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# BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH WISE EFFORT

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From <u>Wise Effort: How to Focus Your Genius Energy on What Matters Most</u> by Diana Hill, PhD. A research-backed guide to using your energy wisely, playing bigger, and living with more vitality and impact. Used with the permission of Sounds True.

I live on a little lane with seven other families in seven other houses that share a piece of land. That means when one family uses too much water, we all pay for it, but also when someone needs to be dug out of the mud, we all bring our shovels. If you read our group message thread, it says things like "Rainbow over at my house, come see!" and "Anyone have a tarp? I've got a leak." Each member has a genius energy that they bring to the lane - one neighbor is a genius at administration and keeps our fire insurance up to date, and another is a qigong master and centered us when the city came down hard on unpermitted work. Then there are the dogs, beehives, chickens, owls, bobcats, and coyotes on our lane, which remind us that we are part of a much larger web of connection.

Together, as one Community Body, we have a collective genius that makes us stronger. But that doesn't make it easy to live with each other. We've had our fair share of disagreements; really long, boring meetings; loss; and uncertainty as one family moves out and a new one moves in. The First Noble Truth has echoed through our lane repeatedly, much as it might have in yours: life contains inevitable ups and downs. But with wise effort, we can manage them with less friction and less suffering - including in community.

Wise effort in community helps you carry life's heavy responsibilities differently. There are your daily tasks of living, which seem to be increasingly complex and stressful, but also the big things like health crises, natural disasters, the rising cost of everything, disparity and discrimination in the workplace and the world, and increasing polarity. When you are part of wise communities - ones

that are curious, open, and focusing their energy in the right places—you feel a sense of shared responsibility, taking care of others and being taken care of in return. There's a collective resilience that is stronger than any one of us has on our own.

We all share a street with someone— or an office space, a place of worship, or a pickleball court on Wednesday nights at 6— and we can make these communities stronger. When we live wisely with each other, we can be happier, be freer, and experience incredible energy. It will take wise effort on your part to do this. Joining a community can be scary, and going deeper in your existing ones can make us feel vulnerable. We are asked to open ourselves, to depend on each other, to see our "interbeing," as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it. As much as we like to build walls, fences, and defenses, we are never really separate.

This brings us to the first step in building wiser communities: getting curious about what is making us feel so alone.



#### Get Curious About What's Making You Lonely

You may be surrounded by people and numerous other living beings but still feel lonely. In 2021, 12 percent of US adults reported having no close friends, a sharp increase from 3 percent in 1990. This rise in loneliness has significant health effects. Loneliness elevates your risk of heart attack and stroke and increases the chance of premature death by up to 26 percent.

We are more technologically connected than ever, with some of us having "hundreds of friends," yet many of us feel like we are fending for ourselves. I believe it's more than technology creating this isolation. Many people feel more connected because of technology. In my view, we feel alone because we've lost touch with the truth of our interdependence, our reciprocal relationship with each other.

Think back to being a kid and all the built- in communities you had-kids you played with at recess; rode bikes with in the neighborhood; or met in the park around the corner to gossip, read the latest Baby- Sitters Club book, swap baseball cards, or maybe just lie underneath the trees. Later, you might have joined band, the volleyball team, or student government or signed up to work at the local Humane Society. These were communities where you could go in order to feel less alone. But as we grow older, we play less, work more, and leave little room for conversation or tree gazing. We get on the subway and pull out our phones or look down when we are walking because it's uncomfortable to look someone in the eye. Often we don't notice the people who are headed to the same place or sharing the same space. Research has shown that weak ties are surprisingly beneficial for our well-being. In fact, you're more likely to secure



a job through acquaintances than friends because they connect you to different social circles. Even something as simple as striking up a conversation during a daily commute can boost your happiness level.

Many of us crave communities but don't see that we are already part of them.

So to start, I encourage you to get curious about the communities right in front of you. Look around your workplace, regular sandwich stop, walking trail, gym, or place of worship. Your group texts might say a lot about the communities you are already part of. Endless texts about arranging carpool or golf tee times? A family group text that weaves together cousins in six different time zones? Those are communities.

If you come up short or yearn for a deeper sense of community, make a brainstorm of possibilities. Start with your interests. Do you love music, vintage cars, video games, cooking, or self-help books? Communities can form around any of these passions. But communities don't arise just from shared joys; they can also emerge from shared worries and a desire for change.

What are the issues that weigh on your heart? Do you worry about climate change or the direction of your country's leadership? Do you feel powerless when reading about acts of violence against people of color? Does your stomach drop when you hear news of suffering in places like the Middle East, Sudan, or Congo or when you hear reports of children who are hungry? There are communities working tirelessly to address these challenges, and they need your genius energy.

#### Get Curious About What's Holding You Back

Community satisfies our core human yearning to belong and feel like we matter. And it's this very yearning—the fact that we want to be connected—that makes putting ourselves out there so hard sometimes. You might want to sign up for that cooking class or work in the community garden, but as the date gets closer, you feel more and more anxious until finally you cancel. Or maybe you are in a community where a conflict is brewing, and you bail or get too overbearing because it's too hard to listen to other people's perspective.

Many of us underuse our genius energy in communities because it's uncomfortable to connect. Take my client Daniel, when he was first diagnosed with cancer, he was hesitant to ask for support. He put off joining a cancer support group and didn't want to lean too much on his friends. Daniel had grown increasingly isolated over the years, as many of us have. A survey conducted by the Survey Center on American Life in 2021 found that the percentage of men reporting having no close friends had quintupled over the previous three decades. Daniel found school functions and dinner parties uncomfortable, hated small talk, and often felt that he didn't relate to others. So we began to get curious: what was he afraid of?



Daniel said he feared that his friends wouldn't be able to handle it if he told them about his struggles. That it would make them uncomfortable and they would not be able to offer helpful support. When I suggested a cancer support group, he said he worried that he would be stuck there hating it, not sure that these would be his "people," judging himself and the people who were there. It seemed easier to keep to himself. At the same time, he longed to not be alone in his diagnosis. Plus, as a medic with cancer, he had a unique perspective to offer others, and he could imagine giving and getting support if he could just stop running away from the situation and getting lost in stories.

To figure out your own blocks to being part of communities around you, get curious about the three ways your genius energy can get misdirected: are you running away, holding on too tightly, or stuck in a story? Get a piece of paper and title it "What's Holding Me Back from Community?" Then answer these questions:

Are you running away from discomfort? Do you fear you won't fit in or that you won't be welcomed into the group? Or maybe you don't trust your social skills and fear that you will be awkward? Do you worry about becoming too dependent on others or fear that people will depend too much on you? Does conflict or disagreement in a group make you uncomfortable? What do you do when these fears show up? Do you leave events early, stay in your office, avoid eye contact, remain quiet, say no to social engagements, or blame yourself for having something "wrong with you"? Get curious about the ways you avoid fully participating in groups.

Then there are the things **we hold on too tightly to** that keep us separate. Do you cling to familiar routines and want to stay in your comfort zone? Maybe you won't go to the meetup because it's "past your bedtime" or starts too early in the morning. Or you want to be in control and you feel uneasy about the unpredictability that comes with groups. Possibly you're attached to your identity of "I'm not the type of person who . . ." Or maybe you are presenting yourself with a fake facade, holding too tightly to impressing people, which in turn keeps them at a distance. How is holding on too tightly preventing you from being part of a community?

Finally, groups can be intimidating, breeding grounds for us to **get stuck in stories**. We believe the things our mind is saying, like *They already have their friend group*; *I have nothing to offer. I don't have time. I'm an impostor. No one will care. No one is like me.* And in our world of increasing divisiveness,

we make up stories about others that keep us separate: Oh, you live there? You voted for whom? You drive what type of car? You look like that? We can't be in the same circle. What stories are keeping you separate?



