

“The Tao Takes on Politics”

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Sermon Text

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Channing Memorial Church**

“The Tao Takes on Politics.” I wrote this title for my sermon with tongue-in-cheek. The irony in my title is that Taoism, as a matter of principle, doesn’t enter into conflict. Thus, it doesn’t “take on” politics--or any opposing force--in that aggressive, confrontational sense of the word. And yet, the Tao does have “a take” on politics. It does try to inform governance. It does include strong opinions about what makes a good leader.

In fact, this summer, when I studied Steven Mitchell’s translation of the *Tao te Ching* for my auction sermon on how ancient Taoism applies to modern times, I was struck by the number of writings where the author, Lao-tzu, focused on governance and leadership. This sacred text does not shy away from secular matters of politics. Thus, I thought it would make a fruitful sermon topic for this Sunday before the election. So, here you have it.

Tidbits -- A Warm-Up

Before our deep dive into the Tao’s take on politics, I’ll warm us up with some tidbits to consider at election time:

“Success is as dangerous as failure. ...

Whether you go up or down the ladder, your position is shaky.” [31]¹

“When the country falls into chaos, patriotism is born.” [18]

¹ Lao-tzu. *Tao te Ching*. (Translation by Stephen Mitchell.) Harper & Row, 1988.

NOTE: All chapters cited in this manuscript (in brackets) are from this work, unless otherwise noted.

From today's reading, here's something heavier and decidedly political:

When rich speculators prosper
While farmers lose their land;
when government officials spend money
on weapons instead of cures;
when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible
while the poor have nowhere to turn-
all this is robbery and chaos.
It is not in keeping with the Tao. [53]

Governance à la Tao

One section from our Story for All Ages highlighted the view that cities run smoothly when they are filled with the Tao (p.32).²

In chapter 39 of the Tao te Ching, Lao-tzu waxes poetic on this topic, emphasizing his view that human intervention is often detrimental:

In harmony with the Tao,
The sky is clear and spacious,
The earth is solid and full,
All creatures flourish together,
Content with the way they are,
Endlessly repeating themselves,
Endlessly renewed.

When man interferes with the Tao,
The sky becomes filthy,
The earth becomes depleted,
The equilibrium crumbles,
Creatures become extinct.

The Master views the parts with compassion,

² Oskolkoff, R.A. (author) and Iovino, J.H. (illustrator). *Voyage to the Sun: The Tao te Ching for Children*. Ruth Ann Oskolkoff, 2015. All references to the Story for All Ages refer to this book.

Because he understands the whole.
His constant practice is humility.
He doesn't glitter like a jewel
But lets himself be shaped by the Tao,
As rugged and common as stone. [39]

In chapter 75, Lao-tzu puts a finer point on it with this hands-off view of government:

When taxes are too high,
People go hungry.
When the government is too intrusive,
People lose their spirit.

Act for the people's benefit.
Trust them; leave them alone. [75]

Before jumping to any conclusions about how Lao-tzu would vote, let's hear his take on what makes a good leader.

Types of Leaders

At election time, our minds are focused on what types of leaders we want to have running our country, our states, our courts, and our school boards. Lucky for us, Lao-tzu has advice about what to look for in our elected officials.

When the Master governs, the people
Are hardly aware that he exists.
Next best is a leader who is loved.
Next, one who is feared.
The worst is one who is despised.

If you don't trust the people,
You make them untrustworthy.

The Master doesn't talk, he acts.
When his work is done,
The people say, "Amazing:
We did it, all by ourselves!" [17]

In our Story for All Ages was a chapter titled, “The Child Who Touches the Whole World.” (p. 20). To quote the chapter, “If you always hold to love and imagination... the Tao will always be there for you. You will always be magical. You will be a hero. You will influence everything.” Love and Imagination. This view of leadership calls to mind our newly-formed Unitarian Universalist motto, “Love at the Center.”

Peace and War

Another chapter in our Story for All Ages emphasized the importance of peace. “We need peace so we can live good lives. (p.24)” it said.

Peace is a central tenet of Taoism. Given some of the current political rhetoric, it seems important to include this writing on the topic:

Weapons are the tools of fear;
A decent man will avoid them
Except in the direst necessity
And, if compelled, will use them
Only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is his highest value.
If the peace has been shattered,
How can he be content?
His enemies are not demons,
But human beings like himself.
He doesn't wish them personal harm.
Nor does he rejoice in victory.
How could he rejoice in victory
And delight in the slaughter of men? [31]

Circling back the Story for All Ages, I quote, “You children should know about laws, learn about war and rules. That is okay. Remember, though, that imagination and love are more important. (p.20)”

Remember, “Love at the Center.”

