

The following thoughts, adapted from *Ethics and Lao-Tzu* and “Building the Great Wall of China,” are set down as a sort of reverie in the aftermath of the recent conference in Chicago. Many division members encountered there for the first time important new voices from East Asia. Xuefu Wang and Mark Yang were, with Louis Hoffman, organizers of the First International Conference on Existential Psychology last year in Nanjing. I am fortunate to have spent time with each of them, both at that gathering and in Chicago as well. I count both as colleagues and friends—mindful, committed and ethically attuned individuals who will provide for rich dialogue and cross-fertilization going forward with those of us here in the States. The Jewish-Bulgarian novelist Elias Canetti once referred to Kafka as the West’s “only Chinese poet.” A strange thought, you may think, which is why I have set down this brief reverie on Kafka and Lao-Tzu and paradox—a meditation on the nuances and tensions between worlds and minds . . .

THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

A Reverie on Kafka, Lao-Tzu and Paradox



Nothing New Under the Sun
Mele's Self-Portrait 12/98

As that which completes the primal images, it is called the Creative; as that which imitates them, it is called the Receptive.

The Book of Changes

Contemplation and activity have their apparent truth; but only the activity radiated by

contemplation, or rather, that which returns to it again, is truth.

Franz Kafka,
Fourth Blue Octavo Notebook

I

The modernist writer Kafka is forever presenting us with characters who are thrashing about in search of law, truth, and way. Yet for all their inexhaustible efforts, they fail even to earn for themselves a respectable name. Kafka understands the ludicrousness of the compulsive quest and, when all is said and done, sides (still in his ironically obsessive manner) with quiescence and the uncanny. Meditating on liturgy, he writes:

There are two main human sins from which all others derive: impatience and indolence. Because of impatience they were expelled from Paradise, because of indolence they don't return. But perhaps there is only one main sin: impatience. Because of impatience they were expelled, because of impatience they don't return.

Franz Kafka,
Third Blue Octavo Notebook

Clearly there is something of Lao-tzu in Kafka, in his use of paradox and aphorism and his eschewal of an ultimate "route map" that might be clearly defined. ("Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!" exclaims a character named Hamm in Beckett's masterpiece *Endgame*.) Consider this astonishing conversation concerning the wisdom of the East as Kafka peruses a German translation of the *Tao te Ching* brought to him excitedly by his youthful friend and acolyte, Gustav Janouch:

'They spell out—as you can see here—transcriptions of reality from translations of ancient Chinese instead of quietly reading the original text of their own lives and responsibilities. To them the day before yesterday seems more accessible than today. But reality is never and nowhere more accessible than in the immediate moment of one's own life . . . All it guarantees us is what is superficial, the façade . . . [O]ne must break through this. Then everything becomes clear.'

'But how does one do that? How does one proceed? Is there some sure guide?'

'No, there is none,' said Kafka, shaking his head. 'There is no route map on the way to truth. The only thing that counts is to make the venture of total dedication. A prescription would already imply a withdrawal, mistrust, and therewith the beginning of a false path. One must accept everything patiently and fearlessly. Man is condemned to life, not death.'

Gustav Janouch,

Conversations with Kafka

This is, quite simply, genius. With inestimable concision and elegance, Kafka points beyond Lao-Tzu's sublime little book (the thing itself) toward precisely the sensibility (awareness) that the book embodies. Kafka's poetic musings upon the *Tao te Ching* recall the Zen story of the master who points instructively at the moon while all the disciples stare dumbly at his finger. Let us keep this profound and humorous insight in mind as humanistic psychology seeks now to integrate new voices and hemispheres. There is much we have to learn from the East. There is much we have, too, still to learn from ourselves, to say nothing of the many intimations of the East we find already here in our own back yards.

II

It has been said that in Kafka we witness the seamless merging of reality and dream. The oneiric state is itself a dialogue of sorts between world and the unencumbered mind. One day my patient, Kristina, a multiple personality, sets down the following dream about alternate/parallel worlds and selves, dissolution of both and engulfment by larger bodies/forces—intimations of forthcoming intrapsychic/cataclysmic events, dissociation/escape and resultant macroscopic perspectives. Note here, too, the Chinese connection and, also, the vagaries of a world in peril without sure beacons to guide our way:

I was living way out in the Far East, in China on an island. I was surrounded by all these people who didn't speak the same language as I did except for one person who acted as my translator and guide. I didn't go anywhere without him because I'd get lost or wouldn't be able to communicate with the people around me. I lived in a house with him and a woman who couldn't speak our language either. She was always sitting on a couch in front of a large picture window watching American television even though she couldn't understand what was being said. I could never figure out why she liked watching it so much. She was older than the man; her hair was already turning grey.

