

A River Called Life

In Taoism life is described as a river. It flows of its own volition whether you are there or not. It has bends, rapids, falls, and whirlpools. All of these split up by calm straights. The river does not do these because of man. It does this despite of man. Just like life. Ups and downs; calm and chaos. When you take a canoe down a river you do not choose what challenges the river will present, only how you will react to these challenges.

Anyone who has ever been on a river can agree that the easiest way to handle challenges on the water is to read the river. You learn to study the behaviors of the water and it's currents and how they are affecting you. Where is the river pushing and pulling you. Now, it's not impossible to use your paddles, fight the current, put your boat where you want it, and pass the obstacle that way. But rivers have many obstacles, many challenges. Life has many challenges. If you fight every challenge, you're going to get very tired very fast. Before long you're not going to enjoy being on this river.

If instead, you learn to read the river, and rather than fight it, work with it, you'll find that the various challenges the river presents can be quite enjoyable. You don't use your paddles to fight the river. You begin to use them to work with the river. The river pulls you this way, so you let it. Not to say you don't steer the canoe or else you would find yourself sitting on the bank more than floating downstream. When the river pulls you flow with it, make minor corrections to stay pointed downstream, and continue on. Rapids require more than minor corrections. They require vigilance and some cautiousness but the same principles apply. There will be times where no matter what you do, the river is going to dump you. Your boat will tip and you're going to get soaked. But you're on a river, getting wet is part of it, so you get back in your boat and keep going.

In life it can be a little more difficult to read the flow but if you practice and learn to keep yourself aware of it, it will eventually become second nature to see the twists and bends. You'll never be able to predict exactly how things will go but if you become accustomed to paying attention to the flow, you will find that surprises no longer catch you off guard, they just happen and you are able to move on from them easily. When life pushes you you go with the push instead of fighting it. Sometimes you realize that push was a good thing. Sometimes it isn't. By choosing instead to not focus on the push and rather on how you react to it you're not stuck thinking about the past but instead thinking of the present moment and how to progress in your new direction. Energy spent on the past is a waste. It accomplishes nothing for you. Energy spent on the future can be beneficial to an extent. But energy spent on the present moment is the most rewarding. When you spend time and energy on turning the present into a positive experience it will begin to compound. One positive moment follows another which follows another. Soon you will begin to find the positive in even bad moments. Those bad moments, which is what they are, just mere moments, stop becoming world ending.

In recent years I've had a lot of bad moments. In April of 2014 I was in the middle of Death Valley conducting Army training. I began having a flare-up of what I would soon find out is Ulcerative Colitis or U.C. U.C. is an inflammatory-bowel disease, a form of autoimmune disease. The short of it is that my colon had become lined with micro-ulcers and my immune system was attacking my own body. I stopped absorbing any nutrients I took in and any food or water I

consumed was quickly “flushed” from my body. I was in the middle of the desert and was rapidly becoming malnourished and dehydrated. After 11 days I was taken to an on post hospital but with their limited resources they couldn’t figure out what was happening to me. All they could do was pump me with i.v.’s to stave the dehydration and morphine for the pain. A week later I returned home with my unit and saw my normal doctor. I seemed to be recovering from whatever bug I had caught and all tests came back pretty normal.

By July those same symptoms had returned but I was stubborn and admittedly stupid. One fateful day I forgot to flush the toilet leaving it full of blood. My roommate was unfortunate enough to find it and forced me to the doctor. They ran blood tests and said they would call me with the results later. I left the doctor and went to the barber. As I was sitting down in the chair the doctor called and told me to get to the hospital. I needed to be admitted. Not realizing the seriousness of the situation I proceeded to get my haircut and then drove to the hospital. If I was going to be stuck at the hospital I at least wanted to look good. Once admitted they asked where my driver was. I said, “I drove myself but my parents are on their way.” Apparently in my condition I should’ve barely been walking let alone operating a motor vehicle. I still didn’t understand because I didn’t feel that bad. All of that pain and discomfort had become normal for me.

After spending a week being stuck with needles and having various tests run I was diagnosed. It slowly began to sink in as I read the pamphlets I was given and endless articles online. There was no cure, only treatment for symptoms. And even then there was no guarantee those treatments would work. The disease varies so much person to person and they’re not even positive what causes it. They told me it could be a long road of trial and error to find a treatment plan that would work for me. Over the next couple of years I would find myself back in the hospital three more times. Each time my Gastroenterologist would plead with me to stop waiting so long before coming in. Apparently I was pretty close to dying. Could’ve fooled me. I felt pretty normal.

