

MY FIRST GURU

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Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Confucius, 1368–1644

LEFT THE CHURCH, OH, SORRY, Church, oh, no, that's OK, I'm not in it anymore, so I can use lowercase, church—the catholic church, that is—right before being confirmed, when I was in eighth grade. I even remember the three discoveries I made that year—or perhaps in seventh grade—that convinced me to do so because I told a

friend or two about them. I know I never told a grown-up or anyone affiliated with the church. I just stopped going to confirmation classes and church, and no one said anything to me about it.

I can confess to you now that it did not, in the end, come down to not being allowed to have Beethoven as my confirmation name because he was

—previously published in *Inlandia*, 2023

neither a saint (officially) or catholic. Though this latter point seemed hypocritical to me because even by then I had learned that catholic “philosophy” held that the catholic church was the ONE UNIVERSAL church—“catholic” *means* universal—and so everyone belonged to it, even if they didn’t know it yet—including Beethoven.

Anyway, some time in junior high I learned that:

(1) There were once three—three!—popes at once, all vying for official recognition as the only one. This meant that . . .

(2) One of the magical tenets I was told back in second grade when preparing for my First Communion could not possibly be true. I distinctly remember asking, “So after you confess, when the priest grants you absolution for your sins, it is DEFINITELY true that his superpower comes directly from Jesus to St. Peter to the next pope and the next and so on down the line for 1900+ years? Every priest, then, has been ordained in a direct line from the beginning of absolution?” Well, the grown-up—maybe a nun who taught second-grade Sunday school—said yes. And *that’s* the only reason I had held on for so long—because I had believed her.

And then I learned that . . .

(3) There was a time when popes, who took a vow of celibacy, passed down the papacy to their children—their illegitimate kids (the b-word).

智

WISDOM

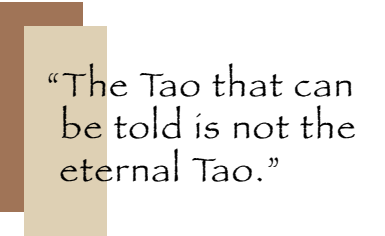
Well that did it for me, I was outathere.

A few years later, during my junior year of high school, I skipped the cafeteria lunch period one day and went to the school library instead, which we were allowed to do. I was skipping meals to lose weight. And whom did I find there but my classmate Donald (Dee) Bennet, blond and blue-eyed, soon to be our quarterback. But I knew him from a few classes we had together.

Instead of letting him be, I sat across from him and asked, “Whatcha reading, Dee?” It looked like poetry from my upside down point of view. He held the cover up and introduced me to the *Tao Te Ching* and its famous first line. He also asked me if I had ever had a thought that was not in words. Not verbal. I thought about it and said, “I don’t think so.” Dee suggested that it will then be very difficult—impossible,

even—for me to understand the *Tao*. I said “Oh,” and asked him if he had ever been so miserable as to think the world was absurd, ridiculous, or possibly even not worth living in. That semester I was taking philosophy with Mrs. Erickson for my English elective, and we had just hit the Existentialists. I think he ducked responding to me by showing me the first poem in the *Tao*. It starts with the famous line, *The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao*. *Tao* translates as “Way, Path, God,” the Way of God, the Path of God, and a few other possibilities; this is if you think of God as an active verb rather than a guy in the sky with a beard.

Anyway, this was fall of 1974. Sixteen years later I would have my first nonverbal thought. Excluding dreams, that is. But I can’t tell it to you. Not in words. It was a big one. Like a beatitude. OK, it *was* a beatitude. Maybe Beatitude, capital B. Yeah, that feels better. Still recovering, so capitalization is an issue.



“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.”

But meanwhile, Lao Tzu, the author of those *Tao Te Ching* poems, knocked me for a loop: there might be a way of thinking, or Way of thinking—sacred thinking, no less—outside of all the so-called western world’s so-called scripture with all its (shudder) *words*?

Suddenly, my abdication from the CcCcChurch (CcCapitalization is still a bit of an issue) started to make a little more sense. Soon I would start to see what kind of sense. But this was a marvelous beginning.

Anyway, Dee Bennet went on to be

a religious studies major at Dartmouth. We became friends, somewhat. Enough for me to visit him at Winter Carnival one year and keep in touch after college. For years I would refer to him as “my first guru,” once I learned that *guru* just meant teacher or spiritual teacher, perhaps.

Decades later I ran into him on an intercity bus heading back home. His scraggly, barely-a-beard beard was long, his hair unkempt. He had been living and working for years as a baker for an itinerant Sufi community in Spain. He had given me a copy of the Quran years earlier with its famous line, “In a place neither east nor west.” So it made sense that he moved east. He was having difficulty remembering English, as he had not spoken it in years. My mom gave him a ride to his mom’s house from the bus station. They had both been teachers at our high school and were still plugged into the same grapevine of gossip and local-interest news. Later I found out that the reason Dee had returned to the states—his mom told

“Wherever he is, whatever he is, if he even is, I doubt that he has the least idea how influential that day in the school library was. When he shared. And taught. By not teaching, but just sharing what could not be taught. Or even told.”

my mom—was for a medical procedure. A serious one. One they couldn’t do in Spain. He hadn’t mentioned it to me on the bus. He was like that. Never talked about himself. Almost never.

Wherever he is, whatever he is, if he even is, I doubt that he has the least idea how influential that day in the school library was. When he shared. And taught. By not teaching, but just sharing what could not be taught. Or even told.

I now have three translations of the *Tao*. I never pick up one without picking up all three. And I have a few Sufi friends in New York. One right in my building, a few floors below me. Also blond and blue-eyed. All nice people. 🌸



Ding Yunpeng, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Buddhist Arhat, 1547–1626