

Thank you, oh Creator, for the gift of today with all that it entails.

I say that each time as I begin because I understand that no matter what happens, no matter the day's experience, it *is* a gift, all of it, free of any consideration of whether it was good or bad. Those labels of “good” and “bad” can limit our experience of the moment and hide available gifts. Labels become word-prisons, used to facilitate the telling of stories.

Consider that we all narrate the story of our experiences in the moment. The information of the moment is interpreted, characterized, and codified. Our various biases, prejudices, and expectations all work together to skew pure observation into a form of narration, one that imbues the moment with a specific meaning. We create a story of what is happening in real time. That impulse to label, to quickly assess what's good or bad, has a biological basis<sup>1</sup> yet works against our aim as seekers, which is to maintain a posture of open, expansive curiosity, free of any imposed narrative.

We've talked about how expectations, especially those codified as metaphor frames, can limit or change perception. Stories, whether created in the moment or carried around and defended, hinder our ability to be in an open and curious state of observation. That state is necessary for both seekers and scientists, and it's one we'll strive for as we explore the subtle realm along our spiritual path. If, as seekers, we simply begin by asking *what is the gift?* in all circumstances, we momentarily set aside our stories and see with different eyes.

It's hard to move through our days and not create stories about what's happening in real time, often forgetting that there is a gift. There is an ancient allegory that beautifully addresses this, called the *Parable of the Taoist Farmer*. Taoism is a Chinese religion and philosophy dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE that dovetails effortlessly with modern science. The *Parable of the Taoist Farmer* illustrates the challenge in constructing stories with the limited data of the now.

An old farmer worked his crops for many years with the help of his wife and only son. His only possession of any worth was the horse he used to work the fields he rented. Then one day, his horse ran away.

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<sup>1</sup> The amygdala is the part of the brain that processes fearful and threatening stimuli. It's part of the limbic system, which developed around 250 million years ago with the evolution of the first mammals. The amygdala assesses threats and creates our so-called “fight or flight” response. It is associated with the body's fear and stress responses, but also plays a pivotal role in memory.

The farmer's wife and son were distraught. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors gathered to console the family. "This is terrible," they said. "Such bad luck," they offered in sympathy.

"Is it bad...or is it good?" asked the farmer. "Truly, only time can answer this."

The puzzled neighbors left, muttering about his eccentricity and bothered by his lack of appreciation for their sympathy.

Two days later, the farmer's horse returned, leading a whole herd of wild horses into the farmer's corral. The farmer's wife and son were ecstatic. The neighbors gathered again, this time in celebration. "How *wonderful*," they exclaimed, "you are the richest man in the village!"

"Is this good...or is this bad?" the farmer mused. "We shall see in time."

The neighbors again left, puzzled by the farmer's reaction to such good fortune and commenting on his lack of gratitude.

The following day, the farmer's son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. This greatly upset the farmer's wife, who sobbed openly. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy. "How awful this is," they exclaimed. "Such a great misfortune!"

"Is this bad or is this good...?" the farmer pondered. "Truly, I just don't know," he said. "That is for time to decide."

The neighbors left the farmer, commenting amongst themselves at just how callous he was regarding this serious injury to his son.

The following day, military officials came to the village and conscripted all of the village's young men into a battle from which none would return. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out, after all.

"We'll shall see...," said the farmer.

This parable illustrates the challenge of accurately telling the story of the now, especially since the reactions of those around us, born of their own stories, may influence or mislead either actively or passively. It includes a reminder not to allow others to become the interpreters of our reality.

I witnessed the root dynamic of this parable years ago when a work friend and fellow freelancer broke his leg just before a twice-yearly — and highly lucrative — nine-day period of work that we both looked forward to. It was a huge financial blow for this young freelancer, and, with nothing else to do, he learned video editing, transitioning rather quickly to being an editor for the same company, earning better wages, finding expanded work opportunities, and creating a better life. Now, could any of *us* pause, take stock of our situation, and consider that maybe we should break a limb or seek disease to provide the energy of transition towards something better? Likely not, but can we ask in any moment of perceived pain, “what is the gift?”

The wisdom of that Taoist parable becomes commonplace two thousand years later in Act II, Scene II of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” where he says, “...for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” This is a deep yet subtle truth. Shakespeare understands how the story we tell controls our experience of it, coloring it like a theatrical gel placed between the light and the moment. Perception is changed, which is a function of the word-prisons. They can create emotional prisons that restrict the way we experience a thing and our perception of the opportunities presented. We lose flexibility and, thus, perspective. The story we assign to a circumstance precludes other interpretations. We can’t forgive. We can’t forget. We can’t move beyond a moment of the past which now mediates our experience of both present and future.

A broken leg is a terrible misfortune. A broken leg that prevents one’s death is quite the opposite. The fact that it can be both is what causes the challenge, especially in an increasingly digital society ever pushing towards binary thinking. Most things are more than one thing at the same time. As we discussed, regarding the movie, *Powers of Ten*, we can shift our perceptual threshold to experience reality differently. Asking “what is the gift?” immediately challenges how we focus our perception and thus which stories can arise. Adding the energy of curiosity and even excitement shifts our emotional polarity, further changing what we can experience.