Running away, holding on too tightly, and being stuck in a story blocks us from getting the community we need. Get to know these traps, and when you spot one, see it as a choice point—a chance to do something different and deepen your community with wise effort. Title a new page "Letting Go of My Story About Community" and fill in the following prompts

| If fear weren't such a problem for me, I would  |
|---|
| If I accepted, I could  |
| If I were to loosen the story that they are, I could  |
| Here are Daniel's responses:<br>If fear weren't such a problem for me, I would ask for help when I feel isolated. |

If I accepted that I cannot do this all on my own, I could see that people want to help.

If I were to loosen up the story that somehow asking for help is giving up, I could get some relief during the hardest times and invite people to come to me when I really need it.

#### Open Up to Feelings That Happen in Community

A community functions as a Second Body. If you are part of a Community Body, that means that when one arm is hurting, the whole body feels it. And it means that if you are feeling awkward, vulnerable, or scared of being part of a group, someone else is surely feeling that as well— or did when they first joined.

On my son's first day of preschool, his sixty-five-year-old teacher told me that even after thirty years of teaching, she still can't sleep the night before school starts. It's normal to be anxious about being judged or about starting something new. If you are worried about walking into a new class, joining a support group, moving into a new neighborhood, or your first day back at work after being away, you can bet there's someone else worried right along with you. Your worry actually points to the power of community. Community offers us a chance to see that we all worry about fitting in and gives us a chance to enter the flow of compassion. Start with compassion for yourself, then offer it to others, and finally open up to receive the gifts of being supported by a larger whole. Here are a few practices from the Wise Effort method that can help.

#### **Get Centered**

Take care of your nervous system. The more centered you are, the more likely you are to send those signals to others through what's called "neuroception"— the unconscious ways our bodies communicate with each other through the muscles around our eyes, the tone of our voice, or how we lean in and offer a gentle pat on the back. Taking a few slow breaths or repeating an encouraging mantra— Just this moment, I can handle this—as you walk into a group can do wonders. And if you are already part of a group, start integrating some centering practices to kick off your gathering. Start your meeting with a moment of silence, a group check- in, or a grounding poem or prayer. The most successful long-term communities like twelve- step meetings, Quaker meetings, and even competitive sports teams center themselves as collective before they get started. That's because when the group is centered, members can better hear each other, support each other's geniuses, and work synergistically as a Wise Self.

#### **Drop into Your Body**

Remember that making space for feelings starts with opening to them in your body. This is very helpful if you tend to get in your head in social situations. Stay at the level of pure sensation—what are you feeling in your belly, your chest, your throat? Then, give your feeling a name and ask it what it needs. To remind yourself of all the other times you have done something hard and gotten through? To look for someone who seems on the outskirts and invite them in? This is the flow of compassion: take in compassion from others, give it to yourself, and offer it outward. When you allow compassion to flow in community, it only gets stronger.

#### They Are Just Like Me

One of the most powerful ways to dissolve the illusion of separateness is to remember that despite our many differences, all humans share the same fundamental experiences. We all know vulnerability and joy, we all long to be loved, and we all carry worries that sometimes keep us awake at night. The Just Like Me practice is a simple way to remember that you are not alone in your experience. The next time you feel anxious, disconnected, or out of place, try this practice. Look at the face of someone you love, an acquaintance, a stranger, or even someone you are having a conflict with and remind yourself of the following:

Just like me, this person has things about their life that are hard.

Just like me, this person has hopes and fears.

Just like me, this person was a child once.

Just like me, this person sometimes struggles to connect.

Just like me, this person gets stuck in their head sometimes.

Just like me, this person wants to be seen, heard, and valued.

Just like me, this person longs to be happy.



Just like you, everyone you encounter has a human mind, body, and heart. When you see this in strangers, people you are angry at, or people you are anxious around, it expands you to a Wise Self. Just like me, they struggle, even though their circumstances and history are different than mine.

Tara Brach puts it this way: "Believing we are separate selves is one of our deepest illusions and the source of our suffering. If we try to hide our feelings of unworthiness or unlovableness, we deepen the sense of separation from others. Taking the risk to be vulnerable and real reveals the truth of our belonging— to each other, to ourselves, and to this world we share."

#### Open to the Many Minds in Your Community

We began this book with the metaphor of a bird stuck in a kitchen, flying at a closed window. Its genius energy is headed in the wrong direction. The benefit of being in community is that you don't have to find your way out alone. There are people there who can see things you can't and who have had experiences you lack. And when you open yourself to others' perspectives, you just might find that open door waiting for you to fly out. You've experienced this when your online group is global and you learn how different cultures solve problems. Or when your AA meeting connects you with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, offering you the chance to learn about different traditions, perspectives, and ways of celebrating. Diverse groups shake up our thinking, broaden our worldview, and widen the door out of that little kitchen we've been stuck in. But taking another person's point of view into consideration doesn't always come naturally to us, especially when we are in positions of power.

Take psychologist Adam Galinsky et al.'s "E" test, for example. When researcher participants were asked to "draw the letter E on their forehead," they were more likely draw an E that faced them if they were primed to be in a position of power. You are less likely to consider another person's perspective when you are at the helm. Remember this in the spaces where you have privilege and make an effort to turn your "E" around to understand another person's worldview. Although you will never truly understand what it is like to be another person, we can all use wise effort to open our minds to more perspectives than just our own.

As David Brooks writes, "Remember that the person who is lower in any power structure than you are has a greater awareness of the situation than you do. . . . Someone who is being sat on knows a lot about the sitter— the way he shifts his weight and moves— whereas the sitter may not be

aware that the sat- on person is even there."

Here are some practices from the Wise Effort method that will help you open up to new perspectives in your communities:

- Question your thoughts: To overcome your biases and your tendency to quickly judge others (which we all have), ask yourself, Are you sure? This is especially important if you are leading a community or are in a position of privilege.
- Enter the paradox: Remember that multiple viewpoints can be true at once. A wise person can hold many perspectives and integrate them.
- Remember your Many Bodies: Every person in your group brings a unique genius that will make your organization, team, or family stronger. Make it your job to highlight their energy and encourage them to find ways to put it to use.
- Share your genius: One of the joys of being in community is mutual exchange—feeling like you are giving and receiving. What genius do you have to offer community? When have you felt most connected and valued in a community, and what were you contributing in those moments?



#### Be an Energizing Leader

When Adelle's West African dance teacher moved away, she realized the class wouldn't continue unless someone stepped up. Though hesitant, she leaned into her genius for breaking things down (she is an occupational therapist) and her deep respect for the culture of West African dance. Each Sunday, ten to twenty people gathered on the beach for Adelle's class, where she taught dances like the Yankadi, a sensual Susu dance that starts slow before bursting with vibrant energy. She began each gathering by sharing the cultural roots of the dance, and her gift for simplifying steps made everyone feel like they could follow. At the end of each class, Adelle invited participants to step into the circle for solos, to do their thing. It wasn't just a dance class; it was a place where people of diverse ages and backgrounds could express themselves, leaving sweaty, exhilarated, and feeling that they were part of something bigger.

Adelle is a positive energizer. Emma Seppälä, a leadership researcher at the Yale School of Management, describes leaders like this as akin to the sun, walking into a room and making it glow. When Seppälä empirically examined what makes an effective organization, she found that the most significant predictor of success was not the leader's influence, personality, charisma, or power but rather their relational energy. This capacity to uplift, energize, and renew others makes a team thrive. Research has shown that if you are a positive energizer, your team will have higher performance and innovation; greater cohesion, loyalty, and engagement; enhanced well-being; and even more positive relationships with their families. We all can step up and lead as positive energizers in our communities. Consider where leadership is needed in your community. Are there places where someone needs to step up, and could that person be you? If so, what genius energy can you bring? Are there places where you could be more bold?

#### Open Up to Wise Habits

Ultimately, wise effort in community is taking action toward your values, even when it's hard. When the going gets tough, how do you want to show up for others? As respectful? Inclusive? Generous? You can put these values at the front of your mind, let them guide you, and make them a habit.