The house that we lived in was small, and it seemed like we lived at the end of a jetty. Three sides of the house looked out upon the ocean. The side of the house with the picture window looked west, so we always saw the sun setting against the horizon. There was another window that was fairly large, looking out onto the sea.

One day I was sitting with the old woman and the man came in and sat down. He told me that the island was slowly sinking into the ocean and that each day the water came closer and closer to the house. He told me that soon the water would overtake us and the house would be lost to the sea. Eventually the whole island would be buried under the sea. Of course, I was saddened to hear it. It was a beautiful place to live, and I couldn't imagine how we could leave it and travel to another island to live. Days went by and, sure enough, whenever I went to the water's edge, it was closer and closer to my home. If I looked to the west, I could see the horizon, and to the right were enormous cliffs. Maybe we could move there and then we would be safe. The man told me that even these places would eventually be swallowed up. He said we would move to America. I asked him why we had to move so far, and he told me the whole continent would be buried, not just our island.

One day the water reached our steps. It rose and kept on rising. We took everything we had and we moved. We flew to America where we soon settled on the East Coast. We moved into a house right along the water, just as we had in China. Again we lived on a jetty, the water surrounding us on three sides, with one large window looking to the west and the setting sun. I asked the man, still my only companion (for even in America they spoke a language I did not understand), what would happen when the continent drowned. He told me that he did not know, that we would have to wait until it happened to find out. The woman still lived with us, and she still watched television, only now she watched Chinese television! One day the man told me that the time had come when the whole continent would be swallowed up. I asked him again what would happen. Surely there would be a massive tidal wave. Would it come all the way to America? Would it swallow us up? Who would survive such a wave? Questions all to which he shrugged his shoulders. We would wait to see.

Then I flew out of my body. At first I hovered over the house and the ocean, and then I hovered over America and then over the whole world. I could see China and Europe and Australia and Africa sinking. It happened slowly at first. Then, as the time

grew longer and longer, it happened faster and faster. I knew that when everything had disappeared under the waves, the suction of the sinking would cause a disturbance in the sea. Still I was unsure of exactly what it would do. So I just hovered in outer space looking at the world. Then it began. The whole globe started to wobble and ripple and fall in upon itself. I watched horrified above the earth, waiting to see what would happen next. It seemed as if the whole earth would collapse upon itself. I was terrified because I knew it meant I would be dead.

Kristina's dream projects upon a planetary canvas an intrapsychic architecture founded on two interior (*altered*) "worlds" or "houses." Red and blue, blood and tears, action and reaction: an inner constellation of makeshift form and "sanity" in the face of overarching chaos without. As psychotherapy progresses, there is a shift from presenting alters of Kristina's "blue world" of presentation to an earlier "red world" of original pain. Our work together (for, surely, I am the translator and guide who has, nonetheless, scant awareness of what exactly happens next) changes qualitatively as primal trauma is encountered face to face. In Kristina's dream, this shift in "houses" is mirrored in the relocation from China to the States. Insofar, however, as the travesty of the outer world continues unabated, the dreamer finally leaves her body outright as she hovers now precariously high above the earth. Dissociation, mastered in early childhood, remains the only reliable means of escape. Yet once the body is abandoned absolutely (just as the nations of the globe now abandon Mother Earth), experience becomes ungrounded and there is no place left to go. All that remains is an apocalyptic flood.

III

A thought:

Lao-tzu's *Tao te Ching*: an exegesis of Being without Action

Kafka's fiction: an exegesis of Action without Being

Another thought, another way of putting it:

Kafka: a literature of Diaspora

Lao-tzu: a guidepost for return

Still, both ancient and modernist contemplatives knew what they were talking about. Kafka himself was wise as a Zen master and, as we have seen, a sometimes student of the East. He

must certainly have resonated with these lines from Lao-tzu, his forerunner in certain respects and early adept of the form:

The Tao is called the Great Mother:
empty yet inexhaustible,
it gives birth to infinite worlds.

Even, of course, to Kafka and his worlds as well.

CODA

If humanistic psychology is to open up fully to new vistas within and without, it is imperative that we embrace more humbly and comprehendingly the nuances, paradoxes, and conundrums so eloquently rendered by misfits and mystics like Lao-Tzu, Kafka and Kristina.

References

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