

The Life and Times of a Taoist Master

A Response to "Moving in a Tangled Web" by Luke Stevens-Royer

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I am so grateful to my colleague Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer for his thoughtful essay and engagement with this year's Prairie Group topic. Luke shares his reflection on what it meant to be connected to the Earth as a young person and within his family. He then invites us to reflect in the same manner. He states that there are, "a thousand stories and traditions and perspectives that can help guide our ways of inter-being in such a time as this." This means asking ourselves questions such as: What is part of our sphere of concern and connection to the Earth? Not just the living sentient beings that exist there, but the full ecology of the place. What are our relationships to the trees, rocks and plants around us? Like a modern-day Yoda encouraging a young Luke Skywalker to open his heart and mind to the Force around him, our Brother Luke knows this lesson already. Indeed, in hearing this call to reconnect to the Earth and to nature, I was reminded of my own encounter with a Yoda like teacher from my past.

Charlie Kast looked like a half-crazy person when I first met him. He was taller than I imagined, and his greying hair and beard seemed permanently disheveled. He spoke with a distinct Boston accent, which stuck out all the more given that we were in central North Carolina. I was taking a circuitous route back to Chicago from General Assembly in 1998, stopping in Chapel Hill first. I had just been accepted as the first intern at the Community Church of Chapel Hill North Carolina — a relatively newly minted UU church with a long history of civil rights and justice work in the South. Although it had been an independent church for much of its history, by calling Charlie Kast to be their minister a few years before, it cemented their identity in their new home of Unitarian Universalism.

I must admit I knew nothing of that history at the time. All I knew was that Charlie Kast, when he had served Second Unitarian Chicago, had a stellar reputation among the Meadville community as an internship supervisor. He was also just coming off the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and I was going before the MFC at the end of my internship - so I was hoping for a bit of an insider's scoop and a good recommendation from him. What I got was even better.

Like Yoda, Charlie's outward appearance belied the spiritual powers within. For you see Charlie Kast was a Taoist master. Oh, he didn't flaunt it, put on airs, or perform some affectation to convince people he was more spiritual than he really was. No, Charlie was a true Taoist Master who did not need to flaunt his ego. What made him a Taoist Master was one simple fact of his existence: he lived authentically, and with integrity. That is to say more than probably any other person I have ever met, Charlie Kast truly lived according to his beliefs and principles.

Being the poor intern I was, I headed out to Chapel Hill a few months ahead of my internship to see if I could find a place I could afford to live. The real estate agent from

the congregation tried and whiffed on an apartment, but it was Charlie who came through. It turns out he drove to the other side of town, all the way in Carrboro, to do his laundry. He discovered a laundry mat owned by an African American family and would drive a considerable amount out of his way to do his laundry there every week. He noticed some low-income apartments across the street from said laundry mat and suggested them to me. And so that was where I stayed during my year learning at the feet of the Taoist Master.

Charlie never married nor had kids. As a gay man in the South perhaps he felt inhibited to display much interest in a partner. Or maybe he just didn't care about romantic relationships. However, he cared a great deal for children, particularly those deprived of love and a stable home. Having been a seasoned foster parent in Chicago, Charlie had a new kid staying in his house every month. Sometimes they would come back when their parents couldn't take it anymore. Charlie became their haven-a trusted place where children were safe and loved.

So was the church. I always half expected Charlie to run into the woods and never come back; that's how different he was from the culture around him. In the days when churches were just waking up to the potential of email, and the multiple uses a membership database might employ, Charlie still wrote everything on a typewriter. I mean everything; from sermons to interoffice memos, to meeting agendas. They were all in that same style - no capital letters. That included his own name, which occasionally I still see spelled without capitals, like e.e. cummings. That was how egoless Charlie was. He didn't even want or need his own name capitalized.

Of course, sometimes that got the better of him. Charlie hated clutter. He couldn't stand a mess. Many a foster kid received a thorough education on cleaning and hygiene during their month with Charlie. The church had a weekly Wednesday night program night, and many a Wednesday evening one could find Charlie still cleaning up the fellowship hall even after the so-called cleaning crew was through. They weren't up to his standard! I would repeat to Charlie lessons he had told me about overfunctioning in an emotional system. He would only smirk at me, having learned his lessons so well to quote them back to him. He didn't care. The church was a mess, and he couldn't stand to leave the place like that.

I learned from Charlie that if ministry is to be a calling it is a calling that applies to our whole being - not just our jobs. Ministry is a way of life; a way of living according to one's values even if that makes things inconvenient or inefficient. And if you look the fool, or have to drive across town to do your laundry, or look strange to people, than that was their problem. Living according to the earth, to our values and principles as Unitarian Universalists, makes us different than most people. That is to say, really living out those principles changes us in a deeply spiritual way. Such a practice is a way of life, not merely sermon fodder. The point is to live according to the earth. Like a Taoist master.

Years later I was trying to contact Charlie so that I could invite him to one of my installations. He had retired from ministry by then but sent a very sweet card and a lovely sentiment even though he could not be there in person. Of course, by that time, Google was a thing. In tracking him down, I came across an interesting article online from the local newspaper in Chapel Hill. It was about this half-crazy homeless guy who was constantly picking up trash and recycling all over the common at the University of North Carolina. The paper was doing a profile on this fellow, who of course turned out to be none other than Charlie Kast. His hair was whiter, and a bit longer which made him look extra disheveled. I had to chuckle at the article's insistence that no this was not a homeless man picking through the garbage looking for items to recycle. It was merely your friendly neighborhood retired UU minister, turned Taoist hermit, with a propensity for being a neat freak.

I could tell Charlie stories all day long; and did to my cohort back at Meadville Lombard when I returned for my final year. "Cut from a different mold," they all agreed. And it turned out to be one of that cohort of long-time colleagues, my dear friend James Kubal-Komoto who serves the UU community in Raleigh these days, who emailed me a few months ago to let me know that Charlie had died. He remembered how I spoke of my mentor with the love, respect, admiration and esteem that only a former intern holds for their former-supervisor-turned-colleague. I like thinking of Charlie among the Great Cloud of Witnesses that sits at our collective shoulders and speaks to us down through the ages. One day you and I will join that chorus too.

However, until that day comes, our job is to listen and hear the lessons they have to teach us if we have ears to hear, as scripture says. Charlie's ministry was an extension of his life. While he no longer formally served a congregation as minister, it didn't mean that his ministry was over. There was still a world of injustice, hatred, and litter to deal with. A true master responds to the world as it is put before him. Surely such a life is an example of the kind of harmony with the earth that Brother Luke has shared with us in his fine paper. May it be an inspiration and example. Amen