

## Worth Keeping in Mind

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### Readings

from *Lieh-Tzu: A Taoist Guide to Practical Living*

Most people like to be praised. They feel good when their accomplishments are acknowledged. However, I feel we would be better off if we were empty of attachments and not imprisoned by recognition, approval, and disapproval. In the long run, we'd have fewer things to worry about....

Chuang-tzu once told a story about two persons who both lost a sheep. One person got very depressed and lost himself in drinking, sex, and gambling to try to forget this misfortune. The other person decided that this would be an excellent chance for him to study the classics and quietly observe the subtleties of nature. Both men experienced the same misfortune, but one man lost himself because he was too attached to the experience of loss, while the other found himself because he was able to let go of gain and loss.

from the writings of Nelson Mandela

Let freedom reign. The sun never set on so glorious a human achievement.

We can't afford to be killing one another.

Our human compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.

We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.

### Sermon

The scholar of world religions Huston Smith, now in his 90s, has for many years engaged in a variety of spiritual practices drawn from several of the world's traditions. A Methodist by birth, he still feels centered in Christianity, yet also practices yoga and meditation; and he prays a Muslim prayer five times a day, in the spirit of Islam. "Five times a day," he says, "distractions are suspended, and one's attention is drawn to the infinite."

Sounds like a pretty good idea to me. For with distractions in this world and in our lives being many, our response is often just to... distract ourselves *from* distractions... with *more* distractions!

So really to stop five times a day and orient ourselves to something larger, infinitely larger than our small selves and our daily concerns... well that sounds more than worthwhile, sounds something like a spiritual survival tip if you ask me. Worth keeping in mind.

This can be done in many ways of course, not only with Muslim prayers, but through many forms of prayer or meditation or mindfulness or simply re-orienting attention: Just stop what we're doing, put aside our worries and that stream of thoughts, and allow our attention to be "drawn to the infinite" – don't need to name it – simply need to be open to it by whatever name or no name, to something larger, grander, the mystery of it all. If only for a moment. Repeating ancient words can help. A prayer. A poem. Or simply looking up at the sky or over at the trees.

Right now, for example...

The theologian and writer Frederick Buechner, exploring the same territory, has written:

We are much involved, all of us, with questions about things that matter a good deal today but will be forgotten by this time tomorrow—the immediate wheres and whens and hows that face us daily at home and at work—but at the same time we tend to lose track of the questions about things that matter always, life-and-death questions about meaning, purpose, and value. To lose track of such deep questions as these is to risk losing track of who we really are in our own depths and where we are really going.

Why do we so easily "lose track"? Why do we so easily get distracted by what in our heart of hearts we know is not so important? Why do we need reminders of what really does matter?

Well, I don't know why it should be so, but I do know – as you know – that it is indeed so. Simply true that we are easily drawn off course, whether by troubles (I talked a lot about that last week) or maybe even more forcefully and potentially destructively by such attractions (which really are distractions) as money, recognition or fame, power and influence.

Our entire culture and economic system is, after all (and I hardly need tell you this, because you know it)... is based on the allure, the false promise that precisely these things – money, fame, and power – will bring real and lasting happiness and well-being. Whereas following these false gods is destroying us spiritually and degrading our world materially – and at an accelerating pace.

Wendell Berry in his novels, essays, and poems, calls it the disease of being dissatisfied – dissatisfied with who we are, where we are, what we are.

Now, I've thought a lot about this notion that being dissatisfied as the root of so many of our ills and problems, from the personal to the global; and I've come to realize that we need to be carefully discerning here.

For there is more than one sort of dissatisfaction.

It is one thing to be dissatisfied with one's circumstances when one really does

have enough – money, home, food, relationships, and so on. And being dissatisfied with what really should be and is enough is a driver that will indeed do us in, each of us and all of us.

But it is quite another thing to be dissatisfied with certain conditions in society, in our world: war, injustice, climate change. This is more than appropriate; it is essential – essential to both our spiritual and material well-being.

