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## GRASP BIRD'S TAIL

### *An Introduction to the Tao of Activism and Leadership*

Let's get this straight right from the start: I know enough about the *Tao te Ching* to understand that writing a book about it is risky business, for two main reasons. The first is:

The way that can be spoken  
is not the only Way  
(*Tao*, 1)

And the second is:

Those who know don't speak  
Those who speak don't know  
(*Tao*, 56)

The *Tao te Ching* is a text, originally written in ancient Chinese, which translates roughly to mean "the Way and its Virtue." Other translators decipher this as "the Way and its Power." Still others call it "The Classic Book of the Supreme Reality (*Tao*) and its Perfect

Manifestation (Te).”<sup>1</sup> Rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it?

The *Tao te Ching* is the second most translated book in the world, next to the Bible. There are more than 250 English translations of this ancient tome alone, with many more in nearly every Western language and, of course, Mandarin and Cantonese. While few translators or scholars agree on the literal definition of the *Tao te Ching*, how to order the chapters, and what the translation of each phrase is, all seem to agree on its purpose: to help guide people towards a better way of living.

So I started out with the intent of keeping this book *relative*ly short, heeding the earlier passage from the *Tao te Ching* about “knowing” and “not speaking.” Alas, I take some solace in how others have interpreted Lao Tzu’s famous line. “He who knows doesn’t talk, but words are no hindrance for him. He uses them as he would use gardening tools,” says Stephen Mitchell in the notes to his 1988 version of the *Tao te Ching*.<sup>2</sup> According to Mitchell, even Lao Tzu was criticized by other Taoists for running on at the mouth with his book of 5,000 characters. It seems that you really *can’t* win.

Let me start by saying simply that this book is my own interpretation of the *Tao te Ching*, as applied to activism, one of my life-long passions. Throughout, I refer to activists and advocates interchangeably. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines an advocate as “a person who supports or speaks in favour” and activism as “a policy of vigorous action in a cause.” It is my belief that everyone has a cause they would advocate for. It may be something as innocent as a six-year-old advocating for fewer vegetables at dinner time, or as dangerous and courageous as being an advocate for democracy and freedom of religion in mainland China. Whatever your kind of activism – to write firebrand letters to the editor, to march in the streets, to blockade logging roads – my hope is that the *Tao te Ching* will speak to you.

Some advocates take a very different path altogether. A growing number of activists are starting businesses as a means to achieve social and environmental change. People like Gary Hirshberg and

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1. Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, trans. Jonathan Star, New York: Penguin, 2001, p. 2

2. Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, New York: Harper Perennial, 1988, p. 86

Samuel Kaymen – the New Hampshire-based founders of Stonyfield Farm, makers of organic milk products – who, from the vantage of being the fourth largest yogurt producer in North America, advocate on issues as diverse as climate change, women's health, food security, and organics; or Kipchoge Spencer of Xtracycle, located in North San Juan, California, whose business builds and customizes “sport utility bikes” with the goal of creating a bicycle lifestyle around the world. Spencer is also the co-founder of Worldbike, a non-profit organization that focuses on creating economic opportunities by allowing people in Africa to move themselves, their goods, and their families using human power.

“Business should be the great breeding ground of the spirit,” says Joel Solomon, co-founder of Vancouver, British Columbia's Renewal Partners. “But business and spirit have been allowed to become separate. In that lies the root of many problems in society.”

Joel Solomon and business partner Carol Newell are philanthropists and entrepreneurs who started the Endswell Foundation to support environmental charities, and Renewal Partners, an early stage venture capital company that has helped spawn more than fifty environmentally and socially progressive businesses in British Columbia and across North America. These advocates use their position within the business community to create wide, sweeping changes that favour society, culture, and the health of our planet.

“There is no excuse for employing ruthless ethics while you make money,” says Solomon, “and then go to your place of worship to be forgiven.” Solomon is an advocate for aligning our values with our system of commerce and our business practices. There are hundreds upon hundreds of businesses emerging across North America and around the world, led by inspirational entrepreneurs who would describe themselves first as advocates and secondly as business people.