Our wise habits don't just impact us— they ripple outward, shaping the communities we live in. Remember that wise habits have three simple steps: notice the choice point, act on your values, and savor the reward. You're at the airport and you notice a fellow traveler looking frazzled, checking their watch nervously. Instead of staying in your own bubble, you offer to let them move ahead of you in the security line. They breathe a sigh of relief, thank you, and then offer a smile to the person in front of them in line. It's a small gesture, but wise habits like this shift the energy of the room. Or maybe there's tension rising in your neighborhood over limited parking spaces. Instead of letting frustration simmer, you see it as a choice point and use your genius for gathering people to host a casual taco night at your house where neighbors can talk, share concerns, and come to a solution together. You're grateful to have played a part in bringing them together.

Every day, we have these choice points— moments when we can focus our genius energy on our values and connect.

Consider the communities you are in. Where are choice points for you to make them better? What genius energy do you have to offer? What are your community values? And what are you willing to feel to embrace mutual understanding? It takes a shift in mindset—believe that solutions are possible; see opportunities, not limits; and care for both personal and community well-being. This is the foundation of community change.

Ultimately, learning how to practice wise effort in your life makes you feel energetic, alive, and like your best talents are being put to work. When you do this in community, whether it's sharing a donut after a swim or creating global connections, you feel a buzz. You are working and growing with others in meaningful ways. We all have a genius, and when we learn how to direct it, we make the world a better place to live in together.



WISE BRAIN BULLETIN 19.4 · 2025 · PAGE 13

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# CULTIVATING SAFETY IN A WORLD OF EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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Adapted from *The Neurobiology of Connection: Re-Wilding Your Deep Nervous System for Wellbeing* by Natureza Gabriel. Used with permission of Jaguar Imprints.

#### THE ARGUMENT

There is an oft-quoted aphorism in the world of trauma healing, which notes that, "Trauma is in the nervous system, not the event." The sentence contains the crucial observation that what we find to be overwhelming is not objective- it is not a question of the particular things that have happened, but rather subjective- how our deep nervous system interprets those events. It acknowledges that our experience is both contextual (someone slamming into you in the middle of a soccer game versus standing in line at the grocery store means totally different things), and a sort of integral of all of our previous experiences. Some delight in public speaking, some are terrified of it. Same event: totally different nervous system interpretation. I say often, and have been saying for years that the healing arts are tilting in the direction of trauma to their detriment if they do not offer equivalent attention to the art and science of connection. And in this spirit, I would like to add a positive corollary to the above statement: "Safety is in the nervous system, not the event." I mean to imply here that in much the same way that trauma is subjective: a function of context and meaning-making, an embodied experience of safety is as well constructed by our nervous systems. And in this essay, I would like to advocate for all of us consciously making the effort to increase our daily neural intake of embodied safety (both despite and because of the difficulty of doing this in modern times) in order to fortify our moment-to-moment experience of wellbeing.

#### **Neuroception: Our Internal Safety Detector**

One of the crucial contributions to the modern discourse on wellness is surely Dr. Stephen Porges' conceptualization of *neuroception*, with its concomitant awareness of the role that an embodied

felt present moment registration of safety, danger, or lifethreat has upon the variable recruitment of autonomic systems.

Part of what Polyvagal Theory has shown us, so elegantly, is that we have access to different neural circuitry when we feel safe, as compared to when we are in danger, and different neural circuitry still when we are in danger as compared to when we are in lifethreat.

Porges had to invent a word to describe the neurological faculty of this discernment, since there is no word that exists in English adequate to the task. He chose neuroception, from neuro-, for neurological, and -ception, etymologically originating in the Latin, where it means layers, and could be taken to mean 'nested inside itself'.1

So this inward neurological perception, that drives our sensory and interoceptive engagement with the environment as we check for safety inwardly and outwardly– the same way your dog, when introduced to a novel environment will sniff, walk the perimeter, and circle before marking territory and settling down to rest– governs the autonomic systems that center our felt experience.

What we then know is that a bodily felt registration of safety is required for flourishing. It is prerequisite to wellness.



#### The Physiological Pulse of Safety

I have argued in my book *The Neurobiology of Connection* that wellness will arise spontaneously if we can spend 51% of our present moments with our Connection Systems online. This is because when these neurological systems are available, the systems that Porges calls *ventral vagal*, our bodies coordinate the internal rhythms required for health, growth, and restoration. Our bodies

 $1\ \mathrm{Kinship}$  with interoception - inwardly nested inside itself, e.g., the sixth sense, and other words ending in -ception

repair themselves, return to equilibrium. This is accomplished, bio-physiologically, through the rhythmic pulsation of safety that coordinates all of our autonomic systems. To be perfectly clear, safety is the frequency whose pulsative cadence organizes your physiology, and allows your Connection System to coordinate the activities of your other autonomic systems (your Movement System (spinally-mediated) and Grounding System<sup>2</sup> (deep belly-mediated).

Many traditions, including ancestral and Indigenous healing lineages from around the world, are aware of, have conceptualized, and work with this pulsation of safety. It is not abstract; rather it is a coordinated waveform that can be assessed physiologically and the coherence of which can be measured quantifiably. It is not Heart-Rate Variability, but is reflected in heart-rate variability. It is not a function of breath, but is reflected precisely in breath. While signals of danger are constant, signals of safety are always pulsatile in nature.

#### **Autonomic Physiology: An Embodied Process**

I regularly teach a seminar in Autonomics. The seminar has two cohorts: a post-doctoral section comprised primarily of wellness practitioners centering autonomic physiology in their work, and a cohort that includes distinguished thought leaders and change-makers from a variety of fields. When the seminar began, I didn't intend for it to organize along these lines, but it became apparent that there were two distinct sets of learning needs, depending on how much background people had in autonomic physiology.

Learning autonomic physiology is an embodied learning process, and it takes time because it begins to reorganize your experience of yourself. What do I mean by this? As we, for example, begin to understand lifethreat responses, and begin to review our own pasts for places where we have moved into shutdown, and begin to do the healing work to transform these places, our systems begin to reorganize. As this process unfolds, endogenously, it begins to reconsolidate memory, change our physical bodies, the way we occupy them emotionally, the degree of our embodiment, how much time we spend in our heads, our understanding of our own histories, how we feel in our skin, and who we understand ourselves to be.

For people who have been using the maps of autonomic physiology as frameworks to help them

2 I would like to thank Jordhynn Ariel Guy for this linguistic innovation in referring to the Deep Belly System as the Grounding System, which helps us to feel what it does in the presence of safety.

transform their experience of their life experiences, which is the most useful way to relate to these materials, there is an experiential confirmation of its reality that really begins to sink into your bones. Learning and embodying these maps, particularly in community, allows us to directly grasp and move the primary levers of our own transformation, becoming more agentic in our own healing. And this process takes time to unfold. The wellness professionals I am training know thismany of them have been involved in this work on themselves, and with their clients, for decades.

Yet for brilliant people new to this, unfamiliar with the language and conceptual categories, the learning process is different. A few weeks into teaching the class for change-makers I realized that I wanted to attempt to strip away all of the technical language, and see if we could meet the needs of the class directly without falling into jargon. What we are talking about are the deepest layers of our humanness- could we approach this directly in language that is close to our experience?

And this is where we encountered something fascinating around safety. One of our colleagues asked – How does the autonomic notion of neuroception relate to psychological safety? Another colleague, an activist, aware of the degree of existential threat all around us – endless war, ecological catastrophe, political upheaval, economic turmoil – simply stated that 'Safety is an illusion.'

Is he correct?



#### Safety in a World of Existential Threat

I think we can boil this down to a single question: What do we mean by safety in a world of existential threat? I contend, in agreement with this person, that we are in collapse at the end-stage of capitalism. All you have to do is look at the news cycle to be reminded of the encroachment of existential threat. We are surrounded by threats. So what do we mean by safety in the midst of all of this?

Sometimes I get extremely frustrated with the English language, which is the first language I learned to speak, because of its great poverty of description around interior states. I got so frustrated by this, nearly thirty years ago, that I embarked on a project of gathering words from other languages to address the lexical gaps in English, particularly words that address facets of *relating*. Words that address our relationship internally with ourselves, to interstitial spaces (i.e., spaces between), and to our relating with the Living and the More-than-human world.

