

The Greek, Heraclitus, The Chinese, Confucius and e e cummings

past, present and future

The Mohawk indians speak of the need to care for children seven generations from the present; the Chinese celebrate the birthday of a person from the moment of conception within the womb and then again on the day of birth - both cultures focus on the gift of life and the gift of being alive. Anglo occidentals, on the contrary, talk about burying the past, forgetting about the past and looking to the future. What, if any, is the truth in these statements; what, if any, is the relationship of us *now*, as we are, to our *past* and *future*? The Puritans, after all, fled both from a form of government and limitations upon religious expression, so their past was expendable and their future was expansive. Puritans up-rooted themselves in order to replant their seeds so they harbored a contempt for history and to this day minimize the importance of history. This Puritan distaste for the past is a principal reason why Americans in general and the American public school in particular disregards history to the point of replacing it with so-called “social studies”. Besides, this Puritan heritage emphasizes the “second coming of Christ” to be the most significant and important aspect of human living, so even the present is not as important since Christ’s immanent “second coming” is the focus of such Puritan life!

But, if we start with the Greek word for what we translate as “truth”, we will have a common basis from which to start; the Greek word is *aletheia*, literally, *a*, the Greek language privative, meaning *not* and *lethein*, a Greek word, meaning four things: *to forget*, *to hide*, *to bury*, and *to cover up*. Thus, the Greeks look upon what we anglo occidentals call “truth” as what humans do not forget, do not hide, do not bury and do not cover up. So, the Greeks require humans to question themselves rather than to claim an answer such as “the truth.”

Indeed, this Greek view of not-forgetting is only one side of the Greek cultural coin; the other side is the Greek word *oein*, the verb *to be* which becomes the English word with an aspirant “h,” namely, *honest*. Now, Confucius makes honesty the foundation of human living when he says:

Book VI, 17

The Master said, "Man's very life is honesty, in that without it he will be lucky indeed if he escapes with his life."

Both the Greek and Chinese cultures emphasized the fact that the truth of virtue is a lived experience and finds its basis in a human person's being honest and, therefore, being truthful with oneself and thereby acting truthfully to others. The sixth century B.C. Ephesian Heraclitus stated it best as he wrote in his *Fragments*:

10. To be temperate is the greatest virtue. Wisdom consists in speaking and acting the truth, giving heed to the nature of things.

This view reflects a fundamental difference between the Greek and occidental culture. The Greeks look upon "truth" as something to which they conform by not-forgetting and by being honest with oneself, whereas occidentals view "truth" as something which we state, even create.

The Greek views of opinion and knowledge reinforce this finding. *Doxa* means opinion in Greek, however, two kinds of opinion are possible, *ortha doxa*, or, *right opinion* and *pheude doxa*, or, *wrong opinion*. A person's opinion is *right* when that person knows *that something is true*, but not why that something is true; a person's opinion is *wrong* when what the person claimed to be true is not true, even if the person gives a reason. *Episteme*, on the other hand, meant what we occidentals call *knowledge*. The Greeks, however, characterized knowledge as resulting from knowing the four kinds of *causes* (*aitia*) which made up any present real being, the *formal*, *material*, *efficient* and *final* causes. On the contrary, knowledge for occidentals, means in general what is true, now and forever and thus, is our equivalent to the *truth*, something positive which we create, possess and, therefore, control. Indeed, after Frances Bacon's *Novum Organum*, *New Organ*, we occidentals have confined our "best" knowledge, which we call "scientific," to the knowledge of two causes, the *material* and *efficient* because these are the only ones we can measure with the instruments we have available. e e cummings provides two poems which describe this anglo occidental attitude about time.

when god decided to invent
he took one breath
bigger than a circus tent
and everything began

when man decided to destroy himself
he took the was of shall
and finding only why
smashed it into because

Cummings contrasts God's breathing whereby creation results (echoing *The Genesis'* account (*Book I, Chapter I*) with man's self-destruction through rationalization. Cummings comments that "rational" humans look at "was" and "shall" seeking "why" and then look for "because," literally, as an excuse or explanation for "why." But, "was" and "shall" are the past and future tenses of the verb "to be," or "is," the transitive verb, so the "was" and "shall" depend for their meanings on the verb "is." Thus, grammatically, the past and the future depend upon and derive their meanings from the present tense, "is." Indeed, the present is the effect of the past and the cause of the future because the present is all we humans have available to us.