In my book (and it's my book, after all), if you have something that you believe in enough to speak up for, to lend your voice and your passion to, then you are an activist. You don't need to be on TV every night or on a picket line to be an activist; all you need is to love something – freedom, democracy, children, the Earth, those who have no voice in society – and a desire to give your voice to that

cause. It is you that I will be addressing throughout *Carry Tiger to Mountain*.

As the subtitle of this book states, this is also the Tao of leadership as it specifically applies to those who have something that they are advocating for, whether it's in the front office or on the front lines. Many advocates come into the social justice or environmental movements seeking leadership, and soon find themselves reluctant leaders. The same is true for owners of ethically driven businesses.<sup>3</sup> And while I don't dwell on leadership in every chapter of *Carry Tiger to Mountain*, without a firm grasp on the *Tao te Ching's* central tenants of leadership – trust, restraint, conviction – many of the *Tao's* lessons for activists will be lost.

### *No One Way for the One Way*

Writing a book about the Tao is risky because there is no single way to perceive what some translators call the *One Way of the Tao*. (That little paradox will make sense later.) In writing this book, I've studied a dozen different translations of the *Tao te Ching*, and another dozen books about Taoist philosophy and Tai Chi, and they all differ in sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic ways. Although some treat it as such, the *Tao te Ching* is not solely a religious doctrine with strict rules and concise application. One of the things that I like most about the *Tao te Ching*, in fact, is that it is *not* a religious book. It is deeply spiritual and holy, but it is not a book about religion. It has no deity. People of many faiths can and do look to the *Tao* for guidance without fear or hesitation. It does not challenge the supremacy of any other God. It does not say *this* way is the *only* way. In fact, it says the opposite. The *Tao* simply seeks to help us follow a path through life that is virtuous and fulfilling, with love, courage, restraint, and compassion as our guides.

The *Tao* is a book of philosophy about how to live your life and

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3. The term ethically driven business is of my own making. It's a catch phrase I use in my work to describe businesses that are pursuing a triple bottom line: taking care of people, the planet, and profits. While corporate social responsibility is the buzz in nearly every business sector, few businesses can honestly say that they are driven by progressive and transparent ethics.

manage your affairs with virtue. One recent publication interprets *Tao te Ching* as “Making this Life Significant.”<sup>4</sup> Both in history and in modern practice, Taoists have based a theology on the writing of Lao Tzu and his contemporaries, and the practice of Taoist internal alchemy, martial arts, and meditation. In this book, I don't fuss too much with doctrine or its religious application, but rather am concerned with how the *Tao te Ching* can be used to help us activists protect and restore what we love.

*Carry Tiger to Mountain* is not a translation of the *Tao te Ching*, but an interpretation of others' translations. On my best days, I can struggle with English – ancient Chinese is well beyond my capability. The translations (or interpretations of translations in some cases) by Thomas Cleary, Stephen Mitchell, Brian Browne Walker, John C.H. Wu, Jonathan Star, and Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, have been my constant companions. I have read others in passing, and have found dozens of translations in the public domain on the Internet.

I have chosen the more traditional spelling of *Tao te Ching* over *Daodejing* – which is favoured by some scholars – for the simple sake of ease and familiarity for the reader. Though *Tao* and *te* are pronounced somewhere between *Dao de* and *Tao te*, I'm not here to educate readers on the subtleties of vernacular and the history of the Tao's translation. For the same reason, I refer to Lao Tzu rather than Laozi, and Chuang Tzu – one of Lao Tzu's contemporaries – rather than Zhuangzi.

Throughout *Carry Tiger to Mountain*, I interchange *Tao te Ching* with The Way and its Virtue. I've also used the words The Way and The Tao to mean the same thing. Also, the *Tao te Ching* is sometimes referred to simply as The Lao Tzu, after the sage who is believed to have penned the original text. And while *Tao* (with italics) means the *Tao te Ching*, Tao (no italics) simply means life, the universe, and everything, as it is understood by Taoists and lay practitioners alike. (I'm sorry if that's confusing. Just plough ahead and trust that it will make sense as you read on.)

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4. Lao Tzu, *Dao De Jing, A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, New York: Ballantine, 2003

### *Who Was Lao Tzu?*

Just as there is “no one way” to interpret the *Tao*, likewise there is no agreement on who the author actually was. A sage from the age of Confucius living in China between 200 and 700 years BC, a man named Lao Tzu is widely *believed* to be the principal author. It is said that upon witnessing the decline of society during the Warring States Period in China, Lao Tzu, the keeper of the royal archives in the state of Chou, set off for the mountains to live apart from society as a hermit. He rode a buffalo. Or possibly an ox.

