

The Tao of Universal Experience
Service by James Endres Howell and Marc Maxson
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Lighting the Chalice: "The Valley Spirit" (Tao Te Ching, chapter VI)
read by Milan Liu

The valley spirit never dies:
It is called "the mysterious female."
The gate of the mysterious female
is called "the source of heaven and earth."
Almost imperceptible,
seemingly insubstantial,
yet never consumed through use.

We light this chalice
in the spirit of seeking and wonder
that gathers us together.

Opening Reading: "What Men Are Poets?" (Richard Feynman)

As many of you know, Richard Feynman was a genius on the order of Archimedes and Leonardo. He won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1965, and his lectures on physics and various autobiographical works have been popular for decades.

He made these remarks during a time when pronouns and allusive phrases conventionally excluded one gender in favor of another—but I couldn't bring myself to tamper with such a lyrical, if outdated, passage. I hope the sentiment speaks for itself. Here's what Dick Feynman said:

I have a friend who's an artist, and he sometimes takes a view which I don't agree with. He'll hold up a flower and say, "Look how beautiful it is," and I'll agree. But then he'll say, "I, as an artist, can see how beautiful a flower is. But you, as a scientist, take it all apart and it becomes dull." I think he's kind of nutty. [...] There are all kinds of interesting questions that come from a knowledge of science, which only adds to the excitement and mystery and awe of a flower. It only adds. I don't understand how it subtracts.

Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars—mere globs of gas atoms. Nothing is ‘mere’. I too can see the stars on a desert night, and feel them. But do I see less or more? The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination—stuck on this carousel my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern—of which I am a part. . . . What is the pattern or the meaning or the *why*? It does [no] harm to the mystery to know a little more about it.

For far more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined it. Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?

Sermon: “The Way of Awe and Wonder”

Here I have a fossil of a trilobite. This fossil is four hundred million years old. That’s less than one tenth of the age of the Earth, but six times as long as it has been since the last dinosaur disappeared. I invite you to ponder these facts.

I’m going to pass this fossil around. When you touch this artifact, think about how long four hundred million years is.



To make a *very* long story short, trilobites were one of the most successful (and most diverse) collections of species in the history of life on earth. They appeared among the first of the fossilizable animals, roughly 500 million years ago, and they flourished for 250 million years.

But they all eventually died. Trilobites were absolutely everywhere that anything lived, for 250 million years, until 250 million years *ago*, and now they’re *all completely gone*.

Ponder those facts. They are truly pregnant with wonder.

We Unitarian Universalists delight in the universal, but universals are difficult to come by in human affairs. One candidate for a universal religious idea is the idea that the world that we see before us is such an incomplete view of true reality as to be misleading—if not outright false.

This idea is related to the idea, again common if not universal, that the search for wisdom is a solitary and courageous search into this ultimately elusive reality.

That idea is related in turn to the common idea that the hidden nature of reality includes profound connections and dependencies between apparently—deceptively—separate objects and individuals. This idea is more prominent in Eastern religions and less important in Western traditions, but again, very broadly shared.

I will come back to these ideas.

When you touch a trilobite (or at least the fossil of a trilobite) and ponder, don't you feel the shock of a thrill running through you? Don't you feel, in your very arms and legs and guts, a sense of awe and wonder? Isn't there something about holding and pondering the trilobite that puts us in the presence of the sacred?

But what about that is sacred?

In December of 1995 astronomers pointed the Hubble Space Telescope at a relatively empty patch of sky—less than half a degree, just a little sliver, of the northern sky with only a handful of stars in it. The Hubble peered deeply into this dark patch for ten days, in order to get a look at the galaxies that lie beyond, outside our own Milky Way galaxy.

In that little sliver of sky, the Hubble exposed 3,000 galaxies—including some of the most distant yet discovered. They called the image the Hubble Deep Field, and if you haven't seen it, be sure to look it up and take a good long gaze. I don't know how else to explain it but to say that it feels like looking right into the eyes of God.

Don't forget the creepy thing about the speed of light: it's *fast*, but it's finitely fast. It takes a little more than a second for light to travel from the

Moon, and about eight minutes to travel from the Sun—so you don't—you *can't*—see any moon but the second-ago moon or any Sun but the Sun as it was eight minutes ago. And when you look at something *very* far away, you're seeing it as it was a *very* long time ago. When you gaze into the Hubble Deep Field, some of the galaxies are as far away as 12 billion light years from Earth. So it is a literal fact that you're looking at a photograph of something that's 12 billion years old. The universe itself appears to be less than 14 billion years old. An image of one little sliver of sky, containing 3,000 galaxies, all in the distant past. I defy you to look at such a photograph, and ponder, and not feel the presence of the sacred.

But what about that is sacred?

