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# BE HAPPY

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“**W**HY ARE YOU CRYING?” my martial arts teacher asks through the translator.

“Because it’s so beautiful. Because I will never be able to do your family’s *gongfu* like that.”

We are on a balcony with a small group of US American teachers hired to help Chinese medical students learn English. When I had mentioned that I wanted to learn a martial art, a Chinese colleague found Yü AnRen, a Heritage Master of an ancient practice. She and I studied with him together and she translated. The crew at the Foreign Teacher House invited her and the Master to lunch so my housemates could see what we were learning.

Watching him is like seeing Baryshnikov do a ten-minute ballet from five feet away—perfect control and grace flowing through space. I am moved to tears.

My teacher leans forward and speaks firmly. My Chinese colleague translates.

“How long you do my family *gongfu*?’ he’s asking.”

“Three weeks.”

“He says, ‘I play this *gongfu* fifteen years. You practice fifteen years every day every day, be like me.’”

Then he jumps up and spreads his arms. “Do not be so serious. Be happy!” The sudden shift makes everyone laugh. He gestures over the balcony, over the whole company.

“We are rich! We enjoy the sun now, the good feeling of a full stomach,” he puts his hand on his belly as my colleague translates. “When we are poor, we enjoy cool dark, the good feeling of light and empty—both are good.”

Mr. Yü is not just mouthing platitudes. This buoyant teacher was born and raised in Chinese high society. His

grandmother learned a secret martial art in Beijing when she was part of the last emperor's court and then passed it on within the family. Mr. Yü's grandfather was a general in the Chinese National Army. Then Mao Zedong's communists took over mainland China, and the family was stripped of its wealth. When my teacher refused to stop practicing the martial arts he knew, he was tortured and imprisoned during Mao's Cultural Revolution.

"Human life—," says Mr. Yü in English on the balcony, flipping his palm up then down, and saying a Chinese word.

"Alternates," says the translator.

"Yes," says my teacher. "Human life alternates. When there is no alternates, we die."

"This is Old China teaching," he continues through the translator. "Life has many things. Yang and yin. Full and empty. Be happy for everything. Move with life."



It sounds good, doesn't it? *Move with life.* But I did not grow up learning how to do this. I am an individualist, privileged, *Can Do* USAmerican. I was encouraged to set goals and arrange things to achieve them. I was told to keep my promises and work hard to get the job done. At the Chinese medical university, we American teachers focus on course plans and operate on timelines, sighting along chains of cause and effect, trying to predict and

control what happens. Our students often comment on this. "Americans work very hard," they say, but I am not sure it is a compliment.



As college-trained USAmericans, we were not reminded that plans are phantoms, ideas about what could or should be. Promises are hopes, really, for how we will behave some day. We were urged to keep our eyes on the prize but not taught how to adjust ourselves to changes around us here and now. The Chinese I worked with were schooled differently.

"The decisive factor in Chinese thought," writes German scholar Richard Wilhelm, "is the recognition of change as the essence."<sup>1</sup> Constant change is the meaning of the Chinese yin-yang symbol that Mr. Yü mentioned: Two commas are nested in a single circle, each containing the seed of the other. A seed of black within the large belly of the white comma, a seed of white within the belly of the black. As the circle turns, seeming opposites become one emptyfull whole by turning into one another. Warm sun and stomachs full, cool dark

and stomachs empty. Plans and plans disintegrating, loss and rebirth.

One way my Chinese students learn about change is through stories, which they tried to pass on to me. More than once when I complained about some aborted project, I was told about the farmer who lost a horse.

A farmer had a valuable horse that ran away. "What bad luck!" cried his neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. Soon after, the horse returned, bringing a wild herd with him. "What good luck!" cried the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. His son was working to gentle one of the horses and fell off, breaking his leg. "Bad luck!" cried the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer. A warlord stormed into town and drafted all able-bodied young men, leaving the injured son behind. "Good luck!" said the neighbors. "Who knows?" said the farmer.<sup>2</sup>

"Why do they find this story reassuring?" I thought at first, but eventually I saw how it worked for them. My students did not think they had much control in their lives. When elaborate plans for a speech contest were disrupted at the last minute because a visiting dignitary wanted the hall, or all students were

called for community service during the week I had scheduled a midterm, they mentioned the farmer who lost a horse. They were probably hinting that I hold plans lightly because who knows what might happen. Better to adapt myself to what comes than to try forcing the world into my mold.