You see, slowly all of the bad had become normal and I stopped seeing it as being so bad. This is the opposite side of how things should be. I wasn’t finding the positive in these “bads”. I was merely suffering through them and ignoring them. I had somehow tricked myself into a style of thinking that if I didn’t admit it was real it wouldn’t be. It would just go away. That’s the wrong way to go about it because that’s not how it works. It finally sunk in when my gastro told me with all seriousness that I almost died. He was worried about me. That day I began to take my disease serious. I stared it in the face and said, “Okay. You win this round. You’re here to stay. But this is the only victory you get.” I was angry at the hand I had been dealt. What had I done to deserve getting stuck with this. The honest answer was nothing, that’s just how life goes. It would be awhile before I came to that conclusion but when I did it was eye opening.

Why was I spending so much time focusing on the hand I had been dealt instead of how I was going to play my cards? I may not have the best hand but I’ve seen people with worse still end up winning. One of the leading, believed causes of a flare for U.C. is stress. Whether it be physical, psychological, or emotional. For me this is very true so I began looking for ways to reduce my stress. Personally, I discovered that perception is a very powerful and malleable tool. The way we view things is not set in stone. It can be challenging to change our perception because typically it is built on a large and strong foundation. Our perception is built brick by

brick from the day we become conscience. The experiences we have, the people we surround ourselves with, the things we do. All of these form our perception of the world and our perception builds off of itself. It's a cycle. It's why it can be so hard to convince somebody to try a food they thought was disgusting when they were a child. Their perception of it was made so long ago that it takes somebody handing them a hammer and forcing them to break up the foundation to realize that they've changed. In this way we can change our whole view on life. When we were kids, everything was a big deal because we were young and our perception of the world was small. As we grow older our perception gets larger. As it gets larger we realize that not everything is such a big deal. As it gets larger it becomes harder to change. It's not impossible, you'll just have to swing the hammer a few more times.

I started big. I took a bulldozer to my perception. Nothing phased me anymore. There was no such thing as a bad experience because I forced myself to stop reacting. I went too far with that thinking though. By not reacting I became stagnant. Things no longer happened to me. They happened around me. No experience was bad, but no experience was good. I began slipping into a depression. What I labeled my gray zone. I was neither happy or sad. I just was. I had destroyed my foundation of perception but had failed to replace it with anything. It was during this time that I discovered the ideologies behind taoism and buddhism. I allowed this to help form my new outlook. Rather than building out of brick and mortar I adopted the idea of the river as my perception. Allowing me to change my perception as I change and as my environment changes.

My friends know my sayings that I live by. They sometimes joke about them but they also point them out when they see them in action. The first started as a joke when I landed a date by simply showing up somewhere I had been invited. I met her for the first time that night and she took all of the initiative and asked me out. When asked how I managed to pull it off I laughed and said, "Do nothing, expect everything." Overtime that saying morphed for me from being about a date to being about my life. When I changed my perception I understood this saying in a new way. Rather than meaning "don't do anything and expect everything to go your way" it now means "don't force things to happen and expect that everything will happen as it should, whether it be good or bad". I stopped spending time and energy getting all wound up on making sure that things happened and instead spent a little energy putting myself in situations where those things *could* happen. If it worked out, great! If it didn't, well no sweat, I didn't waste all my energy on it so there's still some juice left in the tank for the next thing. Which leads to my next saying.

"There is absolutely no point wasting energy on things that have already happened. It's already happened. It's over. Nothing you do can change it. Instead take that energy and use it to figure out what you are going to do from here." The past is unchangeable and the future unknowable. All you can effect is the present. This current moment. If something bad happened, use this time to learn and prevent yourself from being in that situation again. If something good happened, celebrate and use this time to learn how to recreate the situation that lead to it. All we can do is react in the moment and point the canoe in the direction we would like it to go. Looking upstream where we came from only distracts us from what's ahead. We can't see the entire river downstream either. Using energy to do either is a waste and keeps us from enjoying the part of the river we're on. The part of life we're in.

The third saying, and the most recent I've adopted is, "There are no good or bad decisions. There are only decisions. What we do after the decision is what determines if it was good or bad." There is no way to tell with certainty if a decision will have a good or bad outcome. Yet we still get stuck going back and forth between one or the other and delay acting on them because we *need* to make the right choice. What if we choose wrong? Well who's to say if it's right or wrong? You are, but you can only say that after the fact. Making a decision is like coming to a fork in the river. No matter which direction you go all you can do from that point is paddle the boat, react to the river, and make it the right decision. There is no point worrying and wondering about what would have happened had you gone the other way. Focus on the moment and keep the boat pointed downstream.

