

WHEN THE TIMES ARE OUT OF JOINT  
A Sermon Delivered at  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
Sunday, March 8, 2009  
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Responsive Reading 604

*A Vessel So Sacred*

Lao-Tse

Those who would take over the earth  
And shape it to their will never, I notice, succeed.  
The earth is like a vessel so sacred  
that at the mere approach of the profane it is marred.  
And when they reach out their fingers it is gone.  
For a time in the world some form themselves ahead  
and some are left behind.  
For a time in the world some make a great noise  
and some are held silent.  
For a time in the world some are puffed fat  
and some are kept hungry.  
For a time in the world some push aboard  
and some are tipped out.  
At no time in the world will one who is sane  
Over-reach, over-spend, over-rate.

Reading

*The Violence of Modern Life*

Thomas Merton

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by non-violent methods most easily succumbs: activism and over-work.

The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his or her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of her or his work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful.

Offertory Anthem

*Imagine*

John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people Living for today...  
Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for.  
And no religion too. Imagine all the people. Living life in peace...  
You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one.  
Imagine no possessions. I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people. Sharing all the world...  
You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one.

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I hate to throw cold water on John Lennon's dream song, but whenever I hear it, I'm reminded of the trip I made to China over a decade ago now.

I went there in my capacity as an Honorary President of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. Founded in 1970 through an initiative by Dana McLean Greeley after his service as the first president of our own Unitarian Universalist Association, Religions for Peace, as it is now called, is headquartered across from the United Nations in New York. It has the active participation of leaders from every major religious organization in the world: the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the Muslim World League, the World Jewish Congress, indigenous, Hindu, and Buddhist groups – and, in China, all five officially recognized religious groups.

In China, you know, they tried “no religion, too.” They called it the Cultural Revolution. For an entire generation, every shrine, temple, mosque, church, seminary, and monastery was closed. Most of the Chinese religious leaders were imprisoned, killed, or exiled. When I accompanied Bill Vendley, the Secretary General of Religions for Peace, to meetings with the surviving leaders – Catholic, Buddhist, Protestant, Muslim, and Taoist – they all seemed to be either in their 80s or else newly minted, and in their 30s.

When you make such visits in Chinese culture, I knew, you come as a guest with small but symbolic gifts. I bought mine in the gift shop at Monticello, the home of our own Thomas Jefferson. Little pewter cups that Jefferson designed, that look almost Chinese. Elegant wooden pen trays that he also designed, and quite suitable for calligraphy pens. Both chosen so that I could speak about him as, among other things, the author of the world's first statute for religious freedom, in Virginia, in the year 1779; 230 years ago.

Communist China was then starting to implement its “new policy of religious freedom” -- still with a lot of top-down control, with only the five registered religious groups allowed,

but with freedom for each to worship, teach, build, and publish, so long as they stayed independent of groups based overseas, and didn't really challenge the regime. Our goal was to meet with religious leaders, including dissidents and house church leaders, and then to report to the International Association for Religious Freedom, meeting that year in South Korea.

At a banquet given for us, and for the official religious leaders, in the Beijing's Great Hall of the People, Dr. Vendley spoke about the proper role of religion in any culture – preserving the deepest spiritual wisdom of the people's experience, including that derived from times of suffering and difficulty. China's top Communist official in charge of religion acknowledged that errors had been made by the Party in understanding religion. Then he invited all the religious groups to join in spreading the Party's newest slogan, one that I for one found just stunningly ironic: “Renounce Scientific Materialism; Embrace Spiritual Civilization!”

As I tried to figure out where *that* came from, Chinese religious colleagues explained that with the opening up of markets and entrepreneurship, very little remained in Chinese Communism of its Marxism -- except a pervasive materialism. That just as consumer spending was booming, so was the crime rate and corruption. That what the Communists meant by ‘spiritual civilization’ was largely deference to authority – their interpretation of China's ancient Confucian culture.

Confucius, I remembered from my studies of Chinese culture and religion, represented one spiritual approach to what should be done when the times are out of joint. In many respects, Confucianism is not a religion at all. It is humanistic. It does not speak of God. It is a way of treating the secular as sacred. When the times are out of joint, it teaches, one begins with the ‘rectification of names’ or terms. Distorted language must be brought into relationship with reality. Relationships are all to show deference – citizens to rulers, children to parents, students to teachers, youngsters to elders, and friends to friends, but also under a rule of reciprocity: “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.”

When I think about my own life and approach to ministry – which has been devoted to challenging the distorted uses of religion and religious language in our own culture; which has always had a strong dimension of civic and social activism, yearning for right relations between human beings – I know that I have typically taken a similar approach.

