

1990 Distinguished Professor - Dr. William Slaughter
(English and Foreign Languages)
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THE POLITICS OF MY HEART

Every teacher needs a teacher. I don't know much, but that much I know. Mine, for now, is Lao-Tse, the original Taoist monk, whose name, in fact, means "Old Master," and whose book, the TAO TE CHING, which translates as "the Way of virtue's," is one of the greatest books China has ever given the world.

In the TAO TE CHING, Lao-Tee says: "Those who know keep nothing. / Those who know keep silence." And I've said, in a poem of my own, "I much prefer silence to speech." History has it I'm supposed to say something unforgettable, wise, on an occasion such as this one. But I know myself well enough to know that I don't have the "usual" commencement address in me. Is there anything I can say, or not say, that you'll remember, and take with you, as you move on to the next part of your life?

The neglected American poet Robert Sward said something in a poem of his that I've not forgotten. He was teaching an English class, not unlike my own, at Cornell University--in Ithaca, New York--one fall, not too long ago, when he ran out of things to say. No words came. His students trusted him, though, and carried on as if nothing were wrong. Sward showed up for class each day, that fall, and stood in silence before his students, who showed up, too, and who trusted him.

"It's all right," Sward says in his poem. "They have faith in me. They know that one day will speak again."

Suppose I were to stand in silence before you this morning. Not the artful silence of John Cage sitting at his unprepared piano in Carnegie Hall, but the moral silence of silence itself...in which you hear your own heart, with the great heart, beating. Would you trust me then? Would you remember what I hadn't said?

Among others, my colleague Gerson Yessin has been on this platform before me. He didn't keep silence. Rather, he played Chopin, and his hands knew everything. These summer commencements, when one of us, your teachers, "addresses" you, are more than special occasions...at least from our point of view. Gerson was sitting in then, as I am standing in now, for all the truly distinguished teachers you've had at UNF.

Let me play for or you the piano without hands. The tongue, language itself...parabolic and ironic--is my instrument. You can hear what I'm doing with it, or not doing with it, if you listen to me with your inner ears.

(The echo of the said is the unsaid.) We do what we can, don't we? And what I do is poetry.

In an essay called "literature as Equipment for Living," Kenneth Burke says that poems have always had "the force of proverbs." They help us live our lives, he says, and I believe him. Because they've helped me live mine. What wisdom, if any, there is in me...is in me because of poetry.

As you know, from the program and from President Herbert's introduction, I lived and worked in China for a year...before the Tiananmen Square Massacre. The poems I'm giving voice to, this morning, are poems written out of my China experience. China has made me see the world, and myself in it, differently. China has become my metaphor.

How I Became A Taoist Monk

I made my way
to China,
to Laoshan Mountain

where, I had heard,
Taoist monks
still lived,

but they didn't.
So there I was,
all by myself,

with no one
to talk to,
nothing to do.

And there
I still am,
years later,

my beard
turning white
like snow

on the mountain.
It's all right.
I have patience

enough to wait
for them
the Taoist monks.

Expecting them
any day now,
I'm comfortable

with what
I don't have,
believing

everything.
So far as I know
I'm the only one.

A Taoist Monk-like Lao-Tse-has much to teach us about that which is good and true, beautiful and useful. We need to know that climbing the mountain and finding ourselves "with no one / to talk to, nothing to do" is an exercise--a discipline--that will richly pay us. We need to know that taking time out from the work that, by "virtue" of our ethic, both justifies and defines us will add an otherwise missing dimension to our lives. The first and last principle of Taoism is, in Chinese, wu wei; in English, "do nothing." As Lao-Tse says: "If nothing is done, / then all Will be well." We need to know how to waste time. We need to know that hanging up on the dangling, all too often pointless, conversation we are party to Will make the silence that Lao-Tse so highly recommends available to us. We need to know that "having patience enough," being "comfortable" with what we "don't have, " and " believing i everything " are sustainable life positions. Because they are. Trust me...unless I give you reason not to.

In China there is, every spring, a festival called Ching Ming, during which the Chinese practice their own latter-day version of ancestor worship. "The Chinese have always pictured the afterlife as rather like this life, and have therefore generally expected it to be staffed by bureaucrats" ...by civil servants in the sky (THE HEART OF THE DRAGON). During Ching Ming, the Chinese feed their dead; they carry to their ancestral burial places favorite foods. Gravestone turned banquet table. What more could a ghost want? A meal that makes being dead worthwhile.

Hungry Ghosts

All the men I've ever been
I still am. Hungry ghosts

are in me, each one
with his own name,

fault, apology, dream.
Every night, their mouths

open wide, and I feed them.
I always feed them

Which I is I? They all are. That's what "hungry Ghosts" is about: owning up to the fact that we're all divided within and against ourselves and recognizing that division as both necessary and virtuous. How far we are from who we are and how we want to live, if we starve our hungry ghosts when we really should be feeding them. Their mouths, open wide, remind us of all the possible lives we have in us...other than the one we're living. "All the men I've ever been I still am."

One of my ghosts, at lease, is Chinese. I call him, respectfully, Professor Xu, but he still haunts me. To make sense of him--his story, which I'm about to tell you--perhaps you need to know some things about him. Like: He teaches at Beida, Beijing University. French language and literature. Flaubert's MADAME BOVARY is his favorite book; Emma Bovary, his favorite character. He refused to participate in Chairman Mao's infamous "sparrow war." And his wife, persecuted by the Red Guard during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, drowned herself in Weiming Hu (No Name Lake) on the Beida campus.

