

I Ching. I Change.
My Reflection in a Changing World

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This sermon is inspired by and contains elements drawn from a service that Esther, and I attended this summer at the UU church in Savannah, Georgia. This church is historically known as the “Jingle Bell church” because the composer of the song “Jingle Bells”, James Pierpont, served as the Music Director of this Unitarian church in the 1850’s. David Messier, the lay leader on this particular Sunday, presented a wonderful sermon entitled “Me, Myself, and I Ching”. Although my message on the I Ching is different from David’s, I thank him for his inspiration and his willingness to share, In traditional Yin Yang balance – I hold a small piece of his work within my own.

The I Ching, or “Book of Changes” is an original Chinese work of ancient origins. It is most commonly attributed to the Chinese leader, Fu Hsi, some 3,000 years before the birth of Christ. In his well-known translation, theologian Richard Wilhelm, credits the I Ching as, “unquestionably one of the most important books in world literature.” Wilhelm states that, “Indeed, not only the philosophy of China, but its science and statecraft as well have never ceased to draw from the spring of wisdom in the I Ching, and it is not surprising that this alone, among all the Confucian classics, escaped the great burning of the books in that country.” The great book burning occurred in 231 BCE.

Two branches of Chinese philosophy, Taoism and Confucianism, share a common root in the I Ching making it both a book of divination as well as a concept of the universe.

To the Confucianist, The I Ching is a metaphor for social relations.

Some examples:

“Respect yourself and others will respect you.”

“He who speaks without modesty will find it difficult to make his words good.

Or this one:

“By nature, people are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.”

To the Taoist, however, the I Ching is a path to transformative experience. It is both a gateway to change, as its translated name “Book of Changes” implies, and an awareness of our own energy and influence in life.

Some Examples:

“In order to take, one will surely give first.”

“For there to be peace on the planet, there must be peace in the heart.”

(Sound familiar?)

Or this one:

“You do not need to force yourself, or anything around you, but merely adapt your actions to balance the movements of change.”

As Unitarian Universalists, our faith tradition draws from many sources, and many of us look to the I Ching as a source for both wisdom (Confucianism) and spiritual growth (Tao). How relevant is this for us here today, as we come together in our temporary summer location and as we look forward to a place of our own, to explore the Taoist principle of the continual movement of change. We are no strangers to change, but neither are we friends of it.

Each of us has faced change, and will continue to face change in our lives - physically as we grow and age, emotionally as we face illness and loss, socially as we develop friendships and build families, mentally as we discover and develop talents, knowledge and life skills, and spiritually as we navigate the many paths taken in the development of our own personal values and beliefs.

The Tao teaches that the natural order of the universe is constant change and that the path to peace and harmony is in our ability to make changes within - changes that will help to keep us in balance with a world that is constantly changing around us.

Our seventh principle – Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part – connects us to the natural order of the universe – including the constant change it represents. This is difficult for us. We struggle with change. We fight against change. We fear change. We look for the comfort of steady ground and stability - we look for a constant in our lives. We try to control the world around us when change comes to our doorstep, and we hold tightly, sometimes desperately, to the comfortable and the predictable.

When it comes to dealing with the changes we are facing, whether it be here at River of Grass, or in our own private lives, what changes do you find yourself resisting? What comforts do you find yourself clinging to?

River of Grass, in its 12-year history, has faced many changes - changes that have brought us to tears, and changes that have filled us with joy and celebration. Today is New Member Sunday – a time of celebration where we welcome two new members into our community, Linda Gallun and Ken Tuch.

Linda and Ken, as well as other members who have joined River of Grass over the years, represent growth, and with any growth comes change - for they bring with them unique skills and talents, new thoughts, new ideas, and new energy. As our community enters into covenant with them, we open ourselves to be changed by them. Our community evolves and is strengthened by being open to the diversity of our members – both old and new. And, as we welcome and celebrate these new members, let us also recognize and offer our blessings to the members who have recently left us to explore new paths and settle in new places. We will feel their

absence deeply, and hold them in our hearts. Change we celebrate, change we mourn – this is our community’s natural cycle of change.

How can the wisdom of the Tao, this ancient book of changes, help us to live in harmony with change? Let’s take a closer look at Taoism and seek its wisdom together.

The International Freedom Report from 2006 lists over 50 million Taoists worldwide. The report claims that, “Geographically, Taoism flourishes best in Mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, Vietnam, and various Asian communities, with only a small numbers of Taoists in the Western World.”