Indeed, if we reflect upon the essence of being alive, we find the ingestion of a breath to be its source; as a matter of fact, any given human being contacts being alive only by the ingestion of each breath, so we humans exist only in the present action of breathing! All past breaths are exhaled and all future breaths are non-existent! This self-reflection puts the lie to any thoughts about the past or hopes for the future! Neither the past nor the future exist for a living being. Only the present, or is exists and this present is the only time a human contacts being alive. Actually a mythical story from India of "the eye of the bird" expresses this truth:

Long ago in India, there lived a martial arts teacher named Drona. He ran an academy in the middle of the forest where he taught the art of archery. Students traveled for miles and miles to learn from him. A boy named Arjuna wanted to be the best archer in the world. So he decided to study at Drona's academy. He lived in the cottage for students. Drona showed his students how to hold a bow and arrow. He told them to focus, "Look at where you want your arrow to go. Nowhere else." He told them to concentrate, "Think only of what you want your arrow to do.

Nothing else." Arjuna listened intently. He practiced and practiced and practiced. One night while Arjuna was eating his dinner, a gust of wind blew out the oil lamp. Arjuna continued eating.

"I can eat in the dark because I know where my mouth is," he said to himself, "I don't need to look at anything else." He decided to practice archery in the dark. He re-lighted the lamp and used it as a target. He thought, "I know where my target is and I don't need to look at anything else." He picked up his bow and arrows and began shooting. TWANG!

TWANG! The sound of bow strings filled the air. When Drona heard the sound, he came out of his cottage. The sight of Arjuna practicing archery delighted him. He blessed Arjuna, saying "May your arrows never miss their targets."

Soon other students grew jealous of all the attention Arjuna was getting." Why do you think Arjuna is the best among us all?" they asked the teacher. That evening Drona made an announcement. "Tomorrow, there will be an archery competition to find out the best archer," Drona said. "When the sun climbs over the horizon, be ready with your bows and arrows."

The students polished their bows. They sharpened their arrows. Next morning they gathered in the yard. Glossy bows and pointed arrows gleamed in the sun. The wind was still but the students' hearts fluttered with excitement. Drona stepped out. In his hands was a bird made of clay. He laid it on a tree far from them. "See that clay bird perched on the tree ahead of us? Aim at its eye," he said. Then he called the first student. The student plucked an arrow from the quiver, placed it on the bow, and pulled the string. "What do you see ahead of you?" Drona asked. "I see the sun, the clouds, the trees," the student replied as he released the string. The arrow shot forward and landed yards away from the tree.

The second student took his position. He plucked an arrow from his quiver, placed it on the bow, and pulled the string. "What do you see ahead of you?" Drona asked. "I see the tree, the branches, the leaves," the student replied as he released the string. The arrow shot forward and landed near the roots of the tree.

The next student came forward, plucked an arrow from his quiver, placed it on the bow, and pulled the string. "What do you see ahead of you?" Drona asked. "I see the bird, its legs, its wings," the student replied as he let the string go. The arrow shot forward and grazed the wings of the bird.

Finally, it was Arjuna's turn. He plucked an arrow from his quiver, placed it on the bow, and pulled the string. "What do you see ahead of you?" Drona asked. "I see the eye of the bird," Arjuna replied. "What else do you see, Arjuna?" Drona asked. "Nothing. I only see the round

black eye of the bird," Arjuna replied as he released the string. The arrow shot forward with a swoosh. It pierced the center of the eye of the clay bird.