"Did you do your best?" my students asked when I expressed frustration. If I said yes, they assured me, "You can do no more."

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Yet even if I accept the unAmerican notion that we have little control over what happens around us, how can I follow my Master's advice to "Be happy!" about this? How do I—individualist!—abandon my precious plans, my personal disappointments and poignant sorrows and suddenly be happy? On the balcony of the Foreign Teachers House, Mr. Yü is subtly offering suggestions.

Live in the present more often, he implies when he encourages us to enjoy the sun. Forget phantom fears and hopes, and look for what we *Can Do* right here, just now. Enjoy this meal and practice my gongfu every day, because we never know what might come next. In such a world, I might still be lifted into tears by Mr. Yü's performance, but not because it seemed so far from what I could ever achieve, but simply for its transcendent beauty. We can also practice adjusting our feelings and ideas when things change.

This proposal, politely delivered as it was, did not sit well with me at first. I thought about other feelings that arise when plans go awry and threats disrupt my life. I am more often moved to anger or resentment or fear than to happiness and peace. But Mr. Yü implies that these feelings are not automatic; he believes that we choose and practice them. Surrounded for a year by Chinese students, friends, and Mr. Yü, who grew up learning to move with life, I began to consider that feelings might be flexible. Which ones we practice depend on our underlying goals.

Life goals cannot be achieved by following a fixed plan because everything moves. Still, most people and cultures have fundamental aims that underlie human lives—wealth, say, or justice or belonging. "Good luck" is probably the most common wish I

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received on greeting cards in China—a fitting benediction in a world of constant change. But the one written most often on personal notes from my students and friends was: “Wish you Happy and Healthy Forever!” If health and happiness are among our fundamental goals in life, then we surely benefit from learning to shift our feelings toward the positive—from fear to connection, from sulking to smiling. In our little group, Mr. Yü tells some ways he managed this in prison.

In the Cultural Revolution, he was jailed and put on heavy work details with many others. To entertain themselves, the prisoners used to save grains of rice from their scant meals, put them on the floor of their cells, and bet on which ant would get to their grain first. When life locked them up, they still found ways to play. Later, he was moved to “the really bad prison,” where the floor of his cell was covered with water during the rainy season. Every night for a month, he kept fungus at bay by allowing each foot to dry. He lifted a knee and stood on one leg for half an hour, then switched. He got stronger and eventually survived, he says, because he was optimistic. He accepted alternating yin and yang and kept trying to be happy and healthy. On our balcony, he settles into a meditative posture in his chair.

“When you go very, very deep in stillness,” he says with his eyes closed,

“then you begin to dance.” He sits quietly, then slowly moves his limbs until he is up and waltzing around the balcony.

“When you are at the height of dancing, then you start to be still.” He slows himself again and sits in the chair, closing his eyes. Then his eyes pop open, and he looks around the group with a smile.

“Life has many things,” he says. “When you are strong, be firm like a rock. When you are weak, be flexible like air. Be happy for everything. Move with life.” 🌸

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1. Richard Wilhelm, “Opposition and Fellowship,” in *Lectures on the I Ching: Constancy and Change*. Translated from the German by Irene Eber. Princeton University Press, 1979.

2. Alan Watts, USAmerican scholar of Buddhism and Daoism, tells the Chinese farmer story—[listen](#).

Yü AnRen’s family form is called Taiyi You Long Gong (or Quan), meaning Swimming Dragon Gongfu. The most complete version performed by Mr. Yü himself that is currently on the internet is available via [YouTube](#). Accurate information about the form and access to DVD videos of Yü AnRen are available at the website [qidragon.com](#). This site was created by Liping Zhu, my Chinese colleague and the translator mentioned in this essay, with the support and help of Mr. Yü.



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