Now although, as I said, the I Ching was written over 3,000 years ago, Taoism was only recently introduced to the Western world - less than a century ago in fact - and it has been only in the past fifty years that Taoist concepts have gained any cultural favor. Taoism has never been a unified religion as there are many different sects within different rituals, but the core beliefs of Taoism can be seen at the heart of classical Chinese schools of science, philosophy, medicine, and folk ritual. In all of these disciplines, it is believed that: “When the inner world is made simple, the outer world becomes calm.” Think about the words to Gary’s song, “Peace in the Heart”, a song inspired by this Tao philosophy that takes us on a journey from peace on our planet back to its true source – back past peace between nations, past peace between neighbors, back further past peace between families, and still further to the inner peace found at the individual level of the heart – where the true seed of peace begins its growth. How can we apply this concept to achieve peace in our lives, in our homes, in our world, and in our congregation?

As we work through the potential challenges of our temporary space, and anticipate our new space while dealing with the waiting, let us be mindful of how an anxious heart makes for an anxious community, and anxiety can easily steal from us the joy of getting there – step by step - together.

Other core beliefs of Taoism are that when the human will works against natural order, harmony is disrupted, and that each life is a microcosm of the universe and that by taking the time to understand ourselves, we gain awareness of the universe.



The Tao, itself, is represented by the Yin-Yang symbol. You can see it here - two complimentary opposites, turning in a cycle, each giving rise to the other. The white represents “Yang” and the black represents “Yin”. They represent both the nature of opposites and the natural cycle of change. These seemingly contrary forces maintain balance. Notice how each has a seed of the other inside of it. Each half recognizes the interconnection and the interdependence of the natural world. We strive to achieve Tao. In fact, the relationship of the Yin-Yang principle is similar to Newton’s third law of motion, “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” In Taoist terms, one could say that for every external change, there is an equal internal change.

As a divination tool, the nature of the I Ching differs from Western thought. While Western thought centers its attention on the state of being, the I Ching centers its attention on the change and looks not to the future as a representation of events, but as tendencies of movement. The I Ching looks to natural order while instructing what adaptations are needed within ourselves, affirming that while change is inevitable: only growth can be called intentional, only growth can attain balance with change, and only growth can attain Tao. Growth cannot happen without our adaptation to change, and growth cannot happen without challenge - the Yin to the Yang – the Yang to the Yin.

Think about it: We feel most alive at the edge of our comfort zones, our knowledge is acquired by pushing beyond the edge of our own internal truths, our love grows deepest at the edge of harmony, and our faith thrives beyond the edge of what can be known to be true.

Growth is at the edges, and that growth is change - resistance does not stop change, it only prevents growth. The Tao warns us that if we allow our will (resistance) to dictate our interconnectedness and interdependence to the world, then we walk away from the potential of transformative experience.

What adaptations are needed within ourselves to bring us into balance with the change around us? How can my changes within diffuse external resistance and affect positive change in my family, my community, my congregation, my country, my world, my planet?

How do we grow?

I will quote Oscar-winning Brian Grazer, who with movies like *A Beautiful Mind* and *Apollo 13* to his credit, could rest on his laurels. But that's not for him. Grazer believes in disrupting his comfort zone.

He says:

"I was 45 years old when I decided to learn how to surf.

Picture this: The north shore of Oahu—the toughest, most competitive surfing spot on the planet. Fourteen-foot swells. Twenty tattooed locals. And me, 5-foot-8-inches of abject terror. What will get me first, I wondered, the next big wave or the guy to my right with the tattoo on his chest that reads "RIP"?

They say that life is tough enough. But I guess I like to make things difficult on myself, because I do that all the time, every day and on purpose. That's because I believe in disrupting my comfort zone.

Over the last 30 years, I've produced more than 50 movies and 20 television series. I'm successful and, in my business, pretty well

known. I'm a guy who could retire to the golf course tomorrow where the worst that could happen is that my Bloody Mary is watered-down. So why do I continue to subject myself to this sort of thing? The answer is simple: Disrupting my comfort zone, bombarding myself with challenging people and situations—this is the best way I know to keep growing. And to paraphrase a biologist I once met, if you're not growing, you're dying.

So maybe I'm not the best surfer on the north shore, but that's okay. The discomfort, the uncertainty, the physical and mental challenge that I get from this—all the things that too many of us spend our time and energy trying to avoid—they are precisely the things that keep me in the game.”¹

To that I say Amen, and may we find ourselves growing at the edges as we learn how to face our lives' challenges by centering ourselves in the cycles of change and discovering our place in the delicate balance of the Tao.

¹ This I believe. NPR Series Retrieved online at:
http://thisibelieve.org/essay/22868/?utm_campaign=awesm&utm_medium=awe.sm-facebook-post&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_content=sociable-wordpress

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