

An Absorbing Errand
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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In the novel *Roderick Hudson* writer Henry James proposes an interesting definition of happiness: “True happiness... consists in getting out of one’s self. But the point is not only to get out – you must stay out. And to stay out you must have some absorbing errand” (I got this quote and the title for the sermon from Janna Malamud’s book, *An Absorbing Errand*, Counterpoint Books, 2012).

The thought of finding happiness through a distraction is too delicious to ignore. So, this Sunday morning I’m inviting you to consider its possibilities. I am hoping that you will be intrigued with the notion of an absorbing errand too. In his novel Henry James seems to be saying that perhaps the only way we can be saved from our intense self-absorption, from our relentless preoccupation with ourselves, is to find a distraction; a distraction that shifts our focus of attention...

But James is also saying something else. He is saying that this is no simple, small errand. This errand must be absorbing. It must be entrancing, captivating. It must be something that makes us forget all other pressing matters. It must be something that keeps us occupied, immersed and engrossed in both its practice and logic.

THINK OF IT AS PURSUING A HOBBY...

An absorbing errand is similar to a hobby or game you have learned. At first you had to learn all its rules and techniques. You had to monitor everything you were doing as you learned how to play it. At that point, all the details of your performance were still driven by standards that were “outside” of you, standards that were alien to your way of doing things.

But as you got better at the hobby or game, you internalized the standards. The rules and techniques became second nature to you. You learned them at a deeper level of awareness, so as to no longer second-guess yourself while performing them. Then something else happened. With continued practice, you began to live the hobby. It became part of you. It helped you express yourself through its practice. It helped you to get in touch with parts of yourself that you might not discover otherwise.

And then something else happened. Once you reached such level of mastery, you found a deep satisfaction and pride well up inside of you. You enjoyed seeing yourself doing or playing the game. It expanded or stretched you in a different direction. Perhaps it confirmed something positive about you that you had long suspected.

Now every time you practice the hobby or game, it not only entertains you or provides you with some degree of diversion, but it has become an important part of your identity, an important part of who you are. You know you are who you are NOW, because of what you learned by mastering the game.

THAT IS MY DEFINITION OF AN ABSORBING ERRAND...

What the philosopher Alasdair McIntyre called a "practice." To McIntyre a practice is a coherent, complex, cooperative activity that is socially established, with its own rules and regulations, and well-defined limits (leave to an academic to take away all the fun of explaining something artfully).

The practice offers its participants a set of internal goods that arise from performing it. Until you experience these internal goods, the practice is merely a chore. It can get tedious, boring, and be tolerated only for the sake of its external rewards. But once you develop the internal goods, the practice becomes a source of spiritual nourishment.

Say you begin running, hiking or playing tennis to lose weight or to improve your health. Being driven by an external reward, you experience the practice as hard, discouraging work. Your feet are sore, you get shin splints, your knees take a pounding. If you are running, it is hard to get in the mood for a long run when it is cold or dismal outside. If you're playing tennis you experience it as an interruption on your regular daily schedule. It takes a lot of commitment to keep it going.

However, once you develop the internal goods from the practice, once you taste a certain level of mastery, of excellence, you begin to appreciate performing it for its own sake. The practice becomes a medium for self-expression, a source of inner strength.

Sociologists who study the field of *work and occupations* call these internal goods the real standards of a craft or an art. If you think of work as a "practice," for instance, excellence is not simply measured by a paycheck or a promotion, but by certain standards of excellence set by the activity itself. There is an excellent or optimal way of performing any given job.

Think, for instance, of what sets excellent doctor, painter, or skilled musician apart from her professional peers. That kind of excellence is hard to pinpoint, but you can tell two doctors apart, despite similar training and years of experience, can't you? Excellence is set both by the standards of quality of a *community of practitioners* and the standards of quality of *each practitioner*.