This linguistic poverty is a function of words that are missing - for example, there is no word in English for a knowing that comes from the guts, whereas both German (bauchgefühl) and Yiddish (kishkes) have such a word (other languages do as well). We can speak in English about a gut feeling, but this word doesn't carry epistemological weight. It is not understood to be a way-of-knowing.

Another example: there is no word in English for the *felt interior of a word*. When you say to someone, *Thank you*, it can be transparently sincere (I heard a four-year old say it to her mother, *Thank you mommy*, the other day, and it cracked my heart open like breaking an egg over a bowl, made my knees weak, caused tears to leak from my eyes in a sudden upwelling). Or it can be an automatic transactional word, like a bank teller saying thank you because it is part of his customer script. THESE ARE NOT THE SAME WORD. One has an interior of cosmic reverence, the other is plastic. Yet there is no word in English that can differentiate between the felt valence of these two seemingly identical utterances, one made of prayer, the other made of nothing. In Japanese, the word *kotodama* means the spiritual interior of a word. Learning this word, in my twenties, was a reassurance that I was not crazy, that some other culture had perceived this thing that seemed so obvious to me but that I could not say because there was no word for it in the tongue I grew up speaking.

At a deeper structural level, English is a noun-based language, with nearly two-thirds of the most common words being *things*. This contrasts with a verb-based language (many Indigenous

languages are verb-based), such as Lakota, which describes the motion of energies. My friend and mentor Tiokasin Ghosthorse of the Cheyenne River Lakota calls the old Lakota language a 'non-mathematical quantum mechanical language of intuition.' To understand the difference between a noun-based language and a verb-based language, imagine the difference between saying the word 'Sun', and then invoking the feeling of sunlight on your face. One is a noun, the other is a verb. One conveys the notion of a thing (static, abstract category), the other conveys energies of a Being.<sup>3</sup>

As I grapple with this notion of safety in a world of existential threat, it becomes apparent to me that safety is an approximation for a territory that we would do well to spend some time naming in ways that enrich the meanings we would like to accrete as it relates to our wellbeing.

#### Our Ancestral Relationship with Safety

Each of you reading this is held within the gravitational field of a planet hurtling through the void of interstellar space at unfathomable speeds, spinning on an axis, where at the present time human civilization so-called is engaged in the projects of undermining the integrity of the only biosphere in the known universe, blowing one another up, and binge-watching Netflix on smartphones to dissociate from all of this. For those of us making an effort to unplug from the machine and soberly assess how to live in a grounded and loving manner amidst the plunderings of the extraction engine of techno-feudalism, while attempting to feed our families, and stay sane, it is an important and legitimate question. *Does safety even exist at an existential level?* Which is to say nothing of the more granular negotiations of the everyday– from engagements that are strained because of money, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, family, etc. Does safety even exist?

And while I cannot answer this in an absolute sense, beyond wondering aloud with you- in our several million year long species heritage, when we were still wandering in small bands of hunter gatherers as we did for 99% of our lineage history, still held within the ambit of ancestral human normalcy evolutionarily speaking<sup>4</sup>- gathered around the fire on the savannah, at night, with apex predators loping through the dark, would we not have wondered the same thing? Have we, hybrids of angels and apes, ever really known safety in this world that is so full of threats?

And yet, in this archetypal formulation, down in the very roots, the toes if you will of our humanness, comes a possible response. *Out there*, in the night, *No, safety does not exist*. Alone,

<sup>3</sup> If you want to deep dive into cultural linguistics, and the words missing from the English language, see my book <u>Keywords: A Field Guide to the Missing Words</u>

<sup>4</sup> See the work of Darcia Narvaez, e.g., <a href="https://darcianarvaez.substack.com/">https://darcianarvaez.substack.com/</a>

solitary, in the dark- *No, safety does not exist*. Yet here, in the glow of the fire, little ones held close, their tiny fingers and toes enclosed by adult bodies nearest the warmth of the fire, and eyes looking out, watching, *Yes, there is more of it*. Some possible temporary island of it. Human wellbeing is social in nature: and so safety, in deeptime, was organized around the hearth of our small bands of hunter gatherer ancestors.



#### The Squat Line: Vulnerability and Safety in Nature

I always wonder why you see little piles of poop in the center of fire roads. Have you noticed this hiking in nature? There is a squat line running down the center of dirt roads through the forest, as if all of the mammals know that nature's porta-potty is a line down the dead center of a dirt road. Why is this?

It is because taking a dump is very vulnerable if you are a mammal. In order to push it out, you have to relax. And when you are squatting there, allowing this to happen, you are less neurologically vigilant, more exposed. If you are going to be vulnerable, you don't want to get snuck up on. And if you don't want to be snuck up on, it's a good idea to have some open space around you that reveals anyone approaching. The raccoons, the bobcats, the coyotes- they know this viscerally. It is common felt sense.

If you are going to let down your guard, come out of vigilance, you need space around you. Let's call it the *squat line*. A space where we can allow ourselves to become vulnerable. A space where we can come out of vigilance, turn our attention inward, interoceptively, to feel what is moving through our bowels.

The reason I'm bringing you down into the guts, into this shitty example, is so that you can feel the question of safety in your deep belly. Because this is where the question really resides. It resides in the same place as your *bauchgefühl*, your *kishkes*. This question of safety, at an embodied level, is a way of interoceptive knowing that originates in the guts.

At its deepest level it has nothing – zero – to do with cognition. About the life and death nature of it, in starkest terms, the calculus resides entirely in our enteric brains, at the level of gut feeling. And so to re-center the question deeper in the body– *can we find the deep belly version of safety in a world of existential threat?* 

Yet safety, the word itself, is still problematic. What are we really pointing at here? What is the physiological hinge that determines whether we can, so to speak, lower our guard, turn our attention inward, attend? Can we unhook language from the mesh of associations constellated by this notion? And here I propose some alternatives to the word *safety*, because the language of the deep belly is not a word, it is a feeling. What is the feeling we are pointing at?

#### The Odyssey: Yearning for Home as Metaphor

What if, as Gabi Jubran proposes, we think of this in terms of home? At the dawn of western culture, as I was taught it representationally through the canonical books that delineate a metanarrative trajectory of the modern mind, is *The Odyssey*, Homer's epic poem. It tells the story of Odysseus, that man skilled in all ways of contending, who is stranded far from home and hearth. He is filled with yearning for home. In the Greek, *Nostos*.



The Stamnos Vase depicts the ship of Odysseus passing the Sirens.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/
wiki/File:Odysseus\_Sirens\_BM\_
E440.jpg#Licensing

This yearning animates him throughout the text. Adam Johnson, Pulitzer-prize winning fiction writer and my creative writing teacher, taught that yearning is the great governor of character. Not just for Odysseus, but all of us. And the great yearning of character, the archetypal yearning at the root of the story of the modern world is a *yearning for home*.

The Odyssey, to my eyes, yields most readily to interpretation as a text that grapples with the question: How do we get home from war? This is the literal line of the story- our hero is stranded in the wake of war, but The Odyssey is a psycho-symbolic narrative, I would propose to you. The war is inward. The question is how do we get home, inwardly, from war, which is itself a palimpsest for alienation. Distillation of The Odyssey: how do we overcome separation and re-unite with the Source?

And so what if, instead of safety, we mean 'At-homeness'?

Can we access a relative version of that? Can we feel 'at-home' enough to let our guard down, to bring all of our autonomic systems online? To coordinate our breathing up from our deep bellies in an inhalation of belonging? The first Tibetan Buddhist retreat I ever attended, prior to each session of discourse with the Rinpoche, there was an invocation amongst the assembled to generate the energy of *boddhichitta*. This translates roughly as *awakening-mind*. We could also call it the *yearning-to-awaken*. It is a *verb-based feeling*. A reaching, as towards the Sun, even if we cannot see it. If, at some level, safety is an illusion, can we awaken within ourselves *the yearning-for-home*?

