www.bookbindingbynancy.com](http://www.bookbindingbynancy.com)) Bill continues to write and paint in the sumi-e tradition. ([www.taoistliving.com](http://www.taoistliving.com))