As my perception on life changed I began to notice that my perception of my disease was changing. I'm no longer angry I'm stuck with this awful thing. I'm happy for who it has changed me into. It's now my daily reminder not to fight the flow. Instead each day is a positive one where I can find victories all around. I have days where I slip up and get upset about this or that. And later the disease creeps up to try to wedge it's way into those cracks. I no longer view those days as losses. They're just reminders to why I act the way I do on the other days. Other days it creeps in all on it's own, uninvited. Nothing prompts it, it just happens. Those days don't get me down anymore. I just react and try to keep the boat pointed in a good direction.

I mentioned earlier trying to prevent yourself from ending up in bad situations. But a hard fact of life is that bad things are going to happen. A car wreck, being let go, a death. These things happen and sometimes they happen without rhyme or reason. Grief and mourning are normal reactions to events like these. What you do with these reactions is up to you because only you know how to steer yourself through tragedy. Others can give you advice and tips but they're not steering your boat, you are. I find myself working through these emotions quicker than most people I know. This isn't me trying to brag. Just me stating a fact about myself. Grief isn't a competition. When I'm confronted with these types of situations I have found that what works best for me is instant acceptance of what has happened. It has happened and there's nothing I can do about it so there's no point in me denying it or struggling over the idea of it. From there I begin to process how this will change things moving forward and how I'm going to react to these changes. I then begin to look for the positives because I do not enjoy dwelling on negatives. "Did I lose my job? Okay, well perhaps I can look for a job I'll enjoy more." "Was my car totaled? Okay, but I'm not totaled and I've got insurance." "Did someone die?" This one can be a little tougher to deal with because it's easy to brush off material things. Not so much for a loved one. "Did someone die? Yes but I got the gift of having them in my life. The joy of their life is what brings me sadness because it's gone now. But that in itself is pretty beautiful." The fact that someone can touch us in a way that when they are taken for good we become sad, sometimes outraged, that we won't get to experience them again is beautiful. I focus on what they've left behind, not what has been taken. Shared memories with friends and families. I see that as the best parting gift someone can leave when they go. A sadness created from joy. Again, this is my personal process and may not be applicable to anyone but me. Maybe it could work for a lot of people. Who knows?

From the moment we are born we are dying. You sometimes hear people say in passing, "If I die." but they're wrong. Not if, *when*. We all die. Does knowing this make it sting any less?

No. But when we stop saying *if* and start saying *when* it becomes easier to accept the sting. When I was younger I made a deal with my sister that if I die before her she is to ensure that my funeral is a party. I know that they're will be crying and grieving but I also want people to celebrate. I want music and dancing and laughter. As my parting gift I want to be able to give a little more joy and help people understand that it should be a time to celebrate life. They got to know me and I got to know them. Out of 7.5 BILLION people we got to experience each other! How awesome is that? That makes me want to dance. Unfortunately, I won't be there to dance with everyone so they'll have to dance for me.

The only things we leave behind when we die are loved ones, memories, and our reputation. Proverbs 22:1 says, "Choose a good reputation over riches; being held in high esteem is better than silver and gold." I love this because a good reputation is something built from experiences. No one just *has* a good reputation. It's earned from how they act and how they treat others. If we are always striving to create positive experiences others will notice. Others will want to be a part of those positive experiences. Our reputation will start to become positive because we start to become positive. Some may see it as a false front and try to attack your reputation. But a reputation built this way is not easily damaged. Because every attack becomes an experience you are prepared to react to and turn into a positive one. Positivity feeds positivity and with enough practice negativity feeds positivity. Sometimes we build from the negative, other times we separate from the negative. You will start to become so averse to negativity that finding ways to turn it into positivity becomes reflexive. You won't even realize you're doing it. I caught myself doing this when a friend asked if I was worried about leaving my new grill outside as they've had been some thefts in the area. Without thinking I replied, "Perhaps, but if it gets stolen I guess I just won't have a grill anymore. Fact of the matter, I have nowhere to store the grill or lock it up so it stays outside. If it gets stolen, oh well. I've not had a grill before and I got by just fine. Sure I lose the value of the grill but I enjoyed it while I had it. Plus, it's just a thing. I can always get another." I looked back on that exchange later and laughed at my answer because it was completely reflexive. A negative was presented and with no thought I responded with the positive.

This float trip down the river called "Life" is a long one and a weird one. We all get to make this trip and no two trips are the same. Some have it rougher while some get nothing but calm waters. Some are lucky enough to find love and share their canoe with someone. Some enjoy making the whole float by themselves. No matter what everyone else is doing the only journey to focus on is yours. How are you reacting to the flow and obstacles of the river? Are you stuck looking back upstream or trying to see too far downstream? Or are you enjoying the scenery around you and paddling with the flow instead of against it? It's supposed to be fun so get in your canoe, put your paddle in the water, and keep the boat pointed downstream.