Before letting him leave, a guard at the gates to the city (or, in other versions of the story, at the western pass through the mountains out of Chou) asked the wise man to write down a little of what he knew to be true of the world. The result was the *Tao te Ching*. We are left with the impression of Lao Tzu clambering down from his steed, jotting a few notes on some handy parchment or bamboo like we might prattle off the shopping list, and then disappearing into the west. As one of his key pieces of advice suggests, he did his work and then stepped aside, and it has indeed lasted “forever.”

It may be that over the millennia others have added to or augmented the original text. It also has been suggested that Lao Tzu was never just a single man, but that the *Tao te Ching* emerged from a small legion of scribes. The name Lao Tzu means “The Old Master” or “The Old Boy,” and some wonder if anyone could have had such a name. Whatever the case may be, the *Tao* has endured long enough to be considered among the wisest books ever written. Whoever Lao Tzu was, she/he/they gave us just enough, and then no more.

Recently, I read a new translation of the *Tao te Ching* by Robert G. Henricks, who bases his version on recently discovered Mawang-tui texts that appear to be the oldest version of the *Tao te Ching* uncovered so far. Henricks has made subtle changes to how we perceive the *Tao te Ching*, the first of which is to change its name to *Te-Tao Ching* to represent a reordering of the *Tao*’s eighty-one verses.

Just as I thought that maybe the last word had been written about which way is the right way for the One Way, I read another translation, this one featuring “recently discovered bamboo texts” by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall that provide new insight into

the *Tao te Ching*. This serves only to underline my first argument: when a book is as shrouded in mystery and antiquity as the *Tao te Ching*, we can never expect to know a definitive *Tao*.

No doubt a debate will carry on between different camps around the various translations of the *Tao te Ching* about which ones are better and which more closely reflect the point of view of the author or authors of the original version. While I have been distracted by this debate, I don't find it particularly compelling. First, given the mystery around the origin of the *Tao te Ching*, its author, and the possibility that it predates the transition from oral history to written history in ancient China, we won't ever be certain which version is the most accurate.

Second, and I think everybody is in agreement here, the *Tao te Ching* says:

The name that can be named  
is not the only name  
(*Tao*, 1)

Even with this ambiguity, it is widely understood that the *Tao te Ching* is 2,500 years old, give or take a few hundred years. Like accounts of the author, the exact date of creation for the *Tao* varies widely from one source to the next. But generally it is agreed that the book was written some time between the second and seventh century BC, though I strongly suspect that its folksy wisdom had been passed through ancient Chinese culture and society as lore and narrative long before it was committed to paper. If Lao Tzu was indeed the first to write it down, then we might assume that as the keeper of the records of the province of Chou, he had access to a great deal of recorded history which may have found its way into the *Tao te Ching*.

The *Tao te Ching* is the force of nature in the universe. It is what guides us on our path towards virtue, and it is the force of life that sustains us on our journey through the stars. For anybody to say definitively that their interpretation of the *Tao te Ching* is the true way of reading and understanding it is contrary to the very teaching of the Way and its Virtue. The *Tao* is a way, a process, a pathway, not a state or destination.

In addition to the interpretation of others' translations, *Carry Tiger to Mountain* contains nine chapters that attempt to apply the teachings of the *Tao te Ching* to our work as advocates, whatever your cause or mode of activism might be. I hope these lessons will be as applicable to negotiators trying to secure protection of Canada's endangered boreal forest as they are to *Customers Who Care* participants at the Co-operative Bank of the United Kingdom as they work on issues like trade justice and climate change.

### *The Tao is Out of Doors*

To understand the *Tao te Ching*, we must put the text aside and step out into the world and experience it. For me, the best places to see the living Tao is in our children playing in the woods or at the playground; in the graceful, slow-motion dance of a heron along a river bank; or in the curl of the water itself as it slips over rocks and rounds the bend in the brook and disappears from sight.

I first read the *Tao te Ching* in my last years of high school around 1988. It was the Penguin Classic edition translated by D.C. Lau. This introduction corresponded with my first experiences as an advocate for the environment.