Can we make our way down, out of our heads, out of the cranial certainty, out of the depthless loss that burbles and rants as incessant naming, and home to the deep belly center of ourselves, a silence in subterranean caverns of self, and from here can we yearn-for-home? Can we reach for it?

And in the proper context, with the proper support, can touching into the possibility of this ignite the re-organization of our physiological systems to draw us back into the coherent pulse of life?

Can we prostrate ourselves before the difficulty of it all, link arms, and find our way home?

#### **Practical Applications: Cultivating Embodied Safety**

Part of what I am proposing here is that we transform the seeking for safety from a theoretical question in cognition (is safety possible?) into an embodied yearning (can I reach for it through feeling?), and then, most crucially, that we *practice* it.

Because our bodies are, in each moment, neurocepting, and because this is autonomic, i.e., happening in the background without the need for our conscious input or attention, if we can feed ourselves cues of embodied safety on the regular, our autonomic physiology will process these into a baseline more supportive of wellbeing. Doing so requires, perhaps first, that we recognize that having enough safety to coordinate our autonomic systems (turn on the Connection System) is prerequisite to thriving. This gives us, hopefully, sufficient motivation. Below is a list of practices you can engage to increase your bodily registration of a felt sense of present moment safety: the deepest neurological substrate for thriving. Because of our biological tilt toward noticing 'what's wrong' (negativity bias), most of us do not have acute tracking of our own embodied experience of micro-increments of increased safety. We simply do not attend to them because we do not realize they matter. This is food we leave on the table because we don't notice it. Let's look at our lives through the lens of safety to see about increasing access to this foundation resource.

#### SEVEN PRACTICES FOR INCREASING NEURAL INPUTS OF SAFETY

#### 1) Simple noticing

Do you notice when you feel safer? Can you build the capacity, in the present moment, to notice when you feel more safe? Since our bodies are constantly, as in every single gosh-durn moment, neurocepting, there is a crucial wellness skill to build here. The first part of this is noticing, in your own body, what happens when you feel safer. Like, how do you know? Does your breathing change? Do your shoulders drop? Does your belly soften? Does your voice change? Does your mood lighten? Do you get emotional?

What are the particular micro-adjustments that your body makes when you feel safer? How does the base of your spine change angle? How do your hips open and your leg



bones socket into them? How does your chest open? How does your head get carried differently on top of your neck? How does your belly soften? How does energy flow through your genitals? How do the soles of your feet open to the earth? If you aren't aware of any of these shifts, it could be that you have a significant amount of residual shutdown energy - no judgement if so. If that's not the case, it could be that you simply haven't trained yourself to notice these adjustments because they didn't seem important to you.

The foundation of this kind of noticing is mindful awareness, dwelling in the present moment. Once you have a bit of this foundation, begin to direct your attention at noticing your bodily response in different environments. For example, you can experiment with simply witnessing how your body reacts to being in a crowded subway station versus deep in a forest. I assure you, the bodily experience of your sense of tension, boundaries, space, and emotion will be different. The tilt of your hips, openness of your chest, softness of your belly, rootedness of your feet...all of these adjust. This difference pivots around your embodied felt sense of safety.



So you can begin making it a practice to notice the bodily needs for safety, and allow yourself to adjust to this. Most of us do this without thinking. We use our phones as shields, for example, pulling them up in moments of vulnerability or to deflect someone else's inquisitive or intrusive energy. You couldn't do this if you weren't neurocepting danger. The invitation here is to make this more conscious and intentional. How can you adjust your gesture, posture, and felt sense to

calibrate to the different degrees of safety you may experience as you move through your life?

And what if you notice, in particular, the moments when you feel increased safety? When you can let down your guard. What if you begin to organize your days around feeding yourself more safety, recognizing as you are beginning to that it is the first and foundational doorway to greater wellbeing?

#### 2) Noticing in Time

Choose an interval of time, for example- the last day, the last week, the last month. Take a moment to mentally and emotionally scan the overall texture of this time period with regard to safety. Examine the felt texture of this time interval noticing when you felt the deepest sense of safety. Ask yourself-When did it happen? Where were you? What were you doing? With whom? And How did you know that you felt safe? Or safer?

In your first pass through the time period, just look at this broadly and loosely. The time period may have occurred during an epoch when you have a greater or a lesser sense of safety for many reasons. Yet even within this, there will be variations, different amplitudes, if you will, of safety. Take the time to focus on when you were feeling the most safety, and how you know this in your body. As you remember spans of time, bring conscious attention to surfacing moments of greatest safety in the texture of your life. You will remember moments of greatest challenge, difficulty, and defense by default. Augment your memory to include safety.

#### 3) Noticing in tone

What are the reliable and repeatable signals in your particular body that you are feeling safe? Or safer? Are there certain things that you do? Say? Activities you engage in? Ways that your body feels? Ways you hold your posture when you are feeling safe that let you know that you are feeling that way? Facial expressions you make? For example, I don't sing if I'm not feeling safe, nor do I have a sex drive. (Just keeping it real.) When I'm not feeling safe my face doesn't feel relaxed. I don't smile. If I am feeling unsafe, this generally takes the form of anger (fight response) but sometimes of shutdown. These have very different energetic signatures. When I'm feeling safe (enough) I want to play tennis. If I'm not feeling safe I don't. If I notice the kind of music I want to listen to, I can tell whether or not I'm feeling safe. (Music is often how we create a felt soundtrack for our lives, so this is an interesting way to observe the tilt of our bodies obliquely.) See if you can approach your own felt sense of safety like a researcher who was studying you, helping you to seek to elicit this response.

#### 4) Noticing in place

Where do you feel safest in your home? I mean, physically and in an embodied manner. Is it the kitchen? The bathroom? The garden? The bedroom? Why? See if you can figure out what, at an embodied level, is generating cues of safety for you. What are the poetics of space as they generate or reduce your felt sense of safety? If there are places in the house that you do not feel safe, why is that? Attending to this helps to build your conscious awareness of neuroception- the moment-to-moment embodied feeling of safety and danger, and of constructing environments that serve our deepest needs. Our neuroception of safety can be activated by feeling like we are in control, not vulnerable, able to perceive our surroundings, as well as by acoustics, textures, and the look and feel of space and color and architecture. If you made it an explicit goal to have a home that granted you a deeper felt sense of safety, what would you do to make the space different? How could you make it warmer, more inviting, more restorative?\(\frac{1}{2}\)

More broadly, what spaces that you move through in your life do you feel safest in? As you move from home to work to activities, etc., what are the spaces and places that elicit a bodily feeling of safety? Which do not? How can you invite more safety?

#### 5) Noticing in Nature

If you have access to the Living World (I hope you do), what qualities of the Living World convey a sense of safety to you. There has been considerable research done, for example, on two types of primal view situations. One is a vista view, which tends to be from elevation, looking out, and provides you a broad view of who might be approaching. This view situation tends to convey and experience of spaciousness, and give you clear views of approaching predators. This is why real estate is often more expensive in the 'the hills'. The other view is known as a 'refuge view'. Refuge views tended to be tucked in, nested, cozy, and convey a sense of security that is more womblike. When kids build tunnels, or tuck themselves into small nooks and crannies, they are often



going for a refuge view. From a refuge view, we can often look out on a broader landscape while experiencing a sense of protection, and controlling how visible we are from outside. What are the attributes and qualities of places in nature that you feel safe? Do you find yourself drawn to the expanse and height of mountains? The feel of being in water? Notice and take note.

#### 6) Noticing through Relationships

With whom do you feel safest and why? Think about who you share personal stories with, and why? What are the qualities or attributes in others that invite your sense of safety? What can others do, or not do, that helps you feel safe being vulnerable or intimate with them? If you are not feeling safe with someone, what, if anything, can they do to help re-assure you? Where are your redlines, e.g., those places that if someone crosses will break your trust in them? How do you navigate boundaries with people you must work with, or communicate with, but with whom you are not able to feel fully safe? How do you take care of yourself in these relationships, be they with co-workers, bosses, or others who might have structural or positional authority that can impact upon your life?

