

The Tao As & Of Spiritual Healing: Reframing Reconciliation and Recovery



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Both my spiritual and my professional life emerge from the balance I found in the middle location of the Tao. I was born in the middle; the middle of the century and the middle of the year 1949, at the end of June. Perhaps it was destiny that my worldview was organized around the aggressive, asserting and yielding, dependent and independent, hard and soft, feminine and masculine.

I was the oldest of four boys raised by teenagers from the 1940s through 1960s in Cambridge, Massachusetts, working class but probably considered middle class by the time I became a teenager. My mother was a brown-skin Catholic and my father was a very light-skin Protestant Episcopalian. We were raised in a Protestant church in part because my mother was banned from her church for her choice to marry a non-Catholic. That was my earliest exposure to what I saw as self-righteous discrimination and abuse practiced by religion. My mother was also pregnant before marriage, which did not earn her any morality points in the Catholic Church. As a young teenager, I was actively involved in Sunday School, and in the church choir until late in my teens. I struggled with the social and racial turmoil of the mid 1960s while having serious doubts about the religion endorsed by my family. I sought a theology that was more inclusive, or at least less exclusive.

As I began high school in Cambridge, my parents moved me from a predominantly black technical high school for kids with a reading level below third grade, to an all-white middle class neighborhood in Newton, Massachusetts. Most of my peers and classmates were planning to attend Ivory League schools like Harvard, Brown, and Yale, and the rest were headed for MIT, Cal Tech, Stanford, and Berkeley. It was a traumatic transition for me. In my technical school in Cambridge, no one was expected to apply for college. In my new middle class school and neighborhood, I

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was the only student who could not name a single book that I had completed before grade 9. Fortunately, I was a quiet kid who did not cause trouble and I was a very good athlete, so I survived high school and found my way into an athletic scholarship in a college on the outskirts of New York City.

During my freshman year in college, one of my favorite and most admired Christian leaders, Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, was assassinated. This event corrupted and challenged both my Christian faith and my father's belief that education was the answer to oppression and racism. Prior to 1968, I had been very much committed to becoming a professional athlete. I had also considered becoming a sports photographer, so I chose to register in college as a business major. The assassination of Dr. King triggered a search for an alternative religion, philosophy, and lifestyle. I continued to think of myself first and foremost as an athlete, but I was drawn to the philosophies of martial arts that enhanced the internal and external power of the athlete's body and mind.

Winning by Losing

As I was losing my hero, my mentor, and my religion, my prayers were answered. I discovered Taoism, embedded in my training in martial arts, Tai Chi, and Jujitsu. Here were a philosophy, spirituality, and religion that spoke to me, an orientation and a set of very clear and well-articulated values and principles that mapped and described a world view seeming to match exactly the one that I had carried around with me for years without recognizing that it had a history and a name. I discovered the substance and the meaning of Taoism and the symbolic and spiritual meaning of Yin Yang. I was intrigued by its ideas of "winning by losing," and "victory through yielding." I interpreted the ideas to mean that rigid attachment to the religious teaching of my childhood could be counterproductive, and "letting go" could expand my search for a more inclusive alternative theology.

One of the most appealing aspects of Taoism for me was that it was unequivocally inclusive, balanced, integrative, and adaptive, and its resistance to rigid righteousness was genuinely unencumbered. It was infused with humility. It was predicated on characteristics of nature, making it visible to the human eye and allowing transcendence. It encouraged study and learning as opposed to worship. It embraced contradictions while encouraging the recognition of "paradoxical compatibilities." We often conclude that certain feelings, behaviors, and beliefs are incompatible, when a more Taoist examination will allow us to discover compatibilities that were previously invisible. This is visually represented by the symbol of Yin Yang that highlights the light sphere in the larger dark space and highlights the dark sphere in the larger light space. In simple terms, the symbol suggests that what is typically seen as good also has a capacity to be bad *and* what is typically seen as bad also has the capacity to be good. Strong has the capacity to be weak and weak has the capacity to be strong and resilient. The Yin Yang can be as simple as the concept of male characteristics in females and female characteristics in males, or of the sea as

a body of water that has tranquil characteristics in some parts, and violent and raging characteristics in other. “Taoism is an Eastern Philosophy that acknowledges the harmony of opposites” (Siegmann, 2000). The Tao is both the force and the surrender, the push and the yield, the Yin and the Yang.

Clinical Constructs

I sometimes use the following application of Taoism in my practice with couples who are stuck in verbal combat and cannot seem to let go of their need to win their fights and declare themselves RIGHT! “Your home work for this week is to *lose* all the fights that you will have with your partner and to take notes on how you lost the fight and what the fight was about.” This assignment is typically very difficult and usually requires several weeks of in-session practice to catch hold. Once the couple has engaged in the process, several things happen.

- (a) The couple begin to absorb the substance of each other’s position.
- (b) They recognize that there can be more than ONE right (truth) and/or that they can both be right from different perspectives and/or when looking through different lenses.
- (c) The couple often find that they are fighting about trivia and that the time they put into these arguments is entirely counterproductive
- (d) Most importantly, they recognize that they are putting the idea of being “right” as a priority over being a smart supportive partner, which is a critical construction when working with couples, relationships, and families.

