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**Dale Pendell:
Sauntering with Lao Tzu**

*The Tao described in words is not the real Tao.
Words cannot describe it.
--Tao Teh Ching [1]*

The book came as a gift, a drop of poison that slipped into my thoughts lightly clad, unassuming in metaphysics and thus able to evade the frontier defenses poised to attack any cosmic principle clothed in more theistic garb.

It was just a silly Peter Pauper Press book, and the translation, as I recognize now, not particularly scholarly. But it was compact, and direct.

*Man is subject to the laws of the earth,
the earth is subject to the laws of the universe,
the universe is subject to the laws of Tao, and
Tao is subject to the laws of its own nature.
[25]*

The words evoked an image of flowing, light and vacuous, more like a subtle inclination emanating from "that which is" than as a thing itself.

*Looked for, it cannot be seen.
[14]*

Thus it was all the more disturbing when I found that the accompanying philosophy was not only practical, including a theory of government and of history, but also radical.

*the perfect state is small...
they have weapons but no reason to show them...
men forego writing, reckoning with knotted cord.
[80]*

Do away with formal learning and you will not be annoyed by its multitude of details. [19]

and, in my own wording,

*The scholar learns every day,
the follower of the Way unlearns every day.
[48]*

Lao Tzu had a way of turning things upside down. Over the years I collected many translations of the *Tao Teh Ching*, but some verses remain in my memory in some altered or hybrid form.

Red Pine translates verse 38:

*when the Way is lost virtue appears
when virtue is lost kindness appears*

*when kindness is lost justice appears
when justice is lost ritual appears
ritual marks the waning of belief
and onset of confusion*

But in my memory the verse went more like

*When the Way is lost there is custom,
when custom is lost, there is morality,
when morality is lost, there is ritual,
when ritual is lost, there are mere laws.*

The gist is the same. Everywhere Lao Tzu challenges the entrenched ideas of "progress." The Old Ways of the Neolithic were still alive in Lao Tzu's century, though under assault from the centralizing forces of bronze and iron.

Lao Tzu taught leading from behind, that even better than leaders who were loved were leaders who were hardly noticed. He warned that fine sounding words were not often true, and that when most people heard of the Tao, they just laughed.

Thus the truly wise want the unwanted and do not prize what is rare. Study what is unstudied and preserve what is lost. Assist in the course of nature but never interfere in it. [64]

Lao Tzu offered the possibility of a different way of moving in the world--that the world was basically OK, as long as we didn't mess with it too much, that living in harmony with the "Way" was more important than worldly striving. Lao Tzu taught accomplishing without doing, the way of letting things take their course.

Sometimes I wonder if this book which insinuated itself so deeply into the axioms of my thought was really a positive influence. How often had I let the way of inaction be an excuse for avoidance? Maybe I should have stayed with Camus and followed the Absurd. Do we really want to rely on knotted strings rather than writing? And how traceless should a life be?

*Good walking leaves no tracks..
[27]*

Over a thousand years after Lao Tzu, the Chan master Tung Shan taught the "Bird Path," the trackless way. Another thousand years later one of his descendants, the Soto master Shigetsu Ein wrote:

In extending the hands, there is no separate road; it does not transgress the bird's path. Traveling the bird's path by yourself, yet you extend your hands. In the bird's path there is no separate road; knowing the hidden roads yourself, you still don't transgress it. Dwelling in the bird's path, you don't sprout horns on your head but always extend your hands. (Cleary, 1992)

Picking and choosing.
Shouting secrets.
Painting tracks on the wall.

Leaving messages.

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