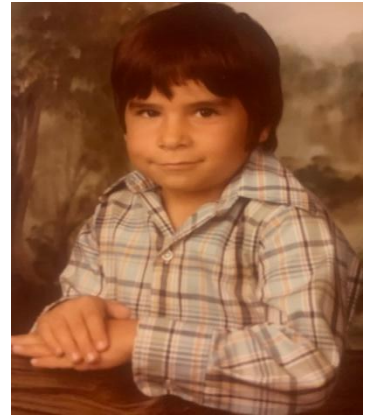


# The Philosopher

I'm not sure it's fair to say I was born a philosopher, but I was somehow born with the tendency to become one. When our father died when we were young, my brothers and I suffered the same trauma and yet we responded to it in very different ways.

If I could give a flash characterization of how my brothers were affected by this event, I would say my older brother's 'Confucian' instincts kicked in. As the oldest sibling, he became the man of the house. I would say he was driven by a profound sense of DUTY. He was and is very devoted to principles, doing the right thing, keeping the extended family in contact with one another.



My youngest brother, perhaps not being old enough to have had any real sense of a stable family unit, was driven by the value of FAMILY. He met the love of his life when he was quite young and he built - by himself with a little help from his friends - a beautiful house on a hillside not far from where I live in Willisburg, Kentucky. Here he and his wife would raise two beautiful daughters.

For me, the tragedy seemed to totally change the way my brain worked; whereas before I was a relatively 'normal' and carefree child, I was now full of questions.

I can remember going back to school and feeling profoundly disconnected from everything going on. I stopped learning. My brain simply stopped processing information in that way. At this tender age I knew nothing about the ideas of *unlearning*, of *deconditioning*, of *abiding in a state of not knowing* that would fascinate me in the years to come. This was a purely instinctual reaction. Where just a few weeks ago I was mindlessly and quite happily going along with the program, now it all seemed like a conspiracy against admitting to ourselves and to one another the truth that we are all going to die.

I can remember learning the names of various cloud types: Stratus, Cirrus, Cumulus Cumulonimbus. After class we went outside for recess. I looked up at this great, white, puffy, billowy, cottony mass against the blue sky and something inside me simply said, "Nah. I think I'll pass on the whole knowledge thing." Though I could see that there was something that was gained by using these labels, I could also see, in a way that few around me seemed to get, that something was lost. An immediacy was lost. A naive kind of intimacy was lost. This naive intimacy had something to do with the meaning of life and death. It also seemed like knowledge without some deeper wisdom was dangerous. It was like giving sharp tools to a baby. Knowledge also had an insidious way of diverting our attention from the great mystery. This love and respect for mystery has remained at the center of my life. The mechanical kind of education I received in my youth just felt like a kind of torture. Something was just not right. It was like people weren't really thinking about how they were living. They were merely living that way because 'everyone else' was - that is, it was a kind of mindless conformity to a pattern that they neither chose nor thought deeply about.



Of course, being raised in the church, I became very interested in what it had to say about this question: what kind of life makes sense given our inevitable demise? I can remember asking my mom if Methodists were going to hell. There was a Methodist church next to the Baptist church we attended, and I could see some of my school mates playing out in the front yard. “I don’t really know,” she responded. I can’t remember if I said anything else, but I can remember thinking “What do you mean you don’t know? How can you be so nice to their parents at the supermarket and talk about little league when the fate of their soul might be at stake?”

A few days later I had an interesting experience. My mom had forgotten her purse (I can remember it was a kind of woven, wooden purse with paintings of flowers on it) on the Church steps while we were in the middle of an incredibly intense thunderstorm! As my mom ran in the rain to pick up her purse, the thunder boomed so loudly that it rattled the inside of the car and an incredible bolt of electricity blasted through the sky. I had a kind of awakening.

Here were these two buildings that were somehow ‘houses of God’. According to their belief, all of the members of one were going to Heaven for eternity and all the members of the other were (possibly?) going to burn in Hell for eternity... and yet eclipsing them both was this incredible power.

And this power was REAL! That is, it was not the product of humans. It was not built by human hands or concocted by human minds or dependent upon human belief. It dawned on me that, if there is a God, this God cannot be contained by any human structure or institution, or concept. After all, humans, though basically pretty nice overall, are far too fallible and mechanical to be given such a responsibility, aren’t we?