Another form in the martial arts, Jujitsu, involves allowing your opposition to overpower itself with little if any resistance from you. This often includes *not* confronting a client but rather listening to them until they walk themselves into a corner (contradiction) and discover on their own terms that they are not able to make sense of what they are feeling, thinking, saying, or doing.

“Embracing your ignorance” is another Taoist concept, also known as “rotating from the role of teacher to role of student.” The smart space may also be stupid and the stupid space may also be smart, Yin and Yang together. In clinical practice, this means retreating from the “expert” position and being a student while inviting the client to be your teacher. This is also extraordinarily effective when teaching, coaching, mentoring, and consulting.

The essential work of the mentor is to guide others to discovering this goodness within themselves and to help them follow their integrity as they reawaken to the inner truth of who they are... “Teaching and learning are interlaced, for both mentor and mentoree have a heart 'that watches and receives.' Neither mentor or mentoree can exist without the other. They define each other... This paradoxical mystery where the duality is neutralized, this is called the Wu Ming, the nondualistic Tao. No longer can we tell whether it is the student offering himself to the teacher or the teacher offering himself to the student. We see each of the two beings mirroring the other in pure reflection. “Those who know they know not, become wise those who presume they know much, stay ignorant.” (Chungliang & Lynch, 1999).

Another example of Taoist thinking in popular rhetoric is the phrase, “keep your friends close and keep your enemies closer.” This seems to be a contradictory recommendation, but from the Taoist perspective it makes very good sense, “paradoxically compatible.”

A client reported to me that he could not leave his abusive partner because it would mean that he would be giving up on the idea that “I am lovable.” On the surface, staying with an abusive partner seems self-destructive, but looking through the Taoist lens we discover that the logic being used by this client seems not so unreasonable. This also allows the provider to endorse a non-pathological perspective, turning “illness” into “adaptiveness.” This also allows the client to re-vision other options that would also support the idea that he may indeed be lovable.

The Taoist move to convert the attribution “pathological” to “adaptive” is similar to the familiar family therapy technique of reframing. When an elementary school girl was dragged into my office with the label, “pyromaniac,” and I was told by her parents that she was creating unbearable drama and chaos for her family, we quickly learned that she felt that lighting fires was the only way she was able to stop her parents from fighting and abusing each other. “I was terrified that they would get a divorce.” For the Taoist therapist, it is easy to resonate with this frightened child's discovery of the power of paradox.

Eugenia Hanfmann (1978) the founder of the Brandeis University counseling center, would often declare that the job of the counselor and psychotherapist was to “find the health within the pathology.” She did not identify herself as a Taoist but her thinking was exactly compatible with what I saw as Taoist theology. She would sometimes refer to the “jealous possessive” lover as someone who was communicating an inflated need and dependency in a way that could be reframed (Jujitsu) as a positive behavior or attitude. The accused partner could then develop a more compassionate reaction that would not condone the possessive behavior but would allow the victim to see this behavior through a more generous and less hostile lens.

Grace Unfolding

Embedded in my youth (yin), there was a capacity to understand those who struggled to read and to learn. As a high school senior, I harbored a fantasy of entering Boston College as an athlete and was rejected in 1966. In 1999 (yang), I was honored as one of 8 “Exemplary Professors” with more than 200 students asserting in writing on their evaluations, “Dr. King was the best professor I had at Boston College.” There was more to the athlete (Yin) that developed over time such that the mind (Yang) could emerge in the balance of my journey from youth to elder.

For me, Taoism is a path and a map to spiritual, emotional physical and mental health. It is the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. It is a shelter from insanity and a sanctuary for spiritual growth, expansion, and rejuvenation. It is the force and the capacity to yield.

Finding an Affirming Community

Twenty five years ago, about 15 years after completing my master's degree in counseling and my doctorate in psychology, I joined a professional group of nine internationally, racially, spiritually, linguistically, and culturally diverse mental health professionals, most of them psychologists. We committed ourselves to a pursuit of cultural competence and humility. We originally described ourselves as the Boston Institute for Culturally Accountable Practices, with the intent of holding each and all of us in the group accountable for affirming cultural awareness and humility, including taking responsibility for blind spots and blunders in our relationships with each other and with others outside of our group. We have changed our name to the Boston Institute for Culturally *Affirming* Practices (BICAP, 2017). This change further endorses my Taoist orientation, in that the Tao aggressively promotes a balanced look at health and pathology and requires commitment to searching for what has been missed, hidden, or overlooked. The compatibility between this group and my Taoist theology is rich, inspirational, and empowering.

Walking in the Way of the Tao

I feel very deeply that I have an encounter with the Almighty every time I walk out into the rain, *or* walk out into the bright, and sometimes hot and humid, sun. Likewise I communicate with Her when I walk into the snow or remove the ice from my frozen windshield and experience the total darkness that is the mystery and power of the Almighty. I encounter the sacred on the many visits that I have made to the Nile River, and the weekly visits that I now make to the Mississippi River. As I witness these spectacles of unrelenting power and flexibility, I am consumed by the flow of the Tao. I embrace fear as one of the ways I connect with the Almighty. It is part of the wisdom that He has granted to me and is a profoundly useful tool for survival. The majesty of She is exquisite, intimidating, devastating, comforting, and rejuvenating. Her balance is the gospel and it is divine.

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