#### 7) Noticing through Technology

Many of us have grown accustomed to moving through the world with a digital brick affixed to our palms, on which we can send and receive phone calls, texts, emails, and engage with a universe of apps. How does your relationship with digital technology, and particularly the phone in your hand, shape your experience of safety? Does having The New York Times on your phone generally make you feel safer or less safe? Does being able to check your stock portfolio in any given moment make you feel safer or less safe? Does being available in every waking moment make you feel safer or less safe? Somehow, over the past decade, we have moved by gradual consensus into normalizing a host



of behaviors in our relationships with technology that, if we simply attend to them at a bodily level, we can feel are not health-creating for us. How might your relationship with digital technology change if one of your goals was to give yourself more consistent neural inputs of safety, and less consistent neural inputs of threat?

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR -



Natureza Gabriel is the Founder of <u>Hearth Science</u>. He is an ancestral neuroscience pioneer, and the principal architect of Autonomics: an animist cartography of the living autonomic nervous system, which he has been developing in collaboration with hundreds of mentors and advisors from 24 cultures for nearly 30 years. He is author of <u>The Neurobiology of Connection: Re-Wilding your Deep Nervous</u>

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Neuroscience, Autonomic Compass: Finding Home in your Nervous System, Restorative Practices of Wellbeing, Keywords: A Field Guide to the Missing Words, and other books. He is host and Executive Producer of The Restorative Practices Film Series, The Connection Masterclass, The Autonomic Spectrum Lectures, and Lectures on the new Foundation Model in Autonomics. He has spent thirty years investigating the intersection of neuroscience, awareness-based practices, and Indigenous Lifeways. He has trained Indigenous tribal leaders, corporate executives around the world, leaders of global activist movements, and been asked to train the entire faculty of one of the world's leading medical schools.

### HOPF

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Call me eccentric
the woman who has started talking to the sun,
the oak trees and pines and cherry blossoms and robins and other winged friends.
The one who lived in this house for so many years
running here and there
that she couldn't have told you which direction to look
to see the sun rise —
and now it has become the one constant thing
even when it appears the solid ground on which we stood has taken us for a ride,
the kind that tosses and twists and makes your stomach drop
in not the good way, but in fear.

And yet, here it is
with certainty beyond any betting folks
Another sunrise,
the daffodils pushing their blooms forth for all to see,
a yellow contrast to the green buds and blades of grass that have come back to life.

This heart is still beating (after more than 516,000 hours!) as if it knows what to do without an instruction manual or Youtube video or AI assisted technology

For goodness' sake,
as if it knows with a kind of wisdom that says YES.

Just this walk,
up and down my street
the eccentric lady
whispering "thank you", "thank you"
remembering to not forget this time,
to not forget today.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR —



Beth Kurland, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, Tedx and public speaker, mind-body coach, and author of four award winning books. Her newest book is You Don't Have to Change to Change Everything: Six Ways to Shift Your Vantage Point, Stop Striving for Happy, and Find True Well-Being. She is also the author of: Dancing on the Tightrope: Transcending the Habits of Your Mind and Awakening to Your Fullest Life; The Transformative Power of

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With a passion for and expertise in mindfulness and mind-body strategies, she brings over three decades of experience to help people cultivate whole person health and wellness. Drawing on research and practices from mindfulness, neuroscience, positive psychology, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and polyvagal theory, she teaches people practical tools to grow the inner resources for resilience and well-being. On her website, <a href="BethKurland.com">BethKurland.com</a>, you can find audio courses, meditations, free resources and a link to her coaching services.

## USING THE TAO TE CHING AS A DAILY PRACTICE

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The *Tao Te Ching* is a classic of Chinese wisdom poetry, written almost 2,600 years ago. It is one of the most loved and widely translated books in human history. Its author is traditionally considered to be Lao-tzu, a Chinese sage who lived during the fifth century BCE. Scholars enjoy debating whether or not Lao-tzu actually authored the *Tao Te Ching*. Some contend that it is a compilation of the wisdom of several authors. I am not particularly concerned with this issue for the purposes of this book. Whoever the author or authors were, they have my everlasting gratitude.

For me, Lao-tzu's book has been much more than a beautiful collection of Chinese wisdom poetry. I have found it to be a "Tao" - which can be translated as a "path" - that has opened for me the experience of life in all of its beauty and all of its pain. It has been a path for me into the territory of awareness, awakening, and living in the present moment. It has gently guided me to see how my conditioned mental habits restrict me, distract me, and cause me unnecessary suffering. Countless

others, across the centuries, have found wisdom and guidance in this path. For this practice I offer

#### Walking the Tao

Lao-tzu, whoever he was, my deepest thanks.

The only step necessary on this walk with the Tao is the one before you at this moment. In fact, this is the only step possible for you. All the other steps along the way are theoretical and will not be real until they, too, lie directly in your path. I am still walking along this same journey and I offer you the companionship of my words in the hopes that they may be of some guidance to you. The walk itself, however, is yours alone to walk.

As you proceed day by day you will be encountering the *Tao Te Ching* in a piecemeal manner. Each line is taken from a chapter of Lao-tzu's book (noted in parentheses) and presented as a standalone thought. This can be confusing and it might be helpful to have a translation of the *Tao Te Ching* available. The translation I am using in this volume is my own, taken from the book, *A Path* 

and a Practice, published by Hachette Books. No matter the translation, the text of the Tao Te Ching is not a linear text. It does not set out its premises at the beginning and then build and expand upon them in a logical progression. Each chapter is a small piece of poetry that looks at a slice of life from the perspective of Lao-tzu's philosophy. It can be frustrating for those of us who are conditioned to assume that, in order to be helpful, books must be orderly and linear.

Yet life is not orderly. We perceive that life unfolds in a linear fashion because our brain processes it one moment after another. But life itself is actually an infinitely complex dance in which we participate, but of which we catch only limited glimpses. It is filled with twists, turns, backtracks, rest stops, and steep grades. Just when we think we can't climb another step, the trail opens up to a restful meadow. Just as we are relaxing along a babbling brook, a canyon appears and the trail plunges into shadow and danger. It is an ever-changing path and each moment is new. Lao-tzu's book has these same characteristics. As you walk the daily walk, keep this in mind. Each day is new but the basic themes repeat.



#### **Direct Experience**

Lao-tzu was neither a priest nor a follower of any religious belief system. He was a patient observer of the flow of life. He watched the wind move the clouds across the sky and the rain soak

the earth. He watched rivers flow through wide valleys and tumble down mountain canyons. He watched the crane stand patiently by the lakeside, waiting on one leg until the water cleared to reveal a fish. He considered the contentment of the turtle sitting in the mud. He observed crops flourish one year and fail the next. He watched the seasons come and go. He saw the wonder of all things rising and falling, coming and going, living and dying. He came to understand that life cannot be captured by words and concepts. It can be talked about. It can be thought about. But it cannot be truly fathomed. It can only be experienced.

The legends that surround the formation of the *Tao Te Ching* illustrate Lao-tzu's reluctance to put his teachings into written words. One such legend speaks of a time when he became so fed up with the politics of repression in the China of his day that he got on his ox and left the country. But the border guard would not let him leave until he wrote down his wisdom for all to share. Lao-tzu said, "If I write it down it will no longer be the Tao." Nevertheless, the guard would not let him leave until he wrote something. So he dismounted his ox, sat in the shade of a tree, and in one afternoon wrote the short text of poetic wisdom that resonates to the present day.

This legend illustrates that this path is not one of abstract philosophy. It is a way of looking at the processes of life as they actually are, not as we think they are. It is a path that must be walked moment by moment, not discussed in endless words. Yet using thoughts and words to make sense of our experience is what we humans do. It is part of our nature. Lao-tzu uses words in short poetic stanzas so they might serve as guides and gateways to direct experience rather than as mere abstractions and distractions. This sometimes frustrates our western conditioning which has come to expect things to be fully explained without ambiguity or paradox.