Anyway, it’s not like I rejected everything in the church. There were moments, despite the sectarianism and conformity, where something else entirely would break through. There were moments of ecstasy and spiritual communion. Moments of profound beauty, compassion, and love. And, of course, there were some of the intriguing words of the bible:

“If you belonged to the world the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.”

And,

“I have conquered the world.”

I knew well how sectarian pride interpreted these words. “We”, that is, “our little group” are the good guys and every other group is the ‘world.’ However, it was clear to me that the ‘world’ was the mindless conformity, the materialism, the tendency to be spiritually asleep that plagues every society, religion and institution. No one is immune from it based merely upon which group they identify with. In fact, our narrow identifications and the limited love, values, and behaviors that flow from these narrow

identifications ARE the world. However, the question remained: *“Who or what is this ‘I’ who has conquered the world?”*

Pursuing this question would take me far beyond the comparative study of Baptist and Methodist beliefs. I became interested in the entire field of philosophy and religious studies. Both within and beyond academia, I studied with Sufi Masters, Zen Masters, taiji Masters, Native American elders and a host of interesting, independent philosophers who had dedicated their lives to pursuing this same question. I found nearly all traditions acknowledge an inner reality, an essential reality, an ultimate reality, which is beyond human convention and the identifications of the human ego. That is, this ‘I’, this internal principle that is ‘beyond the world’, is not the product of a particular religion or culture. Rather, it transcends and predates all religions, cultures, and forms of social conditioning. It is a spiritual truth that is open to humans of any culture, yet cannot be monopolized by any culture. It is **before and beyond** what we typically take to be ‘knowledge.’ Finding this ‘I’ means finding that dimension of self that is not the product of conditioning. It is not dependent upon what others say or think. It is a strange fact at the very center of our being—a kind of bedrock of reality. It is something pure, whole, unconditional, irreducible, unfragmented.



This makes the whole thing very interesting. It has allowed me to encounter, in the most conservative students in a Kentucky seminary and in the most ‘out there’ sadhus along the banks of the Ganges, the same ‘Self.’ This Self has never been touched by any form of influence. It is unconditional. It has ‘conquered the world.’ When two people meet as this one Self, as this one spirit, they experience an ecstasy that transcends all divisive sectarianism. It is deeper than the experience of ‘two different psychologies’ agreeing about something. It is deeper than two people ‘belonging to the same religion.’ Here the two people touch, in their inner unity, the ‘peace which passes all understanding.’ They are that peace.

I have to say that these meetings in spiritual communion are to me the most important thing in life. They ARE real life. It is not just that we ‘feel good’ when we meet in this way. Here, we touch REALITY. When humans meet beyond the divisions that would separate them from one another they enter into the fullness of who and what they are. Our conventional, pragmatic, economic and political way of relating to one another pales by comparison. It is really kind of grotesque. However, I would not have made it to the half century mark if I had not developed some humility and sense of humor in this regard. Humility in acknowledging all those aspects of myself that still move against this kind of unity. Humor in the sense that Don Juan meant when he said to Carlos somewhere

*“You can either cry or you can laugh. My body prefers to laugh...”*

Taiji can be studied by anyone. The techniques are great for physical and emotional healing, finding balance, opening the joints, learning to calm the mind and relax the body, learning to generate power, and a host of other benefits. It need not involve the quest for the ultimate meaning of life. However, given its meditative nature, it has historically been linked to ancient Chinese philosophical traditions referred to by scholars as ‘philosophical Daoism.’

This is a term used to differentiate it from the heavily ritualistic forms of 'religious Daoism.' Though this may seem odd to some Westerners, in traditional Chinese culture the development of martial skill is seen as a kind of spiritual practice and way of self-cultivation. The Chinese monastic traditions at Wudang and Shaolin involve rigorous training in the martial arts. In these cultures, the highest level of practice is a spiritual practice.



At this level, taiji is a way of coming into contact with the deeper reality mentioned above. It involves meditation, contemplation, qigong, neigong, and taijigong as a means of harmonizing body, energy and spirit. In this section, I will try to present and explain some of the philosophical concepts that inform the practice of taiji. These are just presented for your consideration. You are not asked to believe anything. I am not a philosophical Daoist in any official sense. Don't know if there is such a thing. You are invited here to investigate what is said and see if you find any usefulness or truth in it.... enjoy your training!