Though I did not know it then, the two fit well together, and over the past decade and a half, I've tried my best to apply some of the lessons I've gleaned from the *Tao te Ching* to my conservation work. I was driven to speak out against the threats to the places I loved, at that time a tiny woodlot near my home in north Burlington, Ontario. I read the *Tao* because intuitively I sensed in its lessons that which would help me be a better person, and hence, a more effective spokesperson for things wild, even if they were only remnant second growth forests being cut to make way for Highway 407.

*Carry Tiger to Mountain* was conceived during my second season as a Park Naturalist at Lake Louise in Banff National Park, Alberta in 1993. I was hiking over Wasatch Pass, its rough terrain strewn with snow-covered boulders. At that time this book was about the outdoors – an attempt to marry an interpretation of the *Tao te Ching* for people who love the mountains with the *Tao's* physical form – Tai Chi, which I'd dabbled with – which I believed could bring grace



to the mountain experience. (Tai Chi's balancing postures kept me from falling on my face more than once in the high country.)

Over the next few years, though, as I grew ever more involved with the effort to protect the mountains that I had adopted as my home, *Carry Tiger to Mountain* started to become a way for me to apply the *Tao* to my efforts as an activist.

Since 1996, when I left the Park Service – or more aptly, when it left me – I've made my living working with conservation groups. In 1999, I started, with high school acquaintance Kevin Scott, a national conservation organization called Wildcanada.net that I led full time until the beginning of June, 2005. During this period I made many, many mistakes, but I got a few things right too, and I learned many important personal lessons from each experience, whether good or bad. These experiences have in some way elucidated aspects of the *Tao te Ching* and how we might attempt to incorporate its quiet wisdom in our efforts, whatever the cause our business or organization might have: homelessness, child poverty, famine, labour, the environment.

I ask that you indulge me in some retrospection throughout this book as I look at my experiences as an activist, the lessons learned from these efforts, and their relevance to the study of the *Tao te Ching*. I find that I learn best when people tell me about experiences that they have had incorporating abstract concepts into day-to-day practice. I offer some examples from my experience in that spirit.

There are many themes in the *Tao te Ching* that the seasoned advocate will find familiar, and budding ones might heed, such as:

We call the time we spend *doing* productive  
but it is the time when we are *not doing* that gives  
birth to our best ideas  
(*Tao*, 11)

or

Rush into anything  
and you will slip and fall  
Try to hold things still

and you will lose your grip  
(*Tao*, 64)

Much of what we take as contemporary thought was born many thousands of years ago. This knowledge comes back to us through the cycles that Taoists believe link all elements of the world together, called *wu hsing*.<sup>5</sup> Later, I discuss what I call body memory. I believe that we can learn to unlock the memories that the matter in our bodies have of their past configurations as rock, soil, forests, and most certainly as water. This is a relief to me. It means that I don't have to learn everything anew, but simply be silent long enough to remember it.

### *The Tao te Ching and the Tai Chi Tu*

To understand how we might apply these lessons from the *Tao* to the development of our strategy and the management of conflict and crisis, we'll need to look at some underlying ideas of the *Tao te Ching*.



Many people are familiar with the common Taoist symbol for yin and yang. This symbol is sometimes called the Tai Chi, or Tai Chi Tu, which is modestly translated to mean “the supreme ultimate.” I’ve seen it used as a logo for everything from surf wear to a steak house. The symbol is older than the *Tao te Ching*. Some Taoist historians believe that its origin is with the *I Ching* – the book of changes – whose teachings predate Lao Tzu by several hundred years, though its origin in oral history, like that of the Lao Tzu book, is not well known to the west.

Although commonly taken to represent balance and harmony,

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5. My use of *wu hsing* and other words from the Chinese are taken from Alan Watts’ beautiful book *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, published by Pantheon Books in 1975. I am deeply grateful for Alan Watts’ work.

the Tai Chi, or yin and yang symbol, is not about two separate things living together, but about different elements of the same thing. "The key to the relationship between yang and yin is called *hsiang sheng*, mutual arising or inseparability," says Alan Watts in his book *Tao: The Watercourse Way*.<sup>6</sup>

In our daily lives, we often try to obliterate this relationship. We want health without sickness. We want riches without being poor. But harmony is found in the tension between the two. They arise out of one another. They define one another. The polarity is natural.

