

Nothing Done – Nothing Left Undone
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Readings

from the *Tao Te Ching*
(*The Classic of the Way and the Integrity/Virtue/Power of the Way*)

All streams flow to the sea
because it is lower than they are.
Humility gives it its power.

If you want to govern the people
you must place yourself below them.
If you want to lead the people,
you must learn how to follow them.

from chapter 66, Stephen Mitchell translation

To run things,
don't fuss with them.
Nobody who fusses
is fit to run things.

from chapter 48, Ursula Le Guin translation

Do without doing.
Act without action...

from chapter 63, Ursula Le Guin translation

When you do not-doing
Nothing's out of order.

from chapter 3, Ursula Le Guin translation

Sermon

Often sermons are about what to *do* in relation to one or another challenge, whether personal or political.

Yet the ancient Chinese text, the *Tao Te Ching*, seems to tell us that if we do nothing... everything will get done.

Do without doing.
Act without action...

from chapter 47, Ursula Le Guin translation

The wise soul...
Doesn't do, but gets it done.

from chapter 81, Ursula Le Guin translation

Doesn't do... and gets it done? Who is going to cook the meals, do the laundry, earn the money? Doesn't somebody have to *do* something?

But the *Tao Te Ching* seems to tell us to do nothing... and everything will get done.

Try that one the next time your spouse asks you to take out the trash or your boss asks you to write a report: "I'm just doing nothing so that it will all get done." And you know all those leaves on the ground in front of the Parish House? We have not been raking them. And they are still there...

So... unless we're talking about some sort of magic (which I don't think we are) one expects there may be something at least a little beyond the literal meaning here.

And there is.

I have come to understand this "doing not-doing" – "wei wu-wei" is the Chinese – in two ways.

First it does have to do with our need for quite literal not-doing sometimes, out of which more effective doing might be more likely to arise.

Jerry Mander, in his 1991 book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, remembers that as a boy in the 1940s he would come home from school, have a snack, go into his room, be bored, lie on the floor, be even more bored... and then, finally, from the depths of his boredom, he says, something would occur to him to do. And he would do it.

Which is a process short-circuited all too easily, both for children and for the rest of us: by the lure of the screen, whether the TV screen or the computer screen; by the lure of the refrigerator or kitchen cabinet. All sorts of ways to avoid not-doing.

We are so addicted to *doing* that when we might be on the verge of not doing... we reach for the clicker or mouse or snack instead... to be entertained or amused or at least occupied, at least give the appearance of doing!

And notice that we don't give much honor to those who seem to be just loafing around doing nothing. At least call it meditation!

Yet... from a place of really not doing, a state of being so different from the culture's frenetic pace, a state that might actually be boring, at least at first, we might discover a wonderful inward spaciousness... and eventually from this spaciousness and quiet might arise a primal kind of creativity that gets us off the floor and enables things to get done... perhaps the things that matter most, and not just for the sake of doing something, anything, to stave off boredom.

Not that eventually *doing* is the reason to "not do." We can honor both the doing and the not doing; we can learn that there is a place for each in the flow and movement and dance of our lives. We can resist simply grabbing, as our culture would have us do, for the *doing* half of the rhythm. After all, just as music depends as much on the silences, the pauses between the notes as it does on the notes themselves, so do our lives depend on both the doing and the not-doing, breathing out and breathing in, for their texture and beauty and effectiveness.

So... five or ten minutes in the morning, a few quiet breaths now and then at any time during the day, a pause as we sip our tea or coffee...

So that our eventual action comes not from the surface, but from the depths, perhaps closer to what the *Tao Te Ching* calls the Tao, the way, the deeper wellsprings and sources of our lives.

But this "doing without doing" idea is not only about a rhythm between doing on the one hand and not doing on the other.

The *Tao Te Ching* is also, maybe even primarily, suggesting a particular way of doing, or acting, that even in the doing has a kind of not doing at its center. In other words, we are encouraged to bring some of that stillness, that centeredness into the midst of our acting.

What does this mean? Maybe nothing terribly mysterious.

An early translator of the *Tao Te Ching*, Paul Carus, to give just one example, suggests “act with non-assertion” as an appropriate translation of “wei wu wei – do not do.” In other words, don’t “make a show, show off, pose, parade” yourself.

At one point in his translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Stephen Mitchell writes “do your work, then step back.” But we might also try to be “stepped back” even as we do our work. Just doing what needs doing, without making a big deal out of it. Because our work ought not to be about self promotion or self assertion; it should be about the work. And the work need not be about controlling or micromanaging every motion, every step, but rather about getting into the flow of the work (flow... Tao... way of the work) – with what some call effortless effort.

Athletes know all about this, about those moments of letting go, of getting out of your own way so to speak, of letting the years of practice and natural skill just take over. The game then somehow just plays itself. The athlete has total focus, but in an odd way *not* total control.

And this is just right, since in many games (as in life) you can’t know what will come next. You just have to be ready, completely in the game – *not-doing* in the sense of being empty of preconceived ideas as to what will next be required. After all, you can’t know where the ball is coming – whether a basketball, tennis ball, baseball, football – so you have to be utterly open to any possibility. Which is a kind of not-doing approach in the midst of very active doing.

