

Melissa Crider

NWACC spring 2012

Professor Matthew C. Henriksen

ENGL 2213-02 Survey of World Literature to 1650

Monday 6:00 p.m. – 8:45 p.m.

Essay 1

***Bridge to the Gate***

*A Reflection on Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching & Marcus Aurelius' Meditations*

March 12, 2012

If Lao Tzu is the Gate who opens up to The Sky of understanding why we simply cannot know, then Marcus Aurelius is bridge builder who paves The Way arching the path from Earth's clay to Sky's Gate as he invites one to hover over the busy river of this world in order to rightly see to be able to arrive. After much contemplation and digestion of the ancient texts, *Tao Te Ching* and *Meditations*, a stark unison of the messages of both men rings true like the wholesome sounding of a bell.

In harmonizing key that brings delight when observation of the mutuality of voice coalesces in one's mind, the mystical Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, and humble Roman emperor, Aurelius, both seemed to have taken profound and solemn stock in deducing and inducing how to rightly conduct oneself in this world by disciplining one's thoughts in order to live peacefully and in the direction that Nature/God/The Way are one and the same in a most intelligent, all-knowing, and forever enigmatic design.

Also shared is a certain necessary loneliness inherently endured due to the intricate burden of such rare and exhaustive understanding of their fringe truths afforded by a highly specialized selflessness sure to pull certain saints and geniuses magnetically apart from the ordinary in this multi-sensory polar existence. As a result of the robust wisdoms born of each man via having had mazed through arduous worldly extremes in order to only then compatibly key their dials to the goal of sweet temperance, the motion of stillness is what they decide should be striven for. They advise that this more secluded location of *balance* be most dependable and is achieved when slow dancing nearest as one is ever able to the sacred *bulls-eye of things*, teetering around zero, The Middle Way.

Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are singular in tone resonating complexity, yet a sparkling purity. The docile invitations are hidden somewhere too

quiet for most, as is a pearl or forest fairy who kindly blinks her belly on and off when you can't find your way around the trees again. They channel gently through the pen with earned stillness of spirit. These qualities are the very balm that ends up lubricating the truths into digestibility.

The intricate genius both men possess render them wise emotional accountants; in the balancing of extremes, they each arrive to suggest that teetering humbly closest to the zero mark is the finest true place to achieve in human living in order to thrive.

How lovely to have a map—a sacredly structured maze all laid out before you that details what one's forefathers deducted, as found in some Vedic literature such as *The Upanishads*, Christian literature like *The Holy Bible*, or Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Maps are great for herds of sheople (sheep+people=*sheople*). Lao Tzu and Aurelius do not claim such length or complete *knowing*. Their uncharted thoughts being sole originals in tandem with unrestrained delivery prove powerful in relocating the mind and heart to shift in oneself. The difference between watching a live violin solo when the strings are struck at once versus replaying a recording with the volume maladjusted long after the fact, comes to mind.

Comparable notables such as the likes of Aristotle seem to primarily *coolly* intellectualize in a relegating fashion that lands the reader immediately into playing automatic pupil when considering the messages. Some sheople prefer to be told what to think and find it acceptable to remain generically restrained there, safe under the drab umbrella of the socially approved thoughts of one such as Aristotle. His astute philosophies echo down from a mighty sterile throne atop a tall well. The trouble is, his focus seems to lean heavily on the faculty of human logic rather than on all of the useful and pertinent human faculties as a whole—each which is relatively vital in the way of the maturation of a belief to be possible in the informing of and by its parts.

Lao Tzu and Aurelius succeed in reaching deep inside and in connecting with (not merely connecting *to*) the private softer confines of the reader. A meaningful trust is formed. The two greats possess an effortless talent in speaking to their readers as peers; a strong humility is at work that serves to level versus teach, providing a more immediate intimate environment for the permeability of the wisdoms of the messages. Simplicity and brevity are boss as this safe intimacy maintains itself throughout *The Tao Te Ching* and *Meditation's* messages.

Golden is that lesson by itself.