Because the Tai Chi represents the whole or the complete universe, there is the implication that demise is as natural as salvation. I've struggled with the repercussions this might have for my work: ecological demise is simply a natural part of the yin-yang equation.

In places throughout the *Tao*, there is the suggestion that nature should be left to take its own course, and that the events of the world are unfolding as they are intended. For example, verse ten asks, "Can you accept that even for the most vital matters the way of the Tao is to let events run their course?"

The yin-yang polarity that demands balance and harmony through the marriage of opposite sides of the equation could be said to predetermine the horrors, human suffering, and ecological devastation that we fight each day. For there to be balance, we must have both affluence and poverty, one could argue. The world is simply evolving as it should.

Given this, why go on fighting? If the universe is unfolding as it should, why struggle against it?

Cloudwalking Owl explains: "I think a subtle and profound issue is at work here. I believe that Western society has a bias towards *substance* (i.e., things) and Daoism has a bias towards *process* (i.e., actions.) What this means is that whenever Westerners look at a situation we try to find the thing behind it, whether it be the atoms that make up a rock or the "soul" that makes up our spirit. Instead, Taoists look at a situation in order to understand the process. This means that they look at the interplay between yin and yang, or the five elements, when looking at physical things.

"This bias towards process as opposed to substance gives Taoists

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6. Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1975, p. 22

a head start, in my humble opinion, when it comes to understanding things like ecology and activism, because it gets them thinking from the point of view of systems analysis instead of right and wrong, or people's innate tendencies."<sup>7</sup>

You and I are a part of the balance of nature. We too are instruments of the Way and its Virtue, and our lives are intended to be a part of the sometimes awful, sometimes beautiful struggle to keep this world we love so dearly in harmony.

Given this, can we hope to achieve our goals? Eliminate poverty? Stop or reverse climate change? I believe so. The polarity that keeps all the elements of the universe and this tiny corner of it that we call Earth in harmony is deeply and profoundly out of whack. It will be our life's work, and the life's work of our children and their children, to return balance and harmony to the world we occupy. As concerned citizens we are the counterforce to issues such as rampant development, exploitation of children, and the criminal misuse of power around the world.

Balance is not a static point. In the real world, balance is a matter of daily change. When you try to balance on one foot, you are constantly making subtle adjustments to stay upright. While working on our various activities, that balance swings as if on a pendulum. When we look at the Tai Chi Tu as it was originally conceived – the movement of the sun across the sky, casting longer and shorter shadows, easily but constantly changing with the passage of the year – we can imagine that by embracing the balance of the Tai Chi, we can accept nearly constant change. We must move with such change rather than against it if we are to be effective in restoring some equilibrium in a world so acutely tilted towards strife.

Our job as activists is to slow that pendulum down. As it swings towards injustice, we must position ourselves in a way that we can use our energy, our conviction, our compassion, and our love to impede the pendulum's momentum. Can we stop it? No. Try and we will be knocked aside. Can we slow it down or even use its own force to change its direction? Yes.

Some would argue that if the Tai Chi dictates that all things

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7. Cloudwalking Owl is a Taoist and activist with whom I have corresponded over the course of writing this book. He has given me frank and insightful feedback, some of which I have added directly to the text as quotes.

will come to a balance, then there is no need for us to do our work as activists. In time, matters will simply find a point of equilibrium. But remember that we are part of a harmony that exists far beyond our tiny blue planet whose time frame is unknown to us. Preserving life here on Earth and protecting what we love on this planet is not the work of some benign force in of the universe. It is *our* work. Balance is ours to find: it may be millennia before the pendulum begins its slow progress back towards ecological and social justice, and our children cannot wait that long for clean air to breathe and clean water to drink.

Thinking about our struggle in this way has resulted in an important change in how I perceive my work. Winning our fight no longer means merely finding a solution. Rather, I now accept that the struggle will never be over. Our role is to hold in check those forces which continually threaten to destroy that which we care for.