Every one of our species, every single person alive today, is descended from a group of humans that emerged in Africa—less than 100,000 years ago. Very young upstarts compared to Old Lady Trilobite. About 65,000 years ago, some of these people reached India. Almost immediately afterward, some of them reached Australia. They just followed the beaches around the Indian Ocean, so it wasn't such an uncomfortable trip, considering that they were on foot. Then, about 45,000 years ago, people arrived in Europe, where they met the Neandertals, who since that time have gone the way of the trilobites. Then, about 30,000 years ago, people crossed from Asia into Alaska and turned south.

But nobody was really standing still. It's hard to tell when people first reached the middle of Asia—the genetic data are all shmeary because everybody has been going back and forth, hither and yon, to all points of the compass, in conquest and migration, through that part of the world ever since.

Some of you met my friend Jeff Ruff when he was here in April. He's a professor of religious studies and one day he and I were talking about the striking parallels among widely separated ancient cultures. He stopped me short, and with expert dramatic pause, he looked over his left shoulder, and he looked over his right shoulder, and he lowered his voice, and he said, "What you've gotta get—is that *people* have been *walking*, all over the *planet*, for *forty thousand years*."

But let's back up to Africa. We—you, and me, and everybody—are all descended from people who left Africa sometime in the last 65,000 years. And it has become obvious that something truly awful happened about 10,000 years before that migration. It seems that about 75,000 years ago,

judging from the genetic evidence, there was a disaster of some kind—and *almost everybody died*. The amount of genetic variety in our species is dramatically less than you would expect. So the conclusion is that there was some enormous catastrophe that left a surviving breeding group in Africa that was only just big enough to sustain a healthy population. Only a few thousand people survived. Those people are *everybody's* ancestors.

This event is perhaps the first most significant event in our human narrative: *everybody almost died*, and, in fact, *almost everybody did die*. It's very clear that every single person alive today, every single person who walked out of Africa, every single person who walked anywhere, has descended from a group of people about the size of the population of Bellefonte, who were the only survivors of a disaster that nearly sent us the way of the trilobites.

Think of all the generations that went by before we forgot about the disaster. And think of all the generations that have come since we forgot.

We are all—and we always have been—that closely related to each other. Racists have turned out to be even more hypocritical than they previously appeared: for the past 75,000 years, we have been still closer brothers and sisters.

Ponder these facts, and feel the presence of the sacred.

But what about that is sacred?

The story goes that the Buddha's last words, in 543 BC, were this advice to his monks. "Nothing in this world lasts. So keep at it." (I'm paraphrasing.)

Imagine the Buddha's last breath. Or imagine the first breath drawn by Albert Einstein after the OB swatted his little red behind. Or imagine the tremulous lungfuls of air your great-grandfathers expelled when they said to your great-grandmothers, "Will you marry me?"

Now ask: will you or I ever draw a breath that contains the very atoms that vibrated to form the Buddha's farewell, or Einstein's first wail, or the fateful words of your great-grandfathers?

If you make a simple model of the speed of diffusion of atoms in the atmosphere, and account for the cycling of atoms through the biosphere—make some safe assumptions and do the calculations—it turns out that *every single breath you take* contains atoms that were in *each* of those past breaths.

Every lungful of air taken by everyone (before a certain recent date)—every hero and villain and mediocrity who ever lived, and every animal that crept over the earth—each of those breaths contained an atom that will enter your lungs *in the next breath*. And every breath after that.

Now ponder that idea, and if it doesn't make you feel the presence of the sacred, please stand up.

But what about that is sacred?

So how in the world do these ideas connect with Taoism?

Well, in fact what I'm driving at is only a footnote to Taoism. And Taoism, as befits a tradition with twenty-five or thirty centuries of history, is a mix of a lot of different things. Partly, Taoism is a collection of superstitions passed down through countless generations of peasants. Partly, it's an esoteric, contradictory, puzzling set of poetic riddles. Or it is a collection of subtle wisdom. Indeed it's reasonable to make all of these observations.

The Tao means simply the Way. And without exploring what exactly is circumscribed by the idea of "the way" in this rich tradition, I want to focus on what is so fascinating—perhaps, even sacred—about the word itself, Tao.

The Chinese word "tao" has, like a lot of other Chinese vocabulary, passed into Japanese and Korean—it's pronounced "dou" in both languages, and in each case simply means "way." Tae kwon dou is "the way of the foot and the fist," karate-do is "the way of the open hand." Major avenues in the streets of Tokyo are called "dou-ri," and on Chinese highway signs, the passing lane and the exit lane are two different types of "tao." Tao, then, translates very well into our word "way," in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

Now listen to this passage, a long footnote in Victor Mair's 1990 translation of the Tao Te Ching, the major text of the Taoist tradition.

