

Hard is not Impossible
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A couple of weeks ago I re-read Rev. Theresa Soto's poem, "everything is still on fire" and the line, "Hard is not impossible" really stuck with me. It was something I needed to hear that day, and not just about the global pandemic, or systemic racism, or overcoming major human problems. I was struggling with what was going to be possible, and what was important, in *that* moment. I imagine that you may have had moments like that. When the next step, whatever that is, *feels*.... impossible. And yet, hard *is not* impossible even when it feels like we are standing before a sheer mountain wall, with nothing to hold onto. In order to accomplish something important to you, what is the hardest thing you have ever had to do -- with your body? With your mind? With your heart? It might be tough to narrow things down, or maybe there is a singular moment that comes to mind right away. Theresa writes,

...But hard is not impossible. Not yet
is different than never. You, in community,
have an answer. You have a response to systems
of power and control and to the cost
of suffering.
You and your community, together are the answer.

In the *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 78, the Sage writes:

Nothing under heaven is as
soft and yielding as water.
Yet for attacking the hard and
strong, nothing can compare with it.

The weak overcomes the strong.
The soft overcomes the hard.
Everyone knows this, but none
have the ability to practice it.

Therefore the sage says: one who
accepts the dung of the nation
becomes the master of soil and sustenance.
One who deals with the evils of the
nation becomes king under heaven.

True words seem paradoxical.¹

I often go to the Brian Browne Walker translation of the *Tao*, which this was, but I was curious about one line in particular, and looked at a variety of translations of this chapter.

The weak overcomes the strong.

¹ Brian Browne Walker translation

The soft overcomes the hard. [this is generally similar throughout, but then this line...]
Everyone knows this, but none
have the ability to practice it.

There is a lot of variety in the English translation for this line. Some translations say: few have the ability to practice it, or few see it. Stephen Mitchell writes:

The soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
but few can put it into practice.

The choices and context of translators can make a huge difference in meaning. In this particular case in Chapter 78, the translation is the difference between impossible and hard, none and few, which is a world of difference. And yet, if Brian and many other scholars are correct that the most accurate translation is that we know that the gentle overcomes the rigid, but none have the ability to practice it, there is an interesting out in the text, which is the last line, “true words seem paradoxical.” As if the Sage knows we will rebel against the idea that we will never get it right. How many things do we know are true, or the right path, or a better choice that we struggle to make? And perhaps this is a nugget from the *Tao* today. The *Tao* is about finding our way through opposing forces, that acting strong is a sign of weakness, that leaders lead by getting out of the way, that forces that are the most flexible can carve out mountains, and also in Chapter 78, that the person who accepts the dung becomes the king of compost. And so, if we accept that in managing hard things, people often react with rigidity, and miss the compost for the dung, that even if we are never able to fully flow like water in front of a challenge, we *can* still grow and overcome, and learn.

Possibility is the language of hope, of moving forward to a goal down the road. In our Unitarian Universalist history, we can look back to Theodore Parker, who observed that justice was not enacted in linear ways, but rather that sometimes societies move toward justice, sometimes they are stuck, and sometimes they take steps backward. Words of possibility have echoed through generations from his sermon “Of Justice and the Conscience” in 1853. He preached against the Fugitive Slave Law at the Orpheum Theater in Boston (at the bottom of the hill from the Statehouse and our denominational headquarters at the time, 25 Beacon). He said, Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble.

When we are working to change the world, *we have to believe that it is possible to do so.*
“hard is not impossible. Not yet
is different than never.”

If the universe does bend toward justice. If love, compassion, and justice are fundamental in building more whole communities. If life is a series of relationships and connections, then we are invited to make the leap of faith, that there is a hopeful future that we cannot fully see. We are invited to act as though we may get there, and do everything we can to bring everyone into connection and wholeness. We are invited to see the humanity in each person and to act with compassion. We are invited to cherish the beauty, love, and holiness in

each of our lives. We are called to do everything in our power to live into our moral vision, and to know that each act of compassion, no matter how small, impacts the web of life in real and powerful ways.

Sometimes the hard thing we are facing is like a sheer mountain wall in front of us. Sometimes it can feel so overwhelming we just sink down to our knees and say, enough. I have been there. Have you? What has helped you through? Have you dug inside for some hope, or grit, or compassion? Has someone else held out a hand? For me, when I am in a place of *enough*, I practice remembering that even if I am physically alone, I am never truly alone, that I am always connected to others. And I practice being like water, even if I never get there. Rev. Theresa Soto continues in her poem:

You, in community,
have an answer. You have a response to systems
of power and control and to the cost
of suffering.

You and your community, together are the answer.
You are not only a people of flame, but also a people of
Cold, clear truth. You know both where you fall short
and where you flourish, and where you
still reach.

Everything is still on fire, but all is not lost.
you remain, more nimble than steadfast. More
unshakeable than swayed by the latest rage.
You are here to put out the ravenous flames
and heal the world. Enough is enough.

So may it be. Amen.