Talk of balance often divides activists, who fear compromise and trade-offs. As advocates, we find ourselves in a world in which further arbitration is not an option. Many of the people I have worked with over the last decade or more of conservation activism agree that we cannot spare even an inch of land that is undeveloped, unspoiled by pollution, or protected from clear-cuts, oil and gas development, mining, or commercialization. Nearly all agree that we need to reclaim much of what has been spoiled.

Where is *hsiang sheng* – the mutual arising – to be found in this predicament? The harder those who would destroy what is beautiful and precious and essential to life on Earth push, the more of us who care for this planet and all its creatures will stand up. Our terrible predicament as a species, and our will and ability to solve the myriad challenges we face, arise mutually of one another. They are inseparable.

But as discussed in the title chapter of this book, we must be cautious of how we approach these life-threatening problems. “Be an advocate with love, and you wield a great sword,” advises Lao Tzu in verse sixty-seven of the *Tao te Ching*. Unless we remember to take Lao Tzu’s advice, we risk further exasperating this inseparability between opposing forces. Accepting this is one of the most difficult tasks civil society faces today.

Alan Watts might advise us to take solace in the principle of mutual arising, saying of the two sides of the yin and yang polarity: “There is never the ultimate possibility that either one will win over the other, for they are more like lovers wrestling than enemies fighting.”<sup>8</sup>

Accepting this intellectually is easier than being on the front lines of various twenty-first century causes, such as the fight against climate change or the astounding loss of biodiversity – the very fabric of life – that is occurring world-wide. When it is human dignity or lives we are fighting for, it’s not easy to accept that the oppressor and the oppressed are part of the same equation, shifting back and forth to find some kind of balance.

But following the teachings of Lao Tzu is not an intellectual exercise; it’s an emotional and ultimately spiritual leap of faith. We simply have to trust that this balance exists and that we, as advocates, are part of the *Tao’s* way of finding that balance. Accepting that balance does not necessarily mean equal or even just.

If for a moment we were to think about what we really want, we might discover that finding a place where darkness does not threaten to win over light, where evil does not threaten to win over good, isn’t half bad. My life’s work is to protect the environment that my family, friends, and co-habitants on this planet depend on for life. I’d like to reverse climate change so that it doesn’t impact life on Earth one iota. Is that going to happen? Right now, I’d settle for reducing its impact to a point where we can simply survive.

Our work is to toil not just with our heads, but with our hearts, in a way that respects the polarity present in the world, in a way that uses the force that our opponents exert to ultimately shift the balancing point towards justice. If the universe does in fact tilt towards justice, as some have argued, then our task is to find a sufficient fulcrum to pry it loose.

### *The Tao te Ching Will Challenge Us as Advocates*

For the activist, there are some challenging ideas in the *Tao*, and at times I’ve struggled with how to interpret them. How, for example,

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8. Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1975, p. 23

can a busy person incorporate “non-being” into their efforts to protect endangered species, clean up toxic waste, or advocate for the homeless?

After reading the *Tao* countless times, I’m still not certain what non-being is. Or isn’t, as the case may be. As I’ve said, I’m just learning these things myself.

There are other ideas in the *Tao* that challenge the common way of thinking about advocacy. For example:

Do not force action,  
Instead allow action to arise on its own  
and follow its course  
(*Tao*, 48)

As advocates, we buzz around, busy as bees. We hasten to action, striving to gain the advantage over those who oppose us. The *Tao te Ching* suggests “doing by not doing.” That’s a tough concept for many to comprehend, driven as we are by real world deadlines, crises, and grief. However, when I think about the times that I have enjoyed even limited success, it’s been when I deliberately stood back from “the action” and observed the course of events as if detached from them. Often making a decision about what course of action to take is weighted with emotion, ego, anger, or fear. The *Tao* might suggest that by stepping back, the correct course of action will “arise of its own accord.” We can then follow it with ease.

Another head-scratcher is:

The sage leader knows that force and conflict  
always lead to defeat  
Even the most effective campaign leaves bitter  
feelings  
and a desire for retribution in the hearts of the  
defeated  
Lasting victories are not won this way  
(*Tao*, 31)

This has been a particularly difficult lesson for me to learn. My

response to conflict has most often been more conflict. Something that you care about is threatened? React quickly, with force, and maintain that pressure as long as you can. My friend Brock Evans' statement "Endless pressure, endlessly applied" has been my own battle cry for more than a decade. But what I've failed to understand is that pressure need not mean conflict or force. And while the *Tao* accepts that sometimes we must engage in conflict, it advises us to do so with a heavy heart, accepting that by doing so, we have already lost something precious.

