

**Confucian Wisdom for Our Times**  
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**Readings**

by Rebecca Parker, from *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century* by John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker

An additional vision of salvation goes beyond hope for either heavenly reward or earthly success. It recognizes salvation as the gift of full aliveness, here and now, the restored and enlivened capacity to be in the world with wisdom. Such wisdom is not a personal accomplishment but an achievement of life together in human communities that foster astute attention to life in the present, that celebrate beautify and goodness, and that resist evil.

Salvation is fully arriving in *this* life, turning our faces toward its complex realities and engaging our whole being in creative, compassionate, loving interaction with what is at hand. Salvation is the birth of full aliveness, the incarnation of divinity in the flesh of human life together. Salvation is not something one possesses individually: it is something one participates in communally, including in communion with those who have come before.

from the Confucian *Analects*

15.3 Confucius said to a pupil, “Do you think I have come to know many things by studying them?”

The pupil said, “Yes, isn’t it so?”

Confucius said, “No. I penetrate them by their underlying unity.”

(from *The Essential Confucius*, ed. and translated by Thomas Cleary)

**Sermon**

Professor Paul Desjardins: tall but with a slouch, intense but with a ready laugh, bright eyes with a sort of sly twinkle, hair never neatly combed, fly-away.

And almost fifty years later I still see him so clearly at the front of one of our seminar classes asking us to struggle with the meaning of a passage or just a word in the passage: “piety” in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, “justice” in the *Republic*, *tao* in the *Tao Te Ching*. As I recall we spent more than one three hour seminar just on the first line of the *Tao Te Ching*: “The *tao* that can be named is not the eternal *tao*.”

This approach was frustrating to some of us some of the time. Couldn't we just get on with it? We'll never get through the whole book if we spend hours on the first line or on one word for heaven's sake!

Our occasional frustration was entirely missing the point.

All these years, decades, later for example I can still recite in (admittedly terrible) Chinese the first lines of the Confucian text *The Great Learning*. I can do this because we spent so much time parsing the meanings of each character, and learning however badly the brushstrokes of the ancient Chinese characters: "Ta hsueh chi tao, tsai ming ming te, tsai chin min, tsai chi hu chi shan." English translation, the one we used anyway: "What the way of the great learning teaches, is to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence."

Not only did Professor Desjardins require us to learn how to draw the characters, he asked us to draw them over and over again. One of my roommates that year was also in the class. Going beyond brush and paper, we decided to draw the characters on the bathroom walls of our suite as well. I can still picture the black ink on yellow tile. (Which I think I'm recalling washed off pretty easily. I hope so for the sake of the maintenance and cleaning folks.)

In short, as you can clearly tell, I've never forgotten this text.

Yet not only because it was so to speak drilled into us. And not even because for weeks our seminar drilled into the meanings of the text with Paul's guidance. Also because the meaning of this over two thousand year old document is still relevant. To me, but not only to me: also to us – and to our times.

You see, the Great Learning offers a template for how to be in the world ethically, socially, and politically – how to be in a way that enhances the flourishing of life socially and politically during any era. Whatever your role or station in life, as we'll see.

So – a little more about the text, which in most English translations can seem fairly dry and formulaic, maybe lacking in what we might call heart. But I hope you'll see it is nothing of the sort.

You have a copy of the complete text in your order of worship this morning (and printed the end of this manuscript). And though I can't explicate every word and phrase of the entire text in a few minutes, nor am I scholar enough to be able to do so, I hope to note enough key terms and key points to help you see what I mean – both about the richness of the text, and about its relevance to our lives and to our times.

First, then, what about this notion that there is a learning we could call the "great" learning?

The idea is pretty simple actually. Though there are plenty of things to learn and plenty of things worth learning: from science to literature and much else... there is (so is the claim) also a "great" learning which offers some sort of organizing principle for everything else, at least ethically if not also otherwise.

And what is the “path” or “way” (*tao*) of this great learning? The text tells us it is rooted or grounded in three things: “illustrating illustrious virtue, renovating the people, and resting in highest excellence.”

Again, dry language, but rich meaning.

We are enjoined to discover and rest in our highest excellence and to lead by virtuous example in renovating or helping or loving (as an earlier version has it) “the people” – fellow human beings, whomever and wherever they are.

Then this idea of “resting” is elaborated in what may seem to be somewhat cryptic terms; but if we read it as poetry perhaps we will be moved by it, begin to understand it in more than an abstract way:

The point where to rest being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to (“calm in the presence of the tiger”). To that calmness there will succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end.

The way I read it, without parsing every word or line, is that we each are enjoined to find a centeredness in how things are and in who we are – a centeredness which can give us a calmness, a sense of tranquility, “unperturbedness” (and the Chinese character here depicts a person in the presence of a tiger...) from which to act and live – attain desired ends.