Trouble does stir. It stirs indifferently throughout different spaces and eras permeating like the parasitic spores of relentless ivy into the minds and hearts of men and societies until it boasts of lush wild thicket, burdening the experience of *right* human living. Aurelius' and Lao Tzu's remedies, their distillations about how to truly *live rightly in this world* stir differently. Their instructions possess a more *invisible* quality, an invitation that the reader must work and formulate his/her own opinions to navigate through, or to merely remember for him/herself. For instance, when the following is read the mind must ask *why*. It must peer into itself without knowing exactly *how*:

*"If you will take no notice of all the past, and trust the future to providence, and direct the present only conformably to piety and justice [...] That you may always speak the truth freely and without disguise, and do the things which are agreeable to law and according to the worth of each [...] If, neglecting everything else, you shall respect only your ruling faculty and the divinity within you, and if you shall be afraid not because you must sometime cease to live, but if you shall fear never to have begun to live according to nature—then you will be a man worthy of the universe which has produced you[...] You*

*will cease to wonder at things which happen daily as if they were something unexpected, and to be dependent on this or that (Aurelius, 1640)."*

An encoded Quiet that exists at the very nuclei of the seeds of truth is *rescued* by the Rare Few such as the likes of Lao Tzu and Aurelius. They braved the ultimate risk of electing to comb through the truth of their realities as if carefully grooming a child's new hair, and once having recognized, they shared in quiet the meaning that was churned out into words. In *Eighty-One*, Lao Tzu says, "Truthful words are not beautiful; Beautiful words are not truthful; Good men do not argue; Those who argue are not good; Those who know are not learned; The learned do not know (1610)."

This imagery comes to mind in the intermissions of reading both works:

After a days work, Marcus Aurelius is standing in the middle of a formidable bridge that is still half-built leading out of the Quiet Forest, laying the bedrock to this new Lao Tzu lure—the lure of God, the outlet—aka the outlet that can be called an outlet is not the real outlet, "The name that can be named is not the eternal name (Tzu, 1605)," but the bridge is the interim, the synapse between human travails and yearning for the logic of God or memory of returning to It. Still mid-bridge, Aurelius sighs, standing somberly in earthy day-old sweat, head on fist, to rest at the soft arched crest of it while his worn mind is still able to hear the pulse of the inscriptions that the Quiet Forest had once etched deeply while dancing in his veins. His own sturdy heartbeat rises over the new noise of Rome's humankind that he governs—all of the mad voices of the beehive multiplicatively culminating to a climactic extreme via the insipid trill of their incestuous emptiness that has begun the fever of the heavy germ of false construction that encroaches upon his faculties to burden. He remains unwilling to allow the noise to overtake and suffocate his knowledge of the Quiet Forest by advising,

*“Whatever the external circumfluent vortex whirls round, so that the intellectual power exempt from the things of fate can live pure and free by itself, doing what is just and accepting what happens and saying the truth: if you will separate, I say, from this ruling faculty [the Intellect/God] the things which are attached to it by the impressions of sense, and the things of time to come and of time that is past, and will make yourself like Empedocles’ sphere, all round, and in its joyous rest reposing (Aurelius, 1640-41).”*

The beauty of this is that it sparks images of a fetus being strong because it is so gentle and pure. With the similar conviction, Lao Tzu’s *Twenty-Eight* states, “Be the stream of the universe; Being the stream of the universe, Ever true and unswerving, Become as a little child once more [...] Know honor, yet keep humility (1608).”

Lao Tzu and Aurelius owned a thirst beyond human flesh’s normal freezer temperature I.Q. levels regarding Nature/God/The Way being right medicine to man’s mental matrices and illusional constructs that sadly, consequentially result in the need to build an earthen Bridge to reach the sky-Gate. Inquisitive about how to make sense of or make sense of not being able to make sense of what exactly goes on beneath the countless faux surfaces to which sheople attach and allot meaning to, they touched on nature being the great womb to which one should return to be advised or to remember when they can not hear the Quiet Forest anymore.

*“The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return. They grow and flourish and then return to the source. Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature. They carry yin and embrace yang. They achieve harmony by combining these forces (Tzu, 1606-09).”*

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu seems to convey that if a human thinks that s/he can fully describe or name God/The Way, then it would render God/The Way to being as finite as human

faculties could see or sense and therefore, not the entirety of God/The Way at all. It implies that the cosmos/God/The Way is and always will be far too large in scope and breadth to be able to see/sense it all that would be necessary to then be able to “call” “it” “something.” What is grappled with is the erroneous reliance on a human being to describe God/The Way. It would be much like considering and then relying on the summation of what the Empire State Building may in its totality be described to be from the squeaking mouth of a mere fire ant while standing proudly at its podium atop his anthill mound. It’s impossible. Knowing this gives perspective.

In his usual steadiness, Lao Tzu invites us to understand that we simply do not possess the actual “apparatus” with these finite senses to be able to take in such magnitude of scope that only if we were to be able to do so would allow us to be able to take a stab at what the heck God/The Way is, was, or might be. Jonah probably couldn’t describe all of the other organs that filled the entirety of the whale from his point of view when he was swallowed and jailed in its stomach either.