The central concept of the Tao Te Ching, of Taoist philosophy and religion, and indeed of all Chinese thought is Tao. The translation of Tao as "Way" is an easy matter. But our understanding of the term is heightened by a closer look at its early history, which shows that the Tao is deeply imbedded in elemental human experience. The archaic

pronunciation of Tao sounded approximately like *drog* or *dorg*. This links it to the Proto-Indo-European root *drogh* (to run along) and Indo-European *dhorg* (way, movement). Related words in a few modern Indo-European languages are Russian *doroga* (way, road), Polish *droga* (way, road), Czech *draha* (way, track), Serbo-Croatian *draga* ([path through a] valley), and Norwegian dialect *drog* (trail of animals; valley). The latter two examples help to account for the frequent and memorable imagery of the Tao Te Ching; ways and valleys, it would appear, are bound together in our consciousness.

The nearest Sanskrit (Old Indian) cognates to Tao (*drog*) are *dhrajas* (course, motion) and *dhraj* (course). The most closely related English words are “track” and “trek,” while “trail” and “tract” are derived from other cognate Indo-European roots. Following the Way, then, is like going on a cosmic trek. Even more unexpected than the panoply of Indo-European cognates for Tao (*drog*) is the Hebrew root *d-r-g* for the same word and Arabic *t-r-q*, which yields words meaning “track, path, way, way of doing things” and is important in Islamic philosophical discourse.

(A little technical, but I hope you get the gist.)

In other words, it is apparently possible that the people whose languages gave rise to all the languages spoken in the Old World—Africa, all of Asia, Europe, and India—at least, *used the same word* to mean “way,” and they used it in the metaphorical, mysterious sense in which we *still use it*.

There are a number of remarkable insights to take from this footnote. Let’s examine two.

First, it’s another peek into the past—from our trilobite’s point of view it’s only yesterday, but on the scale of our human memory, it’s shrouded in antiquity. It raises goose bumps.

Second, it suggests a linguistic hint, an anthropological clue that illuminates a particular—and perhaps, universal?—religious truth.

It is a humbling, and a truly awe inspiring, idea that before we had writing, seven or ten thousand years ago (or more!), people were groping for an understanding of the universe with the very same vocabulary—and likely the same images and metaphors—that we have been using since. Right up till today.

The very first time I walked into this sanctuary, the first thing I noticed was this beautiful quilt draped over the lectern here. Isn't the image of the valley evocative? Doesn't it invite us to gather our courage and continue on the way, along the path that it reveals to us? (This quilt was another clue that I had come to the right place.)

I always enjoy looking at this quilt, gazing down the valley, regarding the way before me, and taking comfort in my connection to those who have walked it before us—and to those who will follow us. Isn't it a sacred symbol?

But what about that is sacred?

It's a source of great frustration and sadness when relatives and friends of mine condemn evolution, and science generally, in their great fear that its conclusions threaten their worldview. These are the words I hear most often, with the most disappointment: "Then it's all just random, and *meaningless*."

I don't know if Dick Feynman would have agreed to be called a religious man. But his words that I shared at the beginning of the service are a religious statement of exceptional passion and clarity.

"[K]nowledge of science [...] only adds to [...] excitement and mystery and awe [...]. It only adds. I don't understand how it subtracts."

So how can understanding make our story meaningless? I suggest the opposite: when science gives us goose-pimplly feelings of awe, it is precisely because it reminds us how we fit into the majestic enormity of the Universe.

Some will say, "But we're so *insignificant*!"

I'll speak for myself. When I gaze deeply into the Hubble Deep Field's little sliver of sky, or look into that trilobite's eyes, or breathe deep the echoes of all human words, I unconditionally reject insignificance.

Sacred artifacts, like the Hubble Deep Field, and that trilobite, and the word *dorg*—which became the word *tao* and so many other words—contain powerful magic. They harbor the power to help us catch a glimpse—if only fleetingly—of the true nature of reality hidden behind our everyday experience. They have the power to remind us that we are fragile, we are improbable, and that we are all one family.

Emphatically not insignificant, but indeed even more terrifyingly precious and unique than we may have even imagined.

We come now to the end of our service. Please rise as you are willing and able, and join me in responsive reading #670, "The Way." Please respond with the lines set in italics.

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| Friend, I have lost the way. | <i>The way leads on.</i> |
| Is there another way? | <i>The way is one.</i> |
| I must retrace the track! | <i>It's lost and gone.</i> |
| Back, I must travel back! | <i>None goes there, none.</i> |
| Then I'll make my place— | <i>The road runs on—</i> |
| Stand still and set my face— | <i>The road leaps on.</i> |
| Stay here, forever stay. | <i>None stays here, none.</i> |
| I cannot find the way. | <i>The way leads on.</i> |
| Oh, places I have passed! | <i>That journey's done.</i> |
| And what will come at last? | <i>The way leads on.</i> |

The way leads on. From Africa, through all our human languages and through all our human footsteps, into the future, the way leads on.

Blessed be. Go in peace.