So, as I said, it’s not only that we might want to spend *some* time not-doing and *other* time doing. It may also be worth cultivating “doing, not-doing” every minute of the day. We may not be Kevin Garnett or Tom Brady, but we each have our moves to make during the day. We can struggle, even resist every step of the way, trying sometimes vainly to carry out a plan which really just is not working; or we can try to make our moves out of a place of inner receptivity, of not-doing, adjusting with the flow by getting our micromanaging self out of the way.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote in his book *Wherever You Go There You Are*:

Non-doing has nothing to do with being indolent or passive. Quite the contrary. It takes great courage and energy to cultivate non-doing, both in stillness and in activity...

... Non-doing simply means letting things be and allowing them to unfold in their own way. Enormous effort can be involved but it is a graceful, knowledgeable, effortless effort, a “doerless doing,” cultivated over a lifetime.

And next... this is not just about each of us as individuals. It is also about groups and leadership of groups. The *Tao Te Ching* is often appropriately read for personal spiritual inspiration and guidance, but it is also quite explicitly a handbook for leaders. And though the language of the book is directed toward political leaders, the lessons are applicable to any kind of leadership: In families, at work, on a committee, teaching Sunday School. For we all are leaders at one time or another, helping a group to get something done. And the *Tao Te Ching* has lots to say about “doing not doing” leadership, leadership that isn’t about self-promotion but is just about getting the work done from a spiritual center.

We’ve probably all experienced unpleasantly assertive leadership. I have. I was once part of a group (not here at Old Ship) which was led for one stretch of time *very* assertively. Our elected leader knew that we needed better bylaws, a clearer mission statement and policies about this and that. And he knew what those bylaws and statements ought to be... He was a fine human being. But he wore us out and unintentionally created contention and bad feelings. Yes, we got our new bylaws and so on, but to my mind it wasn’t worth the price. We were not led well.

On the other hand, during another stretch this same group had a leader with a quite different style – a pleasant guy, good storyteller, relaxed and comfortable to be around.

But... alas... not very much did get done. Nothing done, *lots* left undone!

Is there a third kind of leader?! A Taoist leader?

Short answer – yes!

Just reflect on one arena of leadership – moderating a meeting – to get a feel for what Taoist, non-assertive, non showy leadership looks like. Whether or not you’ve thought of it in these terms, I expect you’ve all experienced a meeting led in a Taoist spirit, led by someone who is alert to the flow of the meeting, moves things along with a light hand, making sure everyone has a chance to speak and that no one dominates, and sometimes even encouraging a pause in the spirit of the *Tao Te Ching* when the text asks at one point:

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

from chapter 15

Do we have the patience in a group (or for ourselves) – to “not do” (as if the whole group were lying on the floor like that bored child...) while the mud clears and in a mysterious way “the right action arises by itself”? A good leader can help us do that, as she or he helps a group to create an artful, adjust as you go dance of doing-not-doing. As much as anything, the leader is setting a tone through her or his own centeredness and inward stillness. So that at the end of the meeting, the group can say (also quoting the *Tao Te Ching*, whether they know it or not): “Amazing – we did it ourselves!”

I think and hope this is the spirit of leadership we try to encourage around here. For when we affirm the democratic process in our decision making, as we do in our Unitarian Universalist Principles, we are *not* just talking about making sure we take votes about this, that, and the other matter. We are talking about that sometimes dreaded but very good word “process”. It is, really, a spiritual word; it is about the Tao, the way, of getting things done in a group. It is suggesting that we can let our decision making take a course, follow a flow, which includes everyone, which allows everyone to be heard, which is open to change... rather than risking the human cost in hurt feelings and contention which can come when you barrel ahead with or without votes just for the sake of getting something done.

(With all this in mind, I will let you draw your own conclusions as to whether we could use some measure of Taoist leadership on a national scale... and what that would look like...)

Well... moving toward a conclusion... a question: Is living in such a spirit or choosing such a style of leadership and process arbitrary, just one possibility among others which are equally valid?

I don’t think so.

The *Tao Te Ching* certainly doesn’t think so. Quite the contrary, the *Tao Te Ching* teaches that the sort of approach to life and to leadership which I’ve been trying to describe today works because it is indeed the way the Tao works, the way underlying principles of nature and of the universe work.

The Tao teaches that that we can’t *force* a decision, a process, a life direction anymore than we can force the pace of growth in a plant by tugging at it! Rather, we need to pay attention, understand the flow or the process, and work in the spirit of that flow and process – of the way things actually are.

After all, we see that the seasons flow according to rhythms of not-doing and doing; we see, too, that there is always a stillness simultaneous with the flow of nature.

Can we find the same stillness within our doing? Can we learn to listen to the deeper currents of our lives from within that stillness? Can we learn to lead in the spirit of such an attentive stillness – even in the midst of the sometimes fast pace of many of our lives?

Let me leave you with one more evocative example, an example of what seems to me to be a Taoist way of dealing with traffic jams of all things. Did you read about the new effort to bring order and safety to traffic in some busy German downtowns? They are taking down most of the traffic signs and signals – everything but the speed limit signs. So that people will have to pay attention to the flow of traffic and their place in it. Apparently it works! Sounds very Taoist to me.

And isn't this how we might want to live? Attentive... discerning the flow... being part of shaping the flow... experiencing ourselves as part of the flow (the Tao)... of our shared lives, of nature, of the world, the universe?

And is it possible that even our biggest problems – war, climate change, poverty, racism – have arisen out of too much and too assertive doing, too much desire to control, too many preconceived ideas that come from minds too filled with judgments... and too empty of wisdom.

These ancient teachings remind us that there *is* another way.

So may it be.