Directly experiencing life is not something we do easily. By the time we are adults our experience is mediated through filters that provide a constant commentary *about* our life, but ignore the thing itself. We come to believe that life is what we see on a screen. This process is so deeply conditioned in most of us that we don't even notice it. We wander day after day with our minds spinning an endless stream of thoughts, judgments, hopes, fantasies, critiques, and plans all mixed with a babel of advertising jingles and fragments of YouTube videos.

Lao-tzu suggests that this mediated experience is not the same as actual life. At the same time, he does not totally discount the conceptual thinking process. We make a certain kind of sense out of life through the use of categories, thoughts, and words. But these must be seen as gateways to life, not life itself.

#### **Present Moment**

Living in the present moment is an essential component of this path. There is no place to go, except here.

There is no one to be except who you are right now.

This is difficult to grasp. As soon as we actually turn to the present moment, a thought arises that turns our attention toward some future event or to something in the past. It is almost as if the present moment is too frightening to actually experience. An internal voice suggests that we are in too much physical or emotional pain. It hints that we really don't have the capacity to directly face this moment. It then presents an alternative from the countless diversions and distractions available.



We may also notice a voice that tells us, "If you live in the present moment, you will stop all forward progress. You will just drift through life." This voice makes suggestions for self-improvement, suggesting that, "Some later day you will have things arranged to the present moment will be acceptable. Until then, keep on striving!"

Other voices suggest that the present moment is impractical, naive, selfish, lazy, or impossible. They present the usual daydreams, fantasies, and mental babble in order to keep us distracted and unconscious. Thus such a simple-sounding thing as, "living in the present moment," can actually be quite a challenge. Lao-tzu noticed this same difficulty and gently offers other themes throughout his little book to support and encourage this practice of, "the present moment."

No matter how vast the chasm between where we feel we are and where we sense we are going, the only action we can ever take is the one simple step that lies in front of us right in this moment. No matter how complex the journey seems, we only need to know to take the next small step, then the next one, then the next.

#### **Opposites**

This walk does not eliminate the uncomfortable, the painful, or any of the things and qualities we have learned to call, "negative." It would be more popular if it promised to eliminate these things. Instead it promises that we will learn to see the polarities of life in an entirely different way. It

affirms that polarity is essential to the fabric of existence. The mysterious world of quantum physics reveals this basic truth. The electron, with its "negative" charge and the proton with its "positive" charge exist within the atom in perfect balance. Without this fundamental "Yin and Yang" of atomic structure, nothing would exist.



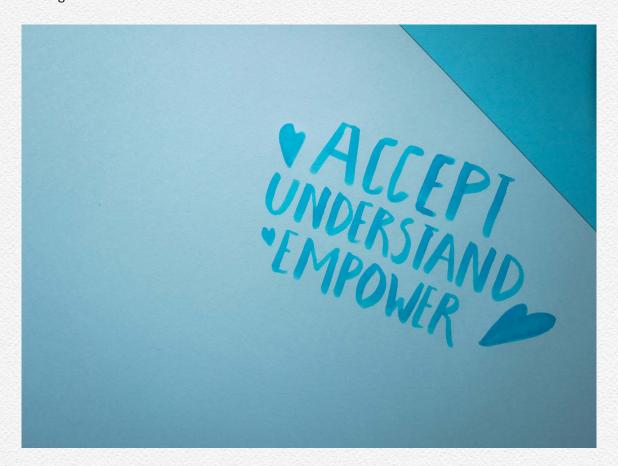
Our basic perception of existence is that of polarities: here and there, us and them, up and down, love and fear, joy and sorrow, life and death. We naturally prefer those things that seem "positive" therefore much of our life is spent trying to experience them in isolation from their "negative" compliments. This impossible task only increases our fear and frustration. No matter how hard we try to make it otherwise, rising always gives way to falling; having always gives way to losing; and life always gives way to death.

Walking this path expands our vision and give us a vantage point where we see all these polarities contained within a greater space. Life gives way to death, but death turns and makes way for life. We don't waste energy challenging the processes of life and instead work in cooperation with them. The negative becomes the doorway to the positive. The positive is fully enjoyed without clinging. We become capable of experiencing the whole of life rather than just the parts we

prefer. Our life is not limited by our fears. Freedom becomes a permanent quality of life available anywhere, anytime.

#### **Acceptance**

Acceptance is courageous attention turned to the nature of things as they truly are, not as we wish them to be. This kind of attention enables our natural wisdom and energy to work effectively with the circumstances given. It allows us to avoid the twin traps of either hiding our heads in the sand while events roll over us, or wearing ourselves out and making things worse by frenetic and ineffective activity. Acceptance allows us to fully understand events and circumstances so that we can participate in life with freedom and joy. We become as patient as a still pond yet powerful as a rushing river.



Our conditioning will insist that, if we accept life as it is, it will never change. We will become the passive victims of fate. In fact, Lao-tzu insists, just the opposite is true. Without a deep and courageous acceptance of the "is-ness" of life, our actions become distorted by our need to impose our opinions, ideas, and solutions on life without understanding the true nature of things. We then stand outside of situations and attempt to fix them from this vantage point. This approach has never worked and it never will. Nonacceptance keeps patterns intact. Acceptance

sets us free.

#### Universal

Lao-tzu is distrustful of formal religion and does not talk about belief systems. He does not advocate the esoteric form of Taoist religion that was prevalent in the China of his time - a Taoism of magic, rituals, and beliefs. His path stands outside such practices and asks nothing from those who follow it except that they pay attention. It does not present rules and doctrines to which one must assent. It presents only observations of the way the Tao seems to work in everyday life and encourages us to follow the same pattern in our lives.

This path is available to persons of any religious tradition or of no tradition. It does not require that we give up rituals nor does it require that we adopt any. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and atheists are all equally welcome. There are no "people of the Tao" who are set apart from any other people. Everything and everyone in the cosmos is an expression of the Tao. Everyone emerges from the Tao and everyone is contained within the Tao.

The only distinction Lao-tzu would make is the observation that those who practice mindful attention to the ways of the Tao will experience the contentment, freedom, and joy that comes from understanding oneself to be a part of life in all its mystery and wonder. It is as if someone within us draws a huge, even infinite, circle that takes in everything that is and then says, "To This I belong!"

#### Let's Begin

Our way of walking this path together will be to consider one or two lines of Lao-tzu's poetry each day. We will let these lines resonate in our minds for the entire day and see what effect they might have on our life. I have used lines from my own translation of the *Tao Te Ching* for this practice but you might want to have other translations available to aid you in going deeper. My own translation is written from a modern perspective of using the poetry as a guide for daily life.

For each day's verse I have added some thoughts that might help clarify the theme. Or they might not. In that case, ignore them. Themes will repeat themselves and we will encounter the same aspects of the path from many vantage points. The journey is yours and your understanding will arise from deep within your own nature. I have also added suggestions for brief "breath prayers,"

a few words which might help your mind quiet down and absorb the themes. Again, modify them anyway you wish to make the daily practice most helpful for you.

As you walk along, remember that you are not alone. This path has been walked by countless others throughout history, and is being walked by countless fellow pilgrims at the present moment. Everyone seeking a way of awakening, truth, and present moment living is your companion on this path, whatever religious or nonreligious label they might currently wear. They have come from all lands, carrying with them a diversity of cultural and religious expressions. They have called themselves Taoists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Sufis, Muslims, atheists, and countless other names. They have established this path with compassion and mindfulness. All their sorrows and all their joys have become part of the landscape along this path. As you walk along, one step at a time, you will be walking in their footsteps. The only quality you need is a tiny bit of willingness. The only action you need to take is to lift your foot and take the next step.

#### **Daily Practice**

#### Talking about a path is not walking that path.

Conventional wisdom insists that we make meaning out of life by our words and concepts; that our linguistic ability is what separates us from other animals. Yet every time we utter a word, we put a bit of distance between ourselves and life itself. The more words we use, the greater the distance becomes until we are so separate and alone that we live in constant fear and misery. There is a place for words, but we must use them carefully.

Take some time today completely free from words - spoken, written, heard, viewed, texted, or tweeted. How does it feel?