Or take the case of a carpenter who imagines, designs and builds an exquisite piece of furniture. What goes into the furniture is not just the wood, nails, in-lays or varnish. The furniture is the visible, concrete manifestation of a man's ideas, talent with tools, and of his own life energy. It is the result of a significant amount of dedicated labor and time.

Furthermore, building that piece of furniture transforms the carpenter herself. She gets better at what she does. She perfects her techniques, her eye for detail. She develops a unique style of carpentry – one that becomes her signature.

Now, THAT'S an absorbing errand – the kind where rewards can only be gained through a long-term engagement with the practice; through a patient and careful process of internalization. One where alien, external standards become internal measures of excellence. And there is no other way to achieve them. You have to do the absorbing errand and stick with it long enough to see these internal goods develop within you.

These internal goods *build our character*. They enhance our sense of identity, our sense of self-esteem. They define our life by providing a certain amount of freedom and autonomy. They enhance our ability to enjoy other things, other activities, and even our relationships. And they shape who we are as a unique individual.

SO, WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT ABSORBING ERRANDS THIS MORNING?

Because today, for the first time, I wish to share with you a little bit about my own absorbing errand, my own practice. So consider this my “Keo’s Taoism 101” lecture.

Taoism has been my practice for almost 25 years, almost half of my life. The centerpiece of this practice is a little book, the *Tao Te Ching*, written some 2,500 years ago (for those interested in a good translation, I recommend the edition translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, published by Vintage Books). There are other Taoist writings that are part of the Chinese collection of philosophical classics, but the *Tao Te Ching* is central.

The book was written by Lao Tzu, an ancient sage who lived six centuries before Christ. It consists of about 5,000 Chinese characters, divided into 81 chapters. It is a work of metaphysical psychology: it describes how the fundamental forces of the cosmos operate, how the cosmic force, the life energy that creates and sustains all life flows outward and manifests itself in all the diversity and variety of life at all levels. From the microscopic to the galaxies:

“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless (the infinite) is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named (the finite) is the mother of everything.”

I know – even the best translations cannot fully spell it out for you. But imagine a formless, timeless, indescribable principle, whose flow organizes *everything* created. Every created entity – humans, animals, trees, blades of grass – is what it is and does what it does as a result of the way this energy shapes it, the way it embodies it, giving it form, mass, and structure.

An important piece of this is that Eastern traditions do not anthropomorphize the sacred. The Tao is not a God. It is not a being. People do not pray to it, or worship it. There is nothing supernatural about this. There is nothing magical about this. We are not seeking a “personal relationship” with a divine entity. The Tao is simply the organizing principle of the universe.

So we are part of gigantic cosmic flow. We are in it, surrounded by it, and part of it. But we are so busy and preoccupied with our own personal lives and conditions that we may live our entire lives without being aware of how we fit in. Nevertheless, the forces that form the galaxies are mirrored in our own individual, inner structure (think of how the iron that runs in your blood came from the stars or how the shape of our corneas mimics the shapes of certain nebulae).

Once we understand how the forces flow through us and through everything around us, we become aware of how to be a part of creation. The point of the practice is to *see this truly* and to *live it fully*. The more you do it, the closer you get to be authentically human.

There is only one problem: because we are so driven by what engages us in our everyday life, we see only the manifestations of the Tao. We miss its deeper beauty:

“Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.”

We try in vain to live full lives if we do not understand this informing principle. And we presume to act, to do, to create, without opening ourselves to the way this ultimate reality organizes our acting, creating, and relating.

The *Tao Te Ching* shows us how the flowing structure of the universe is related to the structure of our own individual nature, and to everything else. The irony is that the best way to learn Taoism is to NOT strive to learn it, is to not try to put it into words. You find it by doing the opposite. You meditate.

Stop running around, stop being busy and absorbed by your own self. Shut up, close your eyes and sit down. The point of Taoist meditation is to help you become desireless. When you do so, the cosmic principle flows unimpeded through your life and your actions.

Do you see now why I am so reluctant to talk about Taoism with my friends? It makes me sound like some blissed-out New Age guru, some improbable bearded religious figure babbling nonsense, recruiting people to shave their heads, wear a robe, and go live in a commune.