In fact, I once had a conversation with an older colleague in our ministry, Ken Patton, whose words we used in the call to worship, about his approach and my own. Patton was a brilliant man – a poet, a pioneer among UUs in drawing on wisdom from other cultures, a naturalistic mystic, and a translator of Chinese poetry and texts. But he was also a cantakerous critic of almost anyone who showed, as I often did, more deference than he liked to the biblical and Judeo-Christian basis of *our* civilization – a religious tradition that he had strongly rejected.

“Ken,” I said, “I think the difference between us is like the difference in Chinese culture between Confucianism and Taoism. When the times are out of joint, the Taoist sage, like Lao-Tse, doesn’t so much try to straighten out the existing culture as get distant from it. Go to the mountains. Commune with nature. Observe there the Way that endures, and wait patiently for the idiots in the markets and the cities and the halls of power to be brought low. Write poetry. You are more of a Taoist, while I’ve been more Confucian.”

To my surprise, Ken agreed with me for once! And when he died, and I spoke at his memorial service, I was able to tell that story about him, as people who knew him all nodded in agreement. That’s who he was – more like Thoreau going to Walden, yet writing about it; or Thomas Merton withdrawing to the Trappist monastery, yet providing spiritual guidance to those pursuing justice and peace.

Now I am older myself. Heaven knows that the times seem more out of joint than ever. And I now recall where that phrase itself comes from: from *Hamlet*, where the Prince declares, “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!”

Built into thinking that setting things right depends on you, of course, is just the kind of hubris that makes for tragedies.

Over the years I've known many social activists filled with zeal to set things right in the world. Who wanted justice in the worst way, and went about pursuing it that way, too! Thomas Merton once offered a warning to those of us who are drawn to civic and social action, saying, "If we attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening our own self-understanding, our own freedom, integrity and capacity to love, we will not have anything to give to others. We will communicate nothing but the contagion of our own obsessions, our aggressiveness, our own ego-centered ambitions."

Earlier this week I spent two days on a spiritual retreat with nearly forty other ministers. The retreat leader began by handing out the Merton passage that we heard as the reading. But I immediately thought of this one. In every reflection and exercise we did together, the goal was to learn to do our work of ministry more from a deeper spiritual center, and less in the busy way that we are always being tempted to do it.

In written Chinese, I'm told, the ideogram meaning "busy" is made up of two elements: the symbol for "heart," and the symbol for "kill." Yet I've also heard that in China today, if you ask someone, "How are you?" they are likely to respond, "Very busy, thank you." As though being "busy" were equivalent to being "well." Perhaps Chinese culture, predominantly Confucian, is like our own, with its Protestant work ethic, in overvaluing staying busy, and could do with a bit more contemplation of the Tao.

Certainly I could. Perhaps you could too. Especially when the times seem out of joint. And if we are wise, perhaps we will take these times as an opportunity to contemplate, meditate, reflect, and learn to move from a deeper place of rest. Barbara Brown Taylor, writing about the need for Sabbath in our lives, acknowledges that it's hard anymore to get on Sundays – and not just for clergy, for everyone. So she calls for more of what she calls "The Spiritual Practice of Saying No" as essential to making time for deeper living.

And Taoist wisdom is similar. "Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub," wrote Lao-Tse, "but it is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel; it is the space

within that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room; it is the holes that make it useful. Profit may come from what is there; but usefulness comes from what is not there.”

I will probably always be more driven to action than deeply contemplative. As E.B. White famously put it, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

But I am now beginning to wish that I had started years ago to start the day as I now do: with a time for meditation, poetry, and receptivity – before plunging into a crowded calendar of conversations, classes, meetings, projects, and encounters – hoping to bring greater spaciousness to my own way of being even when my calendar feels crowded.

After all life is all too short, and the times are all too often quite out of joint. Not to take the time for the Tao, for the Eternal, for in-reach, may be to miss the best of living, and the best chance to be more effective in our outreach. Fortunately, it’s never too late to start, or to start anew, living from the heart. For as Lao Tse taught, if there is to be peace in the world, that is where it must surely begin. May peace be with you! Amen.

\*Hymn 28

*Brief Our Days*

Kenneth Patton

Brief our days, but long for singing, When to sing is made our call,  
For a million stars now flinging, Light upon this earthly ball.  
In a setting of what splendor Are we given chance to render  
Tribute for the whirling sky Where we live and where we die.

Planet earth for us a dwelling, Cool in wind and warm in light,  
In its praise our song is swelling, Grateful for this day and night.  
We, the citizens of heaven, Riding earth as it is driven  
Down the spangled course of space, Know the glory of this place.

Benediction

And now, in our going, may the Eternal Tao bless us and keep us.  
May its light shine upon us, and also out from within us.  
And grant us peace. For these are days that we are given to live.  
Let us rejoice and be glad in them. Amen.