Then comes a brief yet key reminder that it is critical “To know what is first and what is last” – to know what is root and what is branch; after which the text moves on to the long but in *some* (though not all!) ways straightforward center section, that basically makes the point that a well-ordered kingdom is dependent upon well ordered or “cultivated,” individuals, particularly the leaders. Further lines, once again sounding to our ears pretty cryptic, elucidate how to cultivate one’s person:

Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Now, most commentators note the challenge of understanding what in the world could be meant by this bland phrase “investigation of things” which this text has put at the very center of the teaching of the Great Learning. Why would this be so darned important, the hinge of the whole text you could say? (And we are not helped much by other translations that say “affairs” rather than “things.”)

Well, the only way I can make sense of it is in almost mystical terms. Wishing to cultivate ourselves, to become better, more sincere human beings, the path is to go deep into the nature of who we are, which in turn means how we are related to everything and everyone else – and to do this not just abstractly, intellectually, but by direct experience.

How about that?

And from this, we are told, everything else then flows! To knowledge of how things are in completeness, to sincerity, to pure hearts and a cultivated person... and then outwardly to family, community, state, kingdom (or world as we would put it these days).

Then the text brings it home to all of us. This is not just for leaders; we ordinary folk are not off the hook:

From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.

Finally, one more thought, in case we needed more clarity on this point:

It cannot be, when the root is neglected, that what should spring from it will be well ordered. It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.

Well then, are you with me? Am I conveying at least a bit of why this text had such an impact on me, not to mention why it was among the formative texts in China for millennia? And not to mention why the message, this grand holistic vision still resonates and might matters to us, our lives, our times?

Now, this morning is not the time for detailing the influence of Confucian thought throughout Chinese history for the past 2,500 years, which influence has been enormous – both for better and sometimes for worse when the teachings have been abused rather than rightly used. But it is not an exaggeration to affirm, as many do, that Confucius is among the very few of the most influential human beings in history. Even now, for example, after the highly anti-Confucian years of Mao's China, Confucius is experiencing a resurgence.

But putting the grand sweep of history aside, let me move toward a conclusion this morning by sharing a few quotes from the *Analects*, the collection of sayings of and stories about Confucius gathered by his students and disciples after his death. I invite you to hear these brief lines in the context of the Great Learning we've just been exploring, in particular the teaching that the cultivation of the person is at the root of "everything besides."

from 1.1 The Master said, "To learn, and then have occasion to practice what you have learned – is this not satisfying?"

4.4 The Master said, "Merely set your heart sincerely upon Goodness (*ren*) and you will be free of bad intentions."

from 2.21 The Master said, "... in being a filial son and good brother one is already taking part in government. What need is there, then, to speak of 'participating in government'?"

4.16 The Master said, "The exemplary person understands rightness, whereas the petty person understands profit."

2.3 The Master said, "If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves."

I could go on. All in the spirit and context of what translator Thomas Cleary describes as Confucius's central assumption, this overarching vision that "the moral foundation of social order must rest on the primary virtue of humaneness or humanity" – not, as Cleary also wrote, by those in power who consider "personal profit and advantage over public humanity and justice." This is why the path for Confucius was a path of education in the deepest, most thoroughgoing sense, as we've been exploring today.

So whatever hints of mysticism one might find in Confucian writings (and there are some), it is fair to say that the teaching of Confucius was by and large this-worldly, was about how to make one's way in this world, about what a truly good society would look like and how we might help create such a society. And it seems to me that in this general approach to life, we would find ourselves as Unitarian Universalists very much in harmony. For whatever our thoughts or beliefs about the cosmic order, God, heaven and hell, and so on (and whatever mystical experiences we each may or may not have had), we UUs are committed, as we heard in the reading from Rebecca Parker, to a "salvation" that looks something like this, in her words:

...fully arriving in *this* life, turning our faces toward its complex realities and engaging our whole being in creative, compassionate, loving interaction with what is at hand.

For Confucius? "Fully arriving in this life" meant becoming fully human, meant learning to be humane, with as much goodness or virtue as we can muster, serving and helping one another along the way, most often one day and one kind interaction at a time.

So I suppose you could say that either Confucius was a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it... or we are Confucians without knowing it.

Either way. In any case, by whatever name wisdom: For our shared lives in these troubled and troubling times.

So may it be.

**The Great Learning**  
*attributed to Confucius*  
*more likely inspired by his teachings*  
*(translated here by James Legge)*

What the great learning teaches, is to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence.

The point where to rest being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. To that calmness there will succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end.

Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in the Great Learning.

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.

From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.

It cannot be, when the root is neglected, that what should spring from it will be well ordered. It never has been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for, and, at the same time, that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.