Hard to Swallow

Some of Lao-tzu's teachings are hard for me to believe--or hard for me to apply--given our current political climate. Here's one that I struggle with:

The generals have a saying:
"Rather than make the first move
It is better to wait and see.
Rather than advance an inch
It is better to retreat a yard."

This is called
Going forward without advancing,
Pushing back without using weapons.

There is no greater misfortune
Than underestimating your enemy.
Underestimating your enemy
Means thinking that he is evil.
Thus you destroy your three treasures
And become an enemy yourself.

When two great forces oppose each other,
The victory will go
To the one that knows how to yield. [69]

"When two great forces oppose each other, the victory will go to the one that knows how to yield." -- Is that really the case? If I yield, won't I just get bulldozed over? What about standing your ground?

"Underestimating your enemy means thinking that he is evil."

This ties in with the Story for All Ages concept of seeing the light in everyone; the idea that even our enemies have some good in them.

I must say it can be challenging to believe this in our polarized times.

But Lao-tzu goes on to say, "When you see your enemy as evil, you destroy your three treasures and become an enemy yourself." [69]

As a little refresher from my previous sermon on Taoism, your three greatest treasures are simplicity, patience, compassion. [67]. Okay, well, **that** is a good reminder. Maybe I can step back and put my focus back on those ideals-- simplicity, patience, compassion. Maybe I can put Love at the Center.

Fear

Another topic from the Tao that seems to speak to this election season is that of Fear.

To quote our Story for All Ages,

“To be afraid is the biggest mistake. ...

Fear is like a shadow you see from a passing car. Fear is not real. (p.32)”

Seriously? “Fear is not real?” It feels pretty darn real to me these days.

But Lao-tzu explains it this way:

When a country is in harmony with the Tao,

The factories make trucks and tractors.

When a country goes counter to the Tao,

Warheads are stockpiled outside the cities.

There is no greater illusion than fear,

No greater wrong than preparing to defend yourself,

No greater misfortune than having an enemy.

Whoever can see through all fear

Will always be safe. [46]

Okay, I can see the value in thinking this way. Still, this can be difficult to accept when times feel so dangerous. I'm tempted to think that Lao-tzu didn't know about candidates like we have now. But then I realize that dangerous leaders can crop up at any time and in any country. I think it has taken us by surprise that it has not only cropped up in our time and our country, but that it has taken root. It's hard not to be afraid of what feel like very real threats to our democracy.

Here's some more advice from the Tao. Make of it what you will:

Throw away holiness and wisdom,
And people will be a hundred times happier.
Throw away morality and justice,
And people will do the right thing.
Throw away industry and profit,
And there won't be any thieves.

If these three aren't enough,
Just stay at the center of the circle
And let all things take their course. [19]

Like I said, some of this is hard to swallow right now. Industry and profit--okay, I can understand the desire to throw away those potential barriers to right living. But morality and justice? holiness and wisdom? If anything, it seems like we need more of those right now. So, maybe in this instance, the Tao really doesn't apply to our circumstances. Nonetheless, I am trying to keep an open mind. To try to trust people to do the right thing. To stay at the center of the circle--and to keep at that center, Love.

Anticipation and Letting Go

I find myself particularly antsy to know the outcome of this election. Given the volume of mail-in ballots, it seems like it could be a while before we know the results. I sense the need to prepare for the aftermath, regardless of the results. Through this discomfort, I feel as if Lao-tzu is holding my hand with this guidance:

“Do you have patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?” [15]

Elsewhere, he advises:

“Express yourself completely,
Then keep quiet.
...
Open yourself to the Tao,
Then trust your natural responses;

And everything will fall into place.” [23]
Here, I feel as if Lao-tzu is telling me, “Cast your vote and then let go of trying to control the outcome.”

Conclusion -- Between Deep Listening and Repair

It feels appropriate that this sermon--and the election itself--falls between our Soul Matters themes of Deep Listening and Repair. This past month, and in months past, we have been listening intently to candidates. Listening to their positions on issues that matter to us. Listening for policies that make sense to us. Listening as they tell us who they are.

If we're wise, we're also listening deeply to different voters--particularly to those who will vote differently--striving to understand their alternative perspectives, their hopes, their dreams. It is this kind of Deep Listening that will go a long way leading into Repair in the month of November and in the months to come. For no matter the outcome of this election, there will undoubtedly be need for repair.

Whether we enter this repair work feeling victorious or defeated,

whether we enter this repair work feeling fearful or hopeful,

Let us enter this work with humility and curiosity.

Let us enter this work with our 3 treasures intact:

simplicity, patience, compassion

Let us enter this work with trust in ourselves-- and with Love at the Center.

May it be so, and Amen.