The *Tao* is full of wise advice for planning, campaign development, strategy, and tactics:

Sound planning leaves no evidence of a design  
Careful strategy makes people think they arrived  
by chance  
Refined creativity allows for intuition  
Deliberate calculation appears random  
(*Tao*, 27)

There is even advice on fundraising in the *Tao*, though those lessons may be the hardest of all to accept.

Throughout this book, I write about civil society and the application of the *Tao te Ching* to our work and daily lives. I make references to what I think are some things that we do as activists that pit us against the natural flow of energy in the world, against the course of the *Tao*. At times I might sound critical. If you recognize yourself in any of the examples I present – if you see in yourself some of the traits that I suggest run counter to the Way and its Virtue – be gentle with yourself. We are all learning, growing, changing, and challenging the constraints that have held us back as a movement and as civil society. I write about my own experiences here to illustrate that we are all evolving as advocates. Our goal is to become better at what we do so we can protect and restore what we love in this world. Sometimes we have to tackle some really difficult questions and face things about ourselves that make us uncomfortable.

Do not be afraid. You are not alone.



## *The Tao of Escher*

Trying to understand the *Tao te Ching* is sort of like trying to find the starting point in an M.C. Escher print. Escher was the Dutch graphic artist who depicted so-called impossible structures such as the famous *Ascending and Descending* and *Waterfall*. The lithographs are enigmatic, and at once tickle the brain and challenge our perspective. In *Ascending and Descending*, we look down at a rooftop set of stairs with men marching in both directions, up and down. Follow one set of men with the eye as they march and the stairs go up, turn ninety degrees and climb, turn ninety degrees and climb again, and then again, and suddenly you're back at the start, going up ever further. Follow the other set of men in the opposite direction and they are forever going down, around and around the four corners of the stairwell. There is no start and no finish, and the harder you look at the image, the more difficult it becomes to comprehend.

I think it's best to be the bemused observer, pictured in the famous 1960 lithograph, resting on your elbows, somewhat detached and watchful.<sup>9</sup> Like Escher, the *Tao te Ching* is both unknowable and simplistically insightful at the same time. The trick to understanding its paradoxical nature is not to try too hard.

## *Grasp Bird's Tail*

Thinking about the *Tao te Ching* and hoping to live by the Way and its Virtue is a lot like trying to grasp a bird by the tail. You might come away with a few feathers, but more often than not, the bird flits away, leaving you standing and staring up at the sky. Some intuitively know that the harder you try to grasp the bird's tail, the faster the bird will fly.

Some have learned that the best approach is to simply let the bird come to you.

In Taoist Tai Chi, Grasp Bird's Tail is a form often repeated. The gentle pivot of the hips, the drawing back of the hands as if firing a bow, and the firm but restrained push forward with the hands feels like the effort to grasp the Tao. I've named each of the short inter-

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9. For examples of M.C. Escher's "impossible structures," visit [mcescher.com](http://mcescher.com).

pretive essays in this book after a Tai Chi movement as a way to illustrate that understanding the *Tao te Ching* as it applies to our life's work – as it applies to life itself – is about moving physically through the ideas, as well as mentally and emotionally. (My good friend Mark Holmes has also provided some interpretive illustrations to start each chapter).

I explain further in the chapter by the same name why I chose *Carry Tiger to Mountain* as the title for this book. The truth is, I didn't really choose the title, it chose me. From the very moment of conception, those have been the words my body and my mind held as its title for this book. The movement Carry Tiger to Mountain captures the strength, courage, and restraint I think is needed to embrace the challenging ideas the *Tao te Ching* presents us as advocates. As Dr. Jim Butler explains in his Foreword, tigers and mountains are two of the most common and powerful symbols given to us by ancient China – symbols of harmony, happiness, and oneness of nature and courage and bravery. Plus, as an added bonus, it sounds pretty cool.