Professor Xu / Madame Bovary / Sparrow War

Without his wife,
Who drowned her name
In No Name Lake,
1968,

Professor Xu
Is still himself.

Just now
In a small courtyard
--his memory garden,
he calls it-
among sunflowers,
taller than he is,
the only private property
history has left him,

Professor Xu is doing
What he has always done
There. He is

Remembering...
His student days
In France
Before the Great War.
(There have been
so many lesser wars
since.) How

he learned the language
reading Flaubert.

Language...
A crackled kettle
On which we beat out
Tunes for bears
To dance tom
While all the time

we long to move
the stars to pity.

As Professor Xu
remembers it,
Chairman Mao declared
one of those lesser wars
on China's sparrows, 1956...

Listening
with his inner ears,
he hears his countrymen
making political noises
on cracked kettles
too, until
the sparrows, guilty
of eating China's grain,
fall to earth, exhausted.

Home. Where is home?

Professor Xu, longing
in his memory garden,
is home.

An innocent sky
full of sparrows
by day
and stars by night...
unmoved by language,
without pity. Is home.

Professor Xu, loving
Emma Bovary like a wife.

Professor Xu isn't real; I imagined him. I made his story up. The reason I'm telling it to you is because I love him. I love him because he loved--he really loved--his wife, and because, mourning her still after all these years, he loves Emma Bovary "like a wife." (Professor Xu, I like to think, is as real as she is, although he'll never be as well known as she is.) There's a lesson here, is there not? Like The Taoist Monks and the Hungry Ghosts, Professor Xu has something to teach us, doesn't he? And it has nothing to do with power; it has to do with love. With otherness. How to get beyond ourselves, how to project ourselves-- sympathetically--into other bodies, other lives, how "to see and suffer" ourselves in other beings at last (Theodore Roethke). Professor Xu teaches us that there is virtue in loving others enough.

The politics of a man who writes poems are always the politics of his heart. Or, in William Carlos Williams' saying of it: "Poetry is a rival government, always in opposition to its cruder replicas." We live in the World, not out of it, and the world in our time has a very particular moral climate. We must concern ourselves as much with inner as with outer weather. My instrument--the tongue, language itself--is parabolic and ironic. Sometimes the irony is the irony of history. "China: A Parable" has a story in it...not unlike Professor Xu's. But it has a story, with considerable irony, given the Tiananmen Square Massacre, behind it too.

Statues of Chairman Mao are everywhere to be found in China. He had them built to scale, in his own lifetime, which is to say: They are magnified, as his sense of himself (as the Last Emperor) was, out of all proportion. I was in Chengdu the capital of Sichuan province. Walking about, found myself in the center of the city, surrounded by municipal buildings, done in the Russian style of the 1950s, and in the presence of yet another statue of Chairman Mao. But this one was different: this one was scaffolded as if something were about to happen to it. I Wondered What... and wrote "China: A Parable."

On the same day, all over China, scaffolds go up and tarpaulins come down around the remaining statues of Chairman Mao--erected by Chairman Mao, in honor of Chairman Mao--the Great Helmsman.

We know that something is going on in there,
but we don't know what...looking on in wonder.

My guess is as good as any.

Deng Xiaoping has retired, but Deng Xiaoping has not retired. He is still China's puppet-master; he still pulls China's strings. When Deng dies--he's in his 80s--all over China, on the same day, the tarpaulins will be lifted, the scaffolds removed.

And lot Chairman Mao will have become...Deng Xiaoping
Even as I write this, the Workers are chipping away at Mao
with their hammers and chisels. Deng is a smaller man
than Mao was. "He's in there somewhere, we know he is."
We hear the workers sag, chipping away.

What I conclude from this is: China's next "real" leader
will have to be a smaller man than Deng Xiaoping, and Deng
Xiaoping is a small man, so the workers can still chip away
stone and get at him.

As the people in China get bigger, the leaders get smaller
...until no stone is left, until they're not there. At all.

If China is more than China, if China is a metaphor, then my parable is not just about the
Chinese; it's about the rest of us as well. What will we stand, and what fall, for? Where
will we draw the moral boundary lines in the institutional and relational aspects of our
lives? Will we ever, ever, take our politics to heart and act out our lives only and always
in good faith? After all, we are THE PEOPLE and whether we know it or not, whether
they--the Chairman Maos of the world, and they are everywhere to be found, you know
them as well as I do, write both large and small, but most of them not yet "chipped" in
stone--whether they know it or not, the only real power there is...is in US. What will we
do with that knowledge and trust?

The T'ang Dynasty poet, Tu Fu, has a poem--"By the Winding River"--in which he says:

All creatures pursue happiness.
Why have I let an official
Career swerve me from my goal?

I suspect Tu Fu always knew what I'm still trying, hard, to find out: There's more to life
than work. Who you are and how you get your living is not the same thing. There's plenty
of time to be had, but no money to be made, that really matters. "The true cost of a thing
is how much life you have to spend in the getting of it" (Thoreau). Risk is all there is.
"Try to be one on whom nothing is lost" (Henry James). Do not spend yourself carelessly.
Live your life so that--at the end of looking back on it--you'll not hear yourself say:
"What have done with my life? What have I done with my life?" Don't take yourself quite
so seriously Comic relief from the tragic sense of life is yours for the not asking. Beyond
the primal scream is the primal laugh. Laughter and prayer are twin sisters. That's some
of what I've learned since I made my way to China, climbed Laoshan fountain, and
became a Taoist monk.

I've spent my life unpreparing myself; I think almost ready. Silence...is unforgettable,
wise.

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