Now, taking a cue from Arjuna and applying this cue to human biology, we reflect that our breathing and our eating occur in the present, as do all our organ operations and each of our sensations: I see, hear, taste, smell, touch and feel NOW, in the present. Even when we remember a past sickness or pain, or conversation, the remembering is NOW, in the present; the same is true when we talk about or look forward to a future event, that is, we do so in this present! We say, for instance, "I do not remember what I forgot" and that "remember" occurs in the present; or we say, "I hope we can go to the park tomorrow," but such 'hope' is a present action. Furthermore, nothing our autonomic nervous system acts or performs is past or future: our pulse beats in the present, as does our heart. Indeed, the German tradition reacts to a sneeze with *Gott segne dich*, or "God bless you". The reason for such a reaction is that people thought the human heart stopped when one sneezed, so "God bless you" is a prayer that the sneezer does not cease breathing and the sneezer's heart continues to beat!

So, if each of us is Arjuna, one's person is the arrow and one's breathing is "the bird's eye"!

Yet, the present is what we "rational" humans avoid the most, looking to the past as the excuse for the way we are and viewing the future as the one way we can escape the way we are. Oh, yes, we are mortal and, as Tolstoy wrote:

Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying and he was in continual despair. In the depth of his heart, he knew he was dying, but not only was he not accustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not grasp it. The syllogism he had learned from Kiezwetter's Logic: 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore, Caius is mortal,' had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius - man in the abstract - was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a mamma and a pappa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs and delights of childhood, boyhood and youth. What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his

mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius?...Such was his feeling. (chapter vi, p.131)

Ivan Ilych reflected:

If I had to die like Caius, I should have known it was so. An inner voice would have told me so, but there was nothing of the sort in me and I and all my friends felt that our case was quite different from that of Caius. And now here it is"! he said to himself. "It can't be. It's impossible! But here it is.

E.e. cummings mocks such a rational attitude like Ivan Ilych's within his poem about "little Effie's head" and the human behavioral habit to avoid the present moment and the requirement to ACT in the present; instead of ACTING IN THE PRESENT, all we do is "subjectively" delay action with six subjective crumbs, dropped from Effie's gingerbread head: may, might, should, could, would and must "who whispered unto God, my name is must and with the others i've been Effie who isn't alive."

Such an attitude is self-destructive because it avoids the one and only thing humans have, namely, the present and the only contact we have with being alive, that is, each ingestion of breath!

We need to re-read the *Tao* of Lao-tzu:

#32

Tao is eternal and has no name.

Though its simplicity seems insignificant, no one in the world can master it.

If kings and barons would hold on to it, all things would submit to them spontaneously.

Heaven and earth unite to drip sweet dew.

Without the command of men, it drips evenly over all.

As soon as there were regulations and institutions, there were names.

As soon as there are names, know that it is time to stop:

It is by knowing when to stop that one can be free from danger.

Analogically, *Tao* in the world may be compared to rivers and streams running into the sea.

Lao-tzu warns humans to live in the present, and not to live in a house of names constructed by mental concepts into physical words; of course, as soon as humans

begin to “think,” they in fact are in the world of “is,” a spiritual world of the Greek *psyche*, meaning “breath,” which we translate as “soul principle”; this *psyche* or *breath* source is posited by the Greeks as present within the *hule*, or matter of every “self-moving” being – naturally, of course, the Greeks concluded all beings who breathed are self-moving! The Oriental world also finds that all breathing beings have *Chi*, the source of spiritual life within them, just to the left of the physical stomach, the source of physical nutrition as the very source of the breathing which underlies, and nurtures physical life itself!