Talking ... is not walking my path.

#### Thinking about life is not living.

Our conscious thinking process has become a jumble of words. We have been taught to name things, define things, dissect things, atomize things, and explain things - all in an attempt to gain some illusion of control over the Mystery of Life. This again separates us from the very Life for which we search with our words and thoughts. That which we seek will be found when the thinking words cease.

Take ten minutes and look around. Notice how your thoughts are conditioned to name things. Can you just let things be without names?

Thinking is not ... living.

#### Directly experiencing life brings unconditional appreciation and unity.

A "friend" on FaceBook is not a true friend. It is an image of a friend. Social media is not truly society. It is an imitation of society and the longer it serves as a substitute for the real thing, the more lonely we become. A video of a mountain stream is not a substitute for sitting on a rock beside the real thing. When we cease trying to control life by images and concepts, we begin to see life as it actually is in each moment.

Note the ways you keep yourself at a distance from the simple present moment. Again, let the words fade and notice the moment - without words, without thoughts. How does that feel?

I am not ... my image.

#### Thinking about life brings conditional judgments and separation

Our word-filled thoughts enable us to pass judgment on each moment. Each judgment of the moment, whether we consider it, "good," or, "bad," separates us from Life. We have been taught that we must judge things in order to survive, but this judging process has a dark side. It diminishes our natural joy and celebration of the roller-coaster ride of life.

If you are not your thoughts, perhaps you are Someone who thinks. Can you imagine yourself separate from your thoughts?

I am not ... my thoughts.

Free of conditioned thinking, we experience our true nature. Caught in conditioned thinking, we experience only who we think we are.

Conditioned thinking might be called, "second thoughts." Conditioned thinking is seldom able to savor the present moment. Our "first thoughts" process direct experience. "Second thoughts," however, attach labels, evaluations, and meanings. To an extent these "second thoughts" are natural, but we must take care to understand the difference between the two ways of thinking. Look around you. What are your "first thoughts?" What are your "second thoughts?" I want to know ... my first thoughts.

Yet both our conditioned nature and our true nature are part of life itself. Our conditioned experience of living is a gateway to unconditional life.

For all the dangers of our words and concepts, if we approach them carefully they can be a gateway to the Reality they attempt to represent. Understanding this requires that we take a step

back from our conditioned ways of viewing thoughts and words. We awaken to the idea that, though we have thoughts, we are not those thoughts; though we use words, these words are not the "thing itself."

Are there words in your experience that you recognize as gateways to something more Mysterious?

My words ... are gateways.

#### Beauty cannot exist without ugliness. Virtue cannot exist without vice.

The concepts we think of as "opposites" are, in reality, like the poles of a magnet. A magnet, by its very nature, must have a North and a South pole or it would not have a magnetic field. The Cosmos is, in its very nature, composed of a quantum atomic structure that has inseparable positive and negative poles that dance in constant motion. When we try to pretend that we can have only beauty, only light, only progress, only gain, or only anything we open ourselves to suffering.

Think of the opposites in your life. Now think of these as inseparable parts of a whole. Allow them to coexist. How does that feel?

I am a part ... of all of it.

Living, we know death. Struggling, we know ease. Rising high, we know the depths. Being quiet, we understand noise.

In order for the physical Universe to exist, the proton and the electron, positive and negative, must exist. For physical life to exist there must be death to limit and balance it. Gain must be balanced by loss or it would destroy us. Sound must imply silence or music would not exist. It all belongs together.

Imagine living forever in your current body and form. Sounds great? Really? Imagine succeeding without effort, always. Great? Really? How does the interplay of negativity and positivity shape your life?

I accept ... it all.

Everything gives rise to its opposite, therefore we work without conscious effort and teach without agenda.

This verse introduces the Taoist concept of wu-wei, "action without resistance." The harder we try to make things work, the more we activate the fear that we will not succeed. The more we fear

failure, the more desperate our actions become and the less effective our work will be. Wu-wei does not mean idleness. It means acting without trying to force things.

Can you remember a time when your actions seemed effortless? Are you trying too hard right now?

I act ... with ease.



#### We enjoy everything and possess nothing.

The idea that we must possess, own, control, and accumulate in order to enjoy life is nonsense. The moment our thoughts constrict around a thing or an idea, the joy for which we hoped is lost. This truth is at the heart of every authentic spiritual tradition. The only way to enjoy anything, any experience, any love, or any accomplishment is to let it flow in and out of our life, never grasping, always enjoying.

Are you grasping anything right now? An idea? A possession? A love? Imagine your life as a flowing river, always carrying things away and always bringing more.

I let it go ... let it flow.

## Our accomplishments do not emerge from our ego, so we do not cling to them Thus they benefit all beings.

There is a great danger in taking life personally. Ego-centrism is really a miserable way to live. Ego is merely a constellation of personas, or masks, that we have created to present a face to the external world. We come to believe that it is who we are, but it is only a mask. When we take this mask to be the truth, we suffer because we are always evaluating, comparing, and refining

something that is not real; not our authentic being.

Are you taking yourself (that is, images of who you think you are) too seriously? What if this image is not all that important?

I am not ... my ego.

If achievement is valued, jealousy will result. If possessions are valued, hoarding and stealing will result.

Everyone values achievement. Wanting possessions is normal. Right? This verse does seem contrary to conventional wisdom, but then the *Tao Te Ching* is exactly that - contrary to conventional wisdom. Achieving and possessing things is so often an attempt to feel secure. It never works. We will always feel at risk of failing and losing no matter how frantically we work and try to protect ourselves.

What feelings of envy do you experience? Do you hoard things? Does it satisfy you? I let ... things go.

#### Therefore this path is one of contentment and simplicity.

Contentment cannot exist without simplicity but it's not necessarily that easy.. Authentic simplicity is actually a complicated and evolving perception of what we truly need in order to be happy. The important thing is not to let an avaricious society define the parameters of contentment. Society does not value contentment. It needs discontentment to keep the economy chugging along. What do you need in order to be content? Truly? What if I waved my magic Taoist wand and made you absolutely content, just as you are now? How would your life change?

I am simple ... and content.

#### It empties our mind of its chattering and fills our soul with truth.

Our minds are filled with chatter, boring endless chatter. Buddhists call it, "monkey mind." It's actually more like, "adolescent monkey who broke into their parent's liquor cabinet mind." The Tao path is one of a quiet mind. The monkey chatter stops. Mindfulness, meditation, qigong, yoga, and many other practices can guide us in this quieting, but whatever the methods, we must cultivate still minds.

Start with small steps. Take 15 seconds and let your vision soften and your thoughts fade. You are not your thoughts. What, then, are you?

I let my thoughts fade ... and discover myself.

It frees us from our wanting and returns us to our passion.

Wanting something and being passionate about something are entirely different energies. Despite what romance novels tell us, "I want you," is not a declaration of love or passion. It is narcissistic claptrap. Passionate love affairs are often simply wanting on steroids. Authentic passion is the fulfillment of the purpose for which our souls were designed. Authentic passion comes from the flow of the Tao within us.

What do you want? What are you passionate about? Can you sense the difference? I want ... my passion.

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When you finish all 365 days of your Tao walk, keep going. Start again at the beginning. The *Tao Te Ching* is not a holy book of rock-carved rules. It changes every time you read it because it always speaks to your present moment. You cannot exhaust it. It will be your life-long companion and champion. I wish you a continued wonderful journey and perhaps I'll see you down the road.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR -



Photo: Nancy Martin

A native Californian, Bill Martin graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in electronic engineering. After four years as a research scientist for the U.S. Navy, Bill returned to graduate school, earning a master's degree from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. He did not find himself fitting within the traditional clergy structure, so, guided by his love of the Tao Te Ching, he began to seek his own way. He has been

a student and teacher of the Tao for more than four decades and has published many books on the subject, including the popular *Parent's Tao Te Ching*. Bill now lives in southern Arizona with his spouse, Nancy. He continues to teach classes and work with private students.

# Fare Well May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise. Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

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