In the Buddhist sense, this is the difference between pain and suffering. Pain happens in the moment, whereas suffering is caused by the story you wrap around that moment’s pain. Have the experience but no story. Have faith that things unfold in a way that is favorable.

We’re exploring subtle realms, so let’s look at a slightly different framing of the parable, one that incorporates faith and looks at prisons made from stories, both literally and figuratively. It’s called *The King and His Friend*.

An African king had a close friend from childhood who had the habit of remarking “this is good!” about every occurrence in life, no matter what it was.

One day the king and his friend were on a hunting expedition. The king’s friend loaded a gun and handed it to the king but, alas, loaded it wrong and when the king fired it, his thumb was blown off.

“This is good!” exclaimed his friend.

The horrified and bleeding king was furious. “How can you say this is good? This is obviously *horrible!*” he shouted and ordered his friend to be imprisoned.

About a year later, the king went hunting by himself. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They stacked some wood, set up a stake, and bound the king to it. As they were about to set fire to the wood, they noticed the king was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone who was less than whole. They untied the king and chased him away.

Full of remorse, the king rushed to the prison to release his friend.

“You were right; it WAS good,” said the king.

The king told his friend how the missing thumb saved his life and added, “I am so sorry that I locked you away. That was such a terrible thing to do.”

“No! This is good!” responded his delighted friend.

“How could locking you away be good, my friend? I did this bad thing to you while, in fact, I owe you my life.”

“It is good” said his friend, “because if I wasn’t in prison, I would have been hunting with you and they would have eaten *me!*”

Now, could any of us sit for a year in prison, grateful, patiently waiting for the basis of that gratitude to reveal itself...? Likely no, but it seems a worthy state of being to attain. The emotional experience of a story has polarity; it makes us expand outward or contract inward and mediates whether we can find gratitude and achieve peace, if not joy, during any experience, irrespective of pain. Needless contractive experiences, created simply by stories, put us in a state of aversion that is energetically expensive to maintain and draining over time.

Let's take a different look at the parable as it relates to pain, shifting to our science mind and an observation of nature.

Nature has many differing strategies when it comes to reproduction. In the plant world, much of it is seasonal, with flowers and fruit offered to animals or other agents of dispersion. The lodgepole pines have found a very different evolutionary niche. Their strategy, primarily, is patience<sup>2</sup>.

The lodgepole pine is a common tree in western North America. It produces serotinous seed-bearing cones, which means that the cones remain on the tree after maturity. The seeds are encased in a resin that preserves and sequesters them until the conditions are right, which could be years. The lodgepole pine is a fire-dependent species, and the cones open only after a fire has burned the tree, releasing the seeds to germinate in the nourishing, ash-rich soil. Those trees are often the first to colonize an area after a fire, as the formerly lush environment is restored, making for a successful, if uncommon, Darwinian strategy.

Larger trees may survive a fire, scarred and having sacrificed their outer layers to that strategy. Yet for many of those trees, their evolutionary plan for success comes with complete self-immolation, which offers a wonderful metaphor to unfold using a spiritual lens. Is fire good or bad? It is neither, so the question is the error and summons the word-prison. Yet it is both good and bad, depending on intention and the story one uses to describe what is happening.

The intention for the tree is reproduction, so the process could be called good, even if it's not perceived as such for any species living in or around that tree, caught as collateral damage. And yet, the entire ecosystem is enriched, and at that level of observation, there's no way to balance pros and cons that occupy the level of the individual. To reproduce, the tree must burn. To continue its genetic lineage, the tree must become fuel for the fire of transition and transformation. Even if consumed, it has completed a genetic cycle and, we could say, has transitioned into itself once more at the beginning, to add a poetic framing.

This strategy, this process, this relationship with nature offers an interesting meditation or consideration for a seeker. Relative to intention and process: do you have the capacity to sit calmly at the center of your own burning, sacrificing with purpose the thing you have grown into — in our case, the ego — to create better conditions for a version of self, reawakened and returned to original potential?

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, when your species goes back 300 million years, you can develop a strategy of patience.

In our daily experience, truth is too often altered or obscured by stories. The methods and practice of science, added in service to our pursuit of the divine, can offer an understanding of truth that is objective, measurable, and repeatable — and not just a story. As we seek the divine, we must remain open and neutral. “You cannot fill a cup that is already full,” says ancient Zen wisdom. Become like the lodgepole pines. Let go of stories and sit comfortably in the burning of your own transition, my friends. Be nourished by that energy. This is the essence of faith if you believe in a creator motivated by love, harmony, and beauty. The world created in that context is friendly, not hostile, unfolding in a way that is supportive, even if perceived as uncomfortable. Our faith is informed by a belief that things are structured to work out in the end.

As we continue on this path, remember that one of our intentions is to set a baseline posture of malleability and not lock ourselves rigidly into narratives. Let us calmly, openly, and curiously walk our paths. Remember that while stories can impose limitation, individuals who use stories with skill, whether artist or philosopher or scientist, can reveal hidden worlds! This is why it is so powerful when the skills of the seeker, the artist, and the scientist are used harmoniously with an intention of seeking the gift.

Let us close with the invocation:

Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.

Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.

Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.

Thank you, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

Honor the Creator; honor the creation.