

## **HIDING WHOLENESS**

**A sermon given for the ‘Touchstone of Wholeness’ Service**

**by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason**

**at UU Wellesley Hills on**

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**In that passage we read together from the Chinese classic, the *Tao Te Ching*, the Tao is translated as “the Way of life”, which is characterized by its fullness, its widening, its circling, its wholeness. It’s worth our considering the words used to describe it, because they are rough approximations of a vast abstraction, even in the original language of of the text. After the Bible, the *Tao Te Ching* is the most widely translated sacred scripture in the world. As spiritual literature, it has caught and held the imagination of hundreds of millions of people, including perhaps you. It has captured mine, certainly.**

**Whether you consider Taoism to be a religion, philosophy, practice, or outlook, for many it is path — indeed, the Way — to leading a life of greater wholeness, symbolized often in that recognizable icon of yin-yang, light and darkness swirling in a circle, containing one another. “Heaven covers everything. Can you be as generous?” the *Tao Te Ching* asks. “Earth supports everything. Can you be as tolerant?” All Taoist approaches are informed by a radical acceptance of various realities, be they historical, personal, or natural. They attempt to**

ground our humanity, to help us become centered in ourselves and our in our relationships with one another.

“If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations. If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities. If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors,” the *Tao Te Ching* teaches us. “If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.” That peace in the heart can often feel as elusive as peace in the nations.

American psychologist Patrick Dougherty has written in recent years about finding the therapeutic applications of Taoism especially helpful in clinical practice. He describes incorporating it in such a way that can move people from having a certain fixed mindset to becoming more open-hearted themselves. Dougherty also explored its saving power in his private as well as professional life, as a Vietnam veteran with significant psychic and spiritual struggles of his own.

Fighting a foreign war he believed to be unjust while Americans in that era protested the military action stateside left him embittered, along with many of his fellow Marines. They felt most betrayed by the campus protesters at the time, those in their peer group, the same ages as the young soldiers involved in Vietnamese combat. Dougherty confessed that he and his Marine buddies indulged in violent fantasies, narrating the vengeance they could claim facing off against those college students.

When Dougherty returned to the U.S. after his military tours, though, he himself became an undergraduate and then a graduate student; later in his career, he taught on the campus he had fantasized attacking decades earlier. With the start of the first Gulf War, Dougherty recognized that he was suddenly beset with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and that his Vietnam suddenly felt overwhelming to him, and all too immediate.

Civic holidays such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day were especially difficult for Dougherty. Because he knew the toll of combat first-hand, he could not glorify military service himself. “The best warrior is not warlike. The best fighter is not aggressive,” the *Tao Te Ching* declares. “The best commander avoids combat.” Much to his own surprise, he found himself participating in contemporary campus protests against American military action in the Middle East, not in opposition to the U.S. troops, but out of loyalty to them.

The parts of himself — both ethical and emotional — that Dougherty thought could never be restored were when he refused to renounce his own experience; when he reclaimed what he had lost to shame and entered the public arena as a whole being in his own right. His Taoist teacher told him, “All of your unhappiness... [i]t is about the place where your heart is closed... If you can find out how to open your heart, right here in the middle of this time... it will benefit you so much.”

As Dougherty reports, for him, “openheartedness was a hit-or-miss affair.... When I’m able to sit with an open heart, it’s easier to let go of being the expert... something ineffable happens,” he observes. He

surrenders his judgments about himself and his opinions about others and notices that the limits and deficiencies he sees start to leave his sight. Life-giving possibilities enter into view.

“If you can be emptied, you can be filled. If you can be worn out, you can be renewed,” the *Tao Te Ching* declares. “Success is as treacherous as failure. Praise is as useless as blame... You can lose by gaining. You can gain by losing.... You lack nothing when you realize—there is nothing lacking.” Taoist insight invites us to consider the wisdom of such paradox.

When I worked as a clinician at a psychiatric center in urban Philadelphia, one of the colleagues I admired most would tell her most disordered clients, “You are whole, not broken. You are whole.” Because that was not a technique on her part, not a strategy or manualized intervention, but rather, her authentic witness to their basic humanity, her clients eventually came to believe her. “You are whole,” she told them. She recognized that they — like that proverbial cracked pot in our Story for All Ages — were essentially intact.

“To know that you know not is sanity. To know not that you know not is sickness,” the *Tao Te Ching* states. “The Sage doesn’t try to change the people. She simply shows them who they are. She leads them back to where they came from. She leads them back to what they have always known.” Just as my colleague did, the authentic Taoist sage points out to people their wholeness. She does not evaluate so much as encounter them. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, “The Sage is impartial. She uses whatever life sends her.”