In his poem, *One*, Lao Tzu ends with, “Darkness within darkness. The gate to all mystery (1606).” A picture of what energy lies within and far beneath to the *Nth power*, the very most central nucleus of each cell of an encoded seed comes to mind. It looks like a dark “anti-vacuum” of sorts. Maybe there is a *gate*, a portal that lies in wait indeed. Whatever it is, Lao Tzu’s poetic way of going about the introduction of the idea about it marvels.

Both men share the distilled inkling that Nature/God/The Way holds all of the questions and unanswerable answers and when coupled with *God-in-being-as-Intellect* that belongs inherently to each living thing, they suggest that *Nature* equates to the right medicine that may balance man’s defensive fabrications that they handicap themselves in—a deeply encoded

necessary subconscious camouflage for survival by concoction—as one would build tall walls to ensure the enemy stays at bay.

Nature does not like to be told what to do. Both writings decide that Nature is any living thing's true and only Replenisher and of the conditions of this life's unrelinquishing pull on the human spirit. In their knowing, Lao Tzu and Aurelius invite the reader to think on their deductions rather than to merely instruct about them. In lieu of joining the sheople, the unsatisfying mass consciousness of the time periods, and going along in such dark slumber walk while masquerading the planet as living creatures, such Rare Few separate themselves from that while ironically later serving throughout time to console and encourage the very beings who are woven together by the fragile corroded threads of fear that make up the fabric of such a lot, the sheople: the masses who borrow the truths of the Rare Few who dare mightily to go where their shivering skin shied far and away from before.

If sensitively visited with an wide-open heart and emptied mind, a truth beneath these truths also comes to be felt in their messages: Both seemed to have written when or after coming from a state of mind that was consequence of identifying themselves as being incredibly separate from the majority. Anyone who is compelled to write how to live or of the deep questions of which no answers seem to exist in order to soothe himself from the ultimate powerlessness of humans while living, is most probably depressed at one time or another. Due to a myriad of plausible reasons at the times when they inscribed their earnest wisdoms, a quiet ticking is surely at work that clues in on a certain loneliness of each man again and again. This mutual quality of both men having had experienced many exceptional situations seems to have ultimately led to an inner surrender to a remaining worthy confidant: fluid ink and something to record on.



Each man's particular circumstances at such writing times remain an enigma, however, there seemed to have been no human friend who may have been deemed as a safe, worthy, or wise consort enough in whom to enjoy the freedom to thoroughly confess of the prettiest, ugliest and most depressing or joyous truths that their experiences had led them through in order to arrive at such place of final acceptance. There is fortunately always [and sometimes only] ink and paper to lean on to etch one's confidences where they have a better chance at being safely held. For these men, entrusting the page to their knowledge was a loyal treasure chest at the bottom of the ocean that would promise endurance under the auspices of stoic guardianship in order to patiently withstand the unpredictable tides that crash above through scores of choppy and calm years—come what may:

The great sage and kind leader are two of such few of the innately blessed who grasped these things and seemed to have written them down from the private valleys of their own experiences. At the time when ink hit the page/stone/etc., each man seemed to have been coming from a sincerely depressed state of earnest mind and heart but all the while a cool comfort of their acceptance of this fact imbues the messages:

*“In spring some go to the park, and climb the terrace, But I alone am drifting, not knowing where I am. Like a newborn babe before it learns to smile, I am alone, without a place to go [...] Oh, I drift like the waves of the sea, without direction, like the restless wind. Everyone else is busy, But I alone am aimless and depressed. I am different. I am nourished by the great mother (Tzu, 1607).”*

Lao Tzu confesses that he is unlike other sheople because they are jubilant and so contented by the things of this Earth while he misses his Source because the mere things of this Earth have not been satiating to him. The notion that Lao Tzu and Aurelius are depressed when

being possessed to write these things down lest they implode makes more sense than not when ruminating on their writings. Perhaps they were compelled to write what they had learned from this arduous life, and were caught in a realization of a most separate lonesome state or perception of mind that rendered them for whatever their understandable reasons, literally feeling at the polar end of the tether from the sheople.

A reason the reader knows that the Greats are restless but already know how to endure in the end is due to the crystallized wisdom shared that makes profound sense and the usual return to tie the end of the circle together. After grappling over why the gods would have “overlooked (1641)” the fact that bad and good men “should be completely extinguished (1641),” as if they each deserved different treatment in the matter, Aurelius reassures with, “Be assured that if it ought to have been otherwise, the gods would have done it [...] and if it were according to nature, nature would have had it so (1641).”

