

Not Lao-tzu's Magna Carta, xlvi - liv

by strannikov

xlvi

when the Way rules the world, racehorses haul dung,
when the world spurns the Way, warhorses are bred.

no crime cripples more than feeding “appetite”,
no disaster exceeds not knowing “enough”,
no horror brings more grief than “more, more, and more”.

contentment with enough means “to be well-fed”.

xlvii

stay at home and see the world:
no need to peep or peek from any window
to glimpse the Way of Heaven—
you can miss so much while traveling.

thus do sages get somewhere without going,
thus can they catalogue things without seeing,
thus do they accomplish things without doing.

xlviii

scholars at study accumulate knowledge—
sages studied by the Way find that they shed:

they shed and shed more, until they find
that the Way has reduced them to inertia—
taking no action, they act without motive.

busybodies can never conquer the world:
meddling shows just how unfit one is to rule.

xlix

the sage captivated by the Way
is absent-minded, if not mindless:
that is, he defers to the minds of the folk.

the sage is indiscriminate with virtue:
he respects the law-abiding folks,
he respects the unruly law-breaking crowd.

the sage trusts indiscriminately:
he trusts the trustworthy and honest,
he trusts conniving dishonest folk.

self-effacing, the sage looks witless,
freely does he give folks something to laugh at.

I

each of us moves from life to death:
a third of us, companions of life,
a third of us, companions of death,
a third, intent on staying alive,
take great pains but find they've wandered into death.

what might explain the fate of the latter third?

they fail to concede our transience in death.

if we've bothered, we've heard what survivors say
of their jaunts: "rhinos and tigers don't attack"—
walking off battlefields: "no armor, no shield".

the rhino finds no spot to bury its horn,
the tiger finds no spot to bury its claws,
weapons find no body mass in which to lodge.

is this simply a matter of fate?
do survivors refuse to host the death stench?

li

the Way confers life, virtue rears them,
circumstance shapes them, function completes them:
the ten thousand do well to esteem the Way
and honor virtue without thought of reward.

the Way confers their life and rears them,
grows them up to complete them,
rests them, feeds them, supports them, guards them.

the Way gives them life without claiming to own,
confers good without commanding fealty,
an absolute monarch who is not bossy.

this is a Virtue whose profundity awes.

lii

the world took the Way as its Mother, at first:

capture the Mother, she'll bring you the children—
once you have the children, care for their Mother:
from then to your last day, you'll meet no danger.

plug up the holes and shut all the doors:
to your last day you will not labor in vain.
open your holes with babble and spit,
on no day will you be healed.

to see what's small is “to master resources”.
to harbor what is weak requires strength.
in whatever light the day shines down,
return to purpose and master resources:
then you will not consent to calamity.
this is called “attaining constancy”.

liii

if I had even a little sense,
when out and abroad on the Great Way,
I'd fear only the detours and by-passes,
the dead-ends and all the cul-de-sacs.
the Great Way itself is very smooth and straight,
but folks take to the challenge of rough, wild roads.

when the palace is tended and swept with care,
the fields all around are thickets full of weeds—
the granaries stand, but they're empty.
the clothes worn at court are all fancy and fine,
but each expensive belt carries a sharp sword,
the belts gird girths stuffed with rich victuals,
houses gorged with goods, gaud, and costly decor—
this is off-highway robbery, not the Way!

liv

planted and tended, sending down its deep roots,
it cannot be shaken from its soil.

what is bound tight in a firm embrace
cannot simply slip away:

generations hence can then maintain their grip.

cultivate in your person true character,
cultivate in your family true virtue,
cultivate in your village long-lived virtue,
cultivate in your realm plentiful virtue:
cultivated under Heaven, virtue spreads.

So:

observe people through your own person,
observe families through your own clan,
observe your village in other villages,
observe other realms through your own realm,
observe your world in worlds past and yet to come.

how do I know that the world is thus? by this.