**A popular Taoist folktale recounts what happened to Liezi — a figure Chinese historians comically call “a philosopher who never lived” — when he was very poor and his family was practically destitute. A neighbor has pled with the prime minister to show the man some charity. The neighbor insisted, “The man is a true sage! The state should be ashamed to let him and his family go hungry. How much better would it be for you to demonstrate that you can recognize a great sage in your midst.” Convinced by the neighbor, the prime minister sent a servant to bring a large sum of money to Liezi’s home.**

**But the sage immediately refused the gift. After the servant left with the money, his wife complained about Liezi refusing such a generous gift. “What would it have hurt to accept it?” she demanded. “If we live by someone's opinion of us,” Liezi replied, “then we can die by someone's opinion of us.” Soon afterwards in this tale, the prime minister fell from favor into disgrace and he and all his associates were executed. The sage survived, however, along with his entire family.**

**In her commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*, author Carol Deppe notes its philosophy is non-dualistic and holistic. “It speaks of oneness, wholeness, continuum, inclusion, cooperation, complementation. In *Tao Te Ching* everything is connected... the world is a sacred vessel, more easily harmed than improved or controlled,” she writes. So the classic work “speaks of practicing restraint, achieving balance, and learning to know how little we know” and remaining humble before the mysteries of life.**

**“You don’t need to leave home in order to see the world. You don’t have to look out your window in order to find the way. The harder you search the less you find. The farther you go the less you see,” the *Tao Te Ching* cautions. “The Sage sees without looking, finds without searching, and arrives without going anywhere.” With minimal concentration, important object lessons are learned. “Be aware, observe, notice,” we are told.**

**One of the best-known interpreters of Eastern thought for Western audiences was Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who wrote books on Zen masters, mystic contemplatives, and yes, Taoist sages. “There is in all things ... a hidden wholeness,” Merton concluded. Through its tales and teachings, Taoism seeks to reveal the wholeness that has been hiding in plain sight all around us.**

**In the *Tao Te Ching*, there is frequent reference to the “10,000 things” that essentially comprise the catalogue of creation in the natural order. Taoists can find spiritual instruction in a tree that has had its branches felled by a storm, or in the moon that is reflected in a still lake, or in a flock of birds that takes its formation even in high winds. “Accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change—that is the method... Create, complete, fulfill, reverse, return, renew—that is the movement...” of the Way, the *Tao Te Ching* states, throughout our whole world and also within ourselves.**

**Because ancient Chinese did not conjugate verbs and lacked tenses, because its subjects and objects were not always distinguished, and because pronouns were unspecified, the text has presented challenges for translators using a language like ours, English, which has and**

does all these things. Linguistic factors heighten ambiguity in the *Tao Te Ching* and confound the dualistic and categorical thinking we accustomed to, instead asking us consider things in more fluid terms. It seems little wonder, then, that Taoists revere water as a spiritual teacher. It flows far and wide, over oceans, down streams.

Scholars speculate that the *Tao Te Ching* survived through oral transmission for a number of generations before it was transcribed, and to this day debate whether it had a singular author or was the collected teachings of a school of philosophers. But in whatever language it gets recounted in now, we recognize the work speaking in a distinctive voice, with the vantage of “a being who is compassionate, generous, non-controlling, forgiving, and understanding...” as commentator Deppe has written, “who has a serious irreverent streak, a serious rebellious streak, and a distinctive sense of humor.” It eschews sanctimony and encourages us to do the same.

We are asked to be generous with others and ourselves, because Taoism considers generosity a core virtue. “Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold about yourself,” Taoist author Alan Cohen insists. “They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty; and your purpose when you are confused.” These people invite you — ever so lovingly — to recall those things about yourself.

“High and low support each other... Difficult and easy need each other,” the *Tao Te Ching* instructs us. “Know complexity but hold to simplicity. Know sound but hold to silence. Know action but hold to

stillness. Know knowledge but hold to innocence.” I can readily imagine the sort of assurance that its teaching could provide someone like Patrick Dougherty, a person struggling to find a sense of his own integrity in the midst of apparent contradictions. He could be a former Marine and a peaceful protester, an activist and an advocate, a PTSD sufferer and a skilled clinician — all these things were true of him. None of these things diminished his humanity one iota.

Whatever we are, we are also not — how can that be? This is the riddle that resides at the heart of Taoism and one I ask us to ponder today. There is goodness in our badness and badness in our goodness, and at no point are we purely one or the other; the totality of our existence is larger than opposing dualisms.

We are whole when we are broken, cracked even when we are intact. We are perfectly imperfect human beings. Whatever unforgiving opinions we have ourselves and others, we can suspend for now. We can opt to make harmony and unity the central precepts in our lives, however they seem to be going lately. “The Way nurtures everything and harms nothing,” the *Tao Te Ching* declares. “The Sage helps all and hurts none.” May all of us here be sages in our way.

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