We heard earlier a few words from Nelson Mandela. The great gift that Mandela has given us is the same gift we received from Gandhi, from Martin Luther King, Jr, from the Kenyan Wangari Matthai and her Green Belt movement, from Mother Teresa, from so many other great and inspiring men and women:

It is the gift of the reminder by example that we human beings really are able to transcend or grow beyond the smaller concerns of our lives: “the wheres and whens and hows that face us daily” and that must be tended to, but that should not be allowed to swallow the whole of our lives. We really are able to transcend, to grow beyond, these mundane routines of our lives in service of larger values: freedom, justice, peace, a healthy natural world, the well-being of all our brothers and sisters, of all life.

As for Mandela, during his many years in prison it would have been understandable had he become bitter and angry. Instead he more deeply shaped his desire not for personal gain, but his desire to bring freedom and justice to his people, and to do so non-violently if at all possible, even if it meant, as it had to mean, speaking with, negotiating with, the enemy, the very perpetrators of oppression, in service of this goal. Yes, he loved and cared for his family and close circle of friends – we find this affirmed in his writings as well. But the circles of his life also reached ever more widely.

So then: Can we too learn the art of personal contentment, even as we seek a more universal vision and direction for our lives? If so, how?

I find the beginning – and maybe the end – of an answer in the words of Meister Eckhart printed in your program, writing centuries ago:

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you,  
it will be enough."

The practice and art of gratitude – worth keeping in mind. *Not* putting on rose-colored glasses, not about narrow self-satisfaction – “I’ve got mine, so I don’t have to worry about others.” Quite the contrary, a practice of gratitude is about opening our hearts, our lives, our beings to the fullness of life (maybe another way of naming the “infinite”) – and then living accordingly in service of life, in whatever ways small or large are ours.

A digression – which I promise will come back around:

This past Monday morning I was not quite half-way through my run to and then circling World’s End. It was a beautiful morning and I felt strong and healthy.

Then, as I came down a steep section on the narrow Rocky Neck trail I failed to pay attention for the briefest of moments.

Next thing I knew I was down. With a real thump. My glasses were bent. There was blood. “This could be bad” I said out loud (well, that was not all I said) said to no one but myself and whatever small creatures might be nearby: “This could be bad.”

But after a moment or two I stood up. Nothing broken. I walked. Everything seemed to be working. I slowly started to run. A few aches and pains, but not *too* bad. I finished my run.

Home. Well, however okay I felt, I did not look good in the mirror.

But here’s the thing. I *was* home. Some bruises and an eventual shiner; still a few bruises and a shiner a week later. But whole. One piece. It could have been so much worse.

Now, as the day and the week went on, I’ve reflected: The human body-mind, miracle that it is, is designed to run, designed not to fall, designed to re-gain balance if you begin to fall, designed to trigger instantaneously a brace yourself reaction if, after all, you do fall. And then, gratefully (really gratefully) the head is designed to protect as well as possible the brain and the eyes.

Yes, it could have been worse, but millions of years of evolution ensured that this time it wasn’t and that most of the time it wouldn’t be.

Most of the time. Key point.

Because, as this little fall also reminded me, life though designed for survival is at the same time fragile and uncertain. Worth keeping in mind. And if we are paying attention at all (as I wasn’t for that sliver of a moment), we know this is true even though sometimes it might take bonking our heads to remind us.

I expect you see where I’m going with this. My little fall reminded me once again (why *do* we need so many reminders?) of some of the most important realities that are worth keeping in mind, things I’ve been talking about this morning:

Knowing this fragility of our lives, this uncertainty amidst the miracle of life, can we let go of attachments to what really doesn’t matter so much, as that Taoist story reminded us?

Can we learn instead to focus more of the time on what matters far more: the deep questions, the depths, as the words of Frederick Buechner reminded us.

Can we learn to focus not only on personal goals – utterly necessary to have personal goals – but also on goals which reach to others, grounded in universal values such as freedom and justice, peace and the health of the earth, as the life and message of Nelson Mandela and so many other great souls remind us?

Can we remember every day, perhaps several times each day, to open our minds and hearts to the majesty and mystery of the creation, the fullness of life – the infinite as Huston Smith puts it, God by whatever name?

And to do so with gratitude?

All this worth keeping in mind, or so it seems to me.

With gratitude: heart-opening, life-changing gratitude.

So may it be.