But the practice doesn't have to be complicated at all. You live the Tao naturally by being open or receptive to its subtle, elusive and active flow. You learn to match its flow

inside of you with the outer flow around you. When you do so, life becomes “effortless.” Chapter 8 of the *Tao Te Ching* calls it “right timing.”

The Chinese term for that kind of living is *Wu Wei* or “effortless action.” It literally means “causing without doing;” acting without meddlesome, combative or egotistical effort. When we learn to work with our inner nature and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of *Wu Wei* like water, which “does not contend,” but “adapts itself to the perfect place.”

Here’s an easy example of *Wu Wei* from Benjamin Hoff’s *The Tao of Pooh* (Penguin Books, 1994). Think of a kid’s toy of round and square pegs and round and square holes. You are being *Wu Wei* when you put the round peg in the round hole and the square peg in the square hole. Cleverness tries to devise craftier ways of making pegs fit where they do not belong. Knowledge tries to figure out why round pegs fit round holes, but not square holes. But *Wu Wei* person doesn’t try it. It doesn’t think about it. It just does it. And when she does that, she doesn’t appear to be doing much of anything.

Have you ever tried too hard to get something done under a tight deadline? Remember how driven you were by a sense of urgency? You simply had to make this thing happen, and you must make it happen sooner rather than later? Here is what I bet happened – the harder you tried, the more obstacles and challenges popped up; and the more worked up you became about them, the more difficult getting the thing done became.

Now here is the thing – even if you actually got it done, do you remember feeling uneasy afterwards? Perhaps emotionally exhausted or slightly bent out of shape? You are supposed to be enjoying your accomplishment, your achievement for getting it done. But joy does not seem to follow easily from that effort. Relief maybe, but not necessarily joy.

According to the *Tao Te Ching* that kind of frantic effort goes against the flow of things:

“The five colors blind the eye
The five tones deafen the ear
The five flavors dull the taste”

We are supposed to act and live intentionally instead. We are supposed to flow, like water, with the contours of the terrain and not against them.

According to psychologists human beings are built for what they call *limerence*. The way we navigate the world is by creating models in our mind of how things should work, and then seeing if the models match reality or not. When they do, we achieve *limerence*. When one of our models accurately anticipates reality, the mind experiences a little surge

of reward or at least a reassuring feeling of tranquility. When our model contradicts reality we feel tension and concern.

Remember on one of your first dates, when you expected your date to kiss you and she or he did it? That surge you felt confirmed that your prediction matched the way the world was! That is the way you should be experiencing life every day. Taoism helps you get better at creating the model while you experience reality, so the two seem to match “effortlessly.”

The problem is, we spend large parts of our lives trying to get others to fit our models for how they should relate to us, and earnestly trying to resist fitting into their models for how we should relate to them. So, we compete constantly to connect with other people on our terms and they do the same. In the process we miss connecting completely.

My Taoist prayer for you this morning (now there’s a perfect conundrum), is that you may learn to stay connected instead. May your models always mirror the way things really are, so that your life, your actions, your relationships, and your journey remain *Wu Wei*.

Tao Te Ching 1

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of everything.
Ever desireless, one can see its mysterious principle.
Ever desiring, one can see its manifestations.
The two spring from the same source but differ in name;
this appears as mysterious.
Mystery within mystery.
The gate to all essence.

Tao Te Ching 8

A person of great virtue is like the flowing water.
Water benefits all things and contends not with them.
It puts itself in a place that no one wishes to be and thus is closest to Tao.
A virtuous person is like water which adapts itself to the perfect place.
His mind is like the deep water that is calm and peaceful.
His heart is kind like water that benefits all.
His words are sincere like the constant flow of water.
His governing is natural without desire which is like the softness of water that penetrates through hard rocks.
His work is of talent like the free flow of water.
His movement is of right timing like water that flows smoothly.
A virtuous person never forces his way and hence will not make faults.