"Playing" Tai Chi, as author and Tai Chi practitioner Trevor Carolan calls it, has provided me with a way of understanding the *Tao te Ching* not just in my head, but in my body.<sup>10</sup> As I explain in the chapter called "Wave Hands Like Clouds," it's through Tai Chi that I have been able to understand some of the principles of the *Tao te Ching* more clearly, and sort through how they can help me in my work as an activist.

As you read this book, I encourage you to put it down often to move, to practice Yoga, to dance, to run, to walk along a forested path, or sit by an urban creek or stream. The author won't be insulted if your copy of this book has mud on it and has been warped and faded by the sun and stained by salt water. In fact, it will be the greatest compliment a reader could provide.

I want to repeat that this book is not a translation of the *Tao te Ching*. I have made subtle but important changes to the text to adapt for the subject of activism; it is an interpretation. I encourage readers to seek out other translations of the *Tao te Ching* that ring true for them. When you find one, you'll need to read it many times. And sometimes reading it won't be enough.

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10. Trevor Carolan, *Return to Stillness: Twenty Years with a Tai Chi Master*, New York: Marlow & Company, 2003.

“Even with a complete understanding of the text,” says Jonathan Star in the notes to his translation of the *Tao te Ching*, “some sections still do not make sense – and I realized that they were not supposed to.”<sup>11</sup>

The meaning is not in the text itself, but in where that text leads us. It’s not good enough to read the *Tao te Ching*: we must experience it in everything we do. Many people who have never heard of the Way and its Virtue follow its path every day. “I like to believe,” says Brock Evans, Chair of the US Endangered Species Coalition, “that for the most part in my own approach to the issues, my lobbying at all levels, and certainly in my personal life, I have indeed followed the Tao – even without knowing that that’s what I was doing.”

The *Tao te Ching* “was never meant to fully explain the mysteries of the universe, only to allude to them,” says Jonathan Star.<sup>12</sup>

Chuang Tzu, a contemporary of Lao Tzu who is believed to have lived around 250 BC, said, “the world values books, and thinks that in so doing it is valuing Tao. But books contain words only ... these words are worthless as long as that which gives them value is not held in honour.”<sup>13</sup>

Reading about the Tao will not reveal it. Talking about the Tao will not communicate it. Thinking about the Tao will not instill it in the heart or mind. All of these things merely prime the pump. If you hadn’t picked this book up, you might not have ever heard of the *Tao te Ching* or Lao Tzu, but you could very well know the Tao, and the teachings of the Old Boy. You’d have another name for it. Or maybe – best of all – you’d simply live the Way and its Virtue. It would be a part of your work. It would be a part of your family.

If my publisher and my own ego would let me, I’d have you open this book and find only an invitation to visit the nearest patch of unspoiled nature. You might walk along a forested trail to a place where there was a creek or river, maybe with a waterfall or a small set of rapids. There you could sit or jump around or dance or sleep and slowly find the nameless thing that Lao Tzu called the Way. May-

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11. Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, trans. Jonathan Star, New York: Penguin, 2001, p. 2

12. *Ibid*, p. 3

13. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New York: New Directions Press, 1965, p. 82

## CARRY TIGER TO MOUNTAIN

be you would get it in an instant, maybe it would take much, much longer. And maybe you'd find a way to take it back with you to your home, your community centre, your neighbour's kitchen, your office, or your boardroom, and weave it into your work.

But sometimes we can drift from this natural way of living and we need some words, even if only the counsel of a good friend or mentor, to remind us that we've veered from our path.

Pages with words on them are two-dimensional, and the ideas on those pages connect in what appears to be a linear fashion. This is illusion. The Tao is not two-dimensional. It's not even three-dimensional: it has no dimensions at all.

The world is the Tao, and you are part of the world, and so you are the Way and its Virtue. To use it, you need to do nothing; to harness its power, you need only let go of it.

*Carry Tiger to Mountain* is a love letter to people who are trying to make the world a better place. It has been written out of love: love for people, for my colleagues whose struggles I share, and for matters that are important to us, whether we are leaders of large international human rights organizations or conservation groups, business leaders who struggle to guard their bottom line while being outspoken advocates for human rights, fair trade, and the environment, or simply caring citizens gathered around a kitchen table trying to save what we love about this Earth.

It is my greatest hope that *Carry Tiger to Mountain* will help others be happier in their work and more successful in their efforts to safeguard that which we hold dear.