So, both the occidental Greeks and the oriental *Tao*, together with other oriental religious’ texts emphasize the same fact, namely, that humans live in the present; even Kristna spent some eighteen chapters of the *Gita* in an effort to convince Arjuna his war was one of his spiritual immortal soul living within a dying moral body so the human question is: how do humans live in the present since human living is what we do while we are waiting to die? If we live in the present, then we will, as it were, graduate into that same eternal presence when we, in Shakespeare’s words, “slough off this mortal coil”!

here is little Effie's head
whose brains are made of gingerbread
when the judgment day comes
God will find six crumbs

stooping by the coffinlid
waiting for something to rise
as the other somethings did--
you imagine His surprise

bellowing through the general noise
Where is Effie who was dead?
--to God in a tiny voice,
i am may the first crumb said

whereupon its fellow five
crumbs chuckled as if they were alive
and number two took up the song,
might i'm called and did no wrong

cried the third crumb, i am should
and this is my little sister could

with our big brother who is would
don't punish us for we were good;

and the last crumb with some shame
whispered unto God, my name
is must and with the others i've
been Effie who isn't alive

just imagine it I say
God amid a monstrous din
watch your step and follow me
stooping by Effie's little, in

(want a match or can you see?)
which the six subjunctive crumbs
twitch like mutilated thumbs:
picture His peering biggest whey

coloured face on which a frown
puzzles, but I know the way--
(nervously Whose eyes approve
the blessed while His ears are crammed

with the strenuous music of
 the innumerable capering damned)
 --staring wildly up and down
 the here we are now judgment day

cross the threshold have no dread
 lift the sheet back in this way.
 here is little Effie's head
 whose brains are made of gingerbread

Yet, we humans are similar to Effie and her relatives because we continue to rationalize. We continue to avoid the present tense and use the six subjective variables: *may, might, should, could, would and must*. These human types promise the reality of **action**, but produce only verbal appearance. They speak of what they **should** or **must** do; but never do it. They say they **may, might, or would** do something, but do not do so. But, the best avoidance example is those who say they **could** do something yet recuse themselves from performing the action for some "reason." They never **be**, or really exist; they are continuously **becoming**; they reject living in the present and flop about either in the past or the future and never look into the "eye of the bird."

Notwithstanding the fact that human "thinking" is a spiritual activity of the human soul, the Greek and Oriental source of human breathing which occurs in the present, humans become distracted from the present, as e. e. cummings observes because humans take "...the was of shall and finding only why, smashed it into because." So, characteristic of human living is the making of excuses so humans might shrug off responsibility! Humans must live according to the "ear" in the "heart" and love one's "is," oneself in the first and only home each of us is born with and dies with! Only then can any of us to the extent that one loves self can love other human beings.

Now, when we reflect upon the *Myth of Gilgamesh* through the *Tao* and beyond, we find that love is the only continuously present reality – love is in and of the present and has two results: first, since love lives in the present; therefore, love is mercifully responsible. Upnaptisham points Gilgamesh to the presence of Enkidu in his soul as the beloved, thanks to the love of friendship through which they "became human" together and urges Gilgamesh to live in the peace of that presence and not wander the earth in search of a past which does not exist. Given the fact that love makes the beloved present, Upnaptishim declares God to be pure

love and present with Enkidu within Gilgamesh's heart! Lao-tzu calls the reader's attention to the fact that within the ideograph which pictures mercy, in tone poem 67, is the presence of the mother's heart as the source of such mercy; thus, "When Heaven is to save a person, Heaven will protect him through mother's love as mercy," so no one should live without love because such is not the world wherein *Tao* is present, and acts as does a mother's heart of mercy within the human being as beloved by *Tao*. Thus, Lao-tzu urges humans to acknowledge the male, but keep to the female and thereby live in the eternal present:

#28

He who knows male and keeps to the female becomes the ravine of the world.

Being the ravine of the world,

He will never depart from eternal virtue,

But returns to the state of infancy.

He who knows white (*yang* being *light* and, thus *white*), yet keeps to the black (*yin* being *shadow* and, thus *darkness*) becomes the model for the world.

Being the model for the world,

He will never deviate from eternal virtue,

But returns to the state of the non-ultimate.

He who knows glory but keeps to humility becomes the valley of the world.

He will be proficient in eternal virtue,

And returns to the state of un-carved wood.