Aurelius seems aggravated after having been through a probable dark night of the soul when he opens up proposing, “I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinion of himself than on the opinion of others [...] So much more respect have we to what our neighbors shall think of us than to what we shall think of ourselves (1641).”

This certain *separateness-by-brilliance* surely only served to ripen their wisdom. Throughout, accepting their lot and thorough lessons, they were made to lean on only what a sage or good leader might when no one else sufficed: They trusted ink and blank parchment or stone at such poignant junctures in their quests to unselfishly share the truth as they knew personally from enduring their human lives in these clay Earthen bodies.

The roomy messages imparted were enough to get one's own deductions percolating. The mind ended up chewing them like bubblegum, blowing up round pink balloons that form and pop out of existence, only to fill up the next when arriving at such sporadic conclusions about how most "things" sheople consider to be goals/aims—happiness, sex, money. Things like this arose as lessons learned from the texts and then sort of plugged in...

Happiness is not an end aim to be had; it is merely a byproduct of living a good life. Physical sex is not an end, nor to be understood or enjoyed as the mere act in itself; it is rather an apex of physical exchange that in purest form might represent the sudden expression of every spiritual, mental, and emotional faculty that has been shared, formed, woven and held by two dancing helixes ... that make up two mortal clay vessels who have professed love and faith to one another that reserve room for the spaces between. Money? If money were the end of an aim, one should be able to breathe it. Lao Tzu and Aurelius peel back the blanket rendering shallow "goals" to reveal the motor of any such illusion instead.

It is brave to shake faulty foundations of the sheople. A Rare Few in this world seem to behold the talent of striking some kind of divine balance in keeping sheople ears open while still serving up succinct truth...in a divinely different manner that allows for permeability and yet without need for permission from anyone. Most human beings dare not to peer into the nuts and bolts of why things work as they do. What if they *found* out?! Most do not even know how and why their cars, bodies, or clocks function in fear that if something were to go wrong, they would possess the knowledge of how and why and then have to take on the burden of responsibility in fixing the thing—the same burden and responsibility that Lao Tzu and Aurelius took on in spades. Sadly, sheople are addicted to religions, but are not *spiritual* in the least. This incessant skating on surfaces and filling in holes due to fear of delving into the kernel of a matter has

caused epidemics of social insanity, bred inanity, and left such deep thirst in its wake that no existing “modern” society of which most are aware today dares to function according to this kind of most central responsibility—the kind that Aurelius and Lao Tzu’s *Nature* intends.

The potent messages of Lao Tzu and Aurelius whisper to the innermost self in order that they may shed a small light that still must be passed on in hopes of setting this blind world ablaze one torch at a time. If no one dares to light their very own torch in the way of being responsible to grow the truth of the sacred truth flames, then what good is it to continue tossing the hot potato around if never daring to clutch it safely and protectively into one’s own deep pocket?

Potatoes grow cold quickly from hand to hand—in this way they warm no one eventually. The heat is rendered wasted, just like the Rare Few’s words go missing in dusty pretty books that remain as dead as the person who does not open them to ponder the words they contain in their quiet bookshelves. The warmth, the initial flame has to remain in one’s own pocket for a spell so that the hand warms enough in order that it may brave to go about setting his/her own torch to wick in surmising original truth. “Ever desireless, one can see the mystery; Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations (Tzu, 1605).”

Knowledge seems not a final aim or anything to be had in the least either. A horizon never reached, it shimmers on and on like gilded petals of gold as an ideal that one may never grasp with both hands. The experience that brings the byproduct of wisdom seems to exceed any kind of knowledge that one may glean from any book in the end. It must be felt and known by and through all human faculties. We only ever can seem to know our very own experience in this body and mind while recording its thread through this thing we know as “time,” and yet, no one else can ever know or tell another’s truths, nor ever truly be able to know each single step of

The Way that led individuals to arrive at such private epiphanies for themselves. "...What shall be a complete drama is determined by him who was once the cause of its composition, and now of its dissolution: but you are the cause of neither (Aurelius, 1642)."

*"How small a part of boundless and unfathomable time is assigned to every man?...for it is very soon swallowed up in the eternal...And how small a part of the whole substance?...and how small a part of the universal soul?...and on what a small clod of the whole earth you creep?...Reflecting on all this consider nothing to be great, except to act as your nature leads you, and to endure that which the common nature brings (Aurelius, 1641-42)."*

This anthill will do well to dare to forever look up and all around and only ever claim to know for very certain—that it is... but an anthill. No matter the hip haste and cacophony of artifice that the hill may conjure to sing, Lao Tzu and Aurelius may have told a child this:

An ant should do good things for its hill, but must build its very own Bridge to the Gate.

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