

## **Toward a Theology of Power**

by Roger Mohr

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### From the Tao Te Ching, #30

Whenever you advise rulers in the way of the Tao,  
Counsel them not to use force to conquer the universe.  
For this would only cause resistance.  
Thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed  
Lean years follow in the wake of a great war.  
Just do what needs to be done.  
Never take advantage of Power.

Achieve results,  
But never glory in them.  
Achieve results,  
But never boast.  
Achieve results,  
But never be proud.  
Achieve results,  
Because this is the natural way  
Achieve results,  
But not through violence.

Force is followed by loss of strength  
This is not the way of the Tao  
That which goes against the Tao,  
Comes to an early end

Given to us by Lao Tsu in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

## **Building Community with Strawbales**

Before I started seminary, my wife, Lisa, and I had some time on our hands, so we looked around for something amusing to do for a few months. And we found it. We spent a summer working with an intentional community, helping them to get a stalled construction project back on the move. I have done quite a bit of consulting work with ecologically centered communities (they are called "eco-villages"), and I've also been a general contractor and green builder. This particular group was an eco-feminist community, very sensitive to issues of power and gender, and very interested in working with organic materials in their building. The work force was entirely volunteer, and residents decided in the morning what sort of work they wanted to do that day. Sometimes they would garden, or plant trees, or work in the kitchen. And sometimes, they would choose to work on construction.

Now they had succeeded in putting up several small dwellings, using strawbales to form the walls and then sealing the bales with a natural clay and lime mixture as a plaster. It may sound strange, but straw is an outstanding insulator, and the bales function like building blocks. If sealed properly, a strawbale building can last for a century, insulated to R-60 when most houses are only at R-15, and composed almost entirely of organic materials, many of them taken directly from the land. They had built three little houses this way, ranging from 100 square feet to about 400 square feet, and they felt like they were ready to face a bigger challenge. So they hired an architect, put together their ideas and dreams, and came up with a plan to build a two-story, 3500 square foot strawbale and timberframe structure, ten times the size of their largest building to date. It was a mammoth project, probably the biggest strawbale structure I had ever seen, a veritable straw palace.

They jumped right in, and started to build it themselves.

Now construction work is not for everybody. It is heavy, dirty, dangerous work, physically punishing and emotionally demanding. The folks who were doing the building were mostly volunteer interns, college students of both genders. Many of them had never even operated a hammer. And while they found the novelty of doing the smaller buildings amusing - stacking a few strawbales, mixing the plaster with their feet, then spreading it on with their hands - the demands of a project this big went well beyond the level of enjoyable labor, right on into work. And the sheer scope of the project frightened them away; it was just too much to get their heads around. Three years after they had started, they had only managed to raise the skeleton for the first floor, and gotten part of the decking down to start work on the second floor. They knew they were out of their league, so they asked us to help.

We started work after the first thaw, in late March. Some of the residents slept in the dwellings, but the few small buildings were full, and we slept in our tent. Our first night there, the temperature reached a low of 19 degrees. But some of the residents had actually wintered over in their tents. They were cold, muddy, and tired already, but very interested in getting the project done so that the next winter they might have amenities like a roof and walls, maybe even heat.

We started the next day, unpacking our equipment, setting up the work space, and arranging the materials we needed to get started. A warm front had come in during the night, and the temperature had risen into the thirties by midmorning. Lisa, and me, and one or two other hardy souls worked on a partially completed platform twenty feet in the air, facing a steady drizzle, driven by a raw wind that swept across the prairie at twenty miles an hour.

Most people opted to work in the kitchen that first day. But within a couple weeks, the sun came back, the members started to thaw out, and the interns started arriving, eager and cheerful. They were intimidated by the project, but a few of them began to come around to work with us on the building, as we completed the platform and raised the skeleton. They were mostly gentle hippie kids, sensitive and serious, very concerned about the environment, but physically a bit soft and maybe a little emotionally timid.

Still, our workforce grew continuously, and soon we had as many people as we could find tasks and tools for. They had to be patiently nurtured and taught about the work, but soon they began to discover their abilities, and to grow stronger. They began to conquer their fears and insecurities, and began to come together as a team.

By the end May, the sun was shining, the platform was completed, and the second story skeleton was standing proud and strong in the winds that seemed to blow incessantly across the green, rolling hills. At

that point, we began to build and raise the roof trusses. We were using recycled wood, materials they had salvaged from buildings that were being torn down. Much of our timber was oak, very hard, and very heavy. Some of the trusses required four people to carry them. And to get them into place, we had to have someone stand on the beams of the skeleton, to lift and position the truss, while a crew below pushed it up toward them. Imagine balancing on a narrow timber, like a gymnast's balancing beam, thirty feet in the air, and then kneeling to catch the end of a two hundred pound structure, while the people below you struggle to lift it into your outstretched hand.

We built and lifted 64 of those trusses for that building.

We managed to get the roof on, the windows and doors installed, and the bales laid before fall, leaving them to do the plaster the next year. And they could all get in out of the cold that winter. We sweated and worked in the wind and sun and rain, learning together, facing our fears together, and doing more that summer than had been accomplished in the previous three years. But I knew that we had done more than gotten the building together that summer. I remember one day, as we were finishing the last section of roof trusses. I was on the beams with one of the interns, a young architect, who had overcome a serious fear of heights to join me there. On the beam on the other side was a young Israeli woman with the heart of a lioness, who worked observing wolves in the wild, and another young man, a poet waiting to begin his MFA work that fall. On the platform below us were half a dozen men and women, including Lisa, carrying the trusses and lifting them to us.

But there, high in the air, sweating it out in the sun, with the temperature over ninety degrees, and our lives in one another's hands, we were happy together, laughing and joking, sure of ourselves and one another. We were playing the Temptations on the CD player, and as we worked we were dancing. We were so filled with joy that my partner, the one with the terrible fear of heights, was doing the twist with me on the high beam. And we linked arms and formed a miniature chorus line, doing high kicks as the Temptations sang *The Way You Do the Things You Do*, even as the vultures swept by overhead.

Now that is power.

### **Leadership and Tribal Life**

I once did some research on social organization in Native American tribes, looking primarily at the plains tribes and at the Pawnee in particular. I think what I found might be relevant here. When we think about leadership and tribal life, we may have a sense of a chief of some kind, who makes decisions about what was to be done. The tribe then executed the orders given by the chief. But in most cases, tribal life was entirely voluntary. A person announced that they had in mind to go raiding, or hunting, or whatever. Those who thought that this was a good idea, and that trusted this leader's judgment would agree to go along. But if they doubted the wisdom of the plan, or the capability of the leader, they didn't go. And even once they had joined, they could always change their minds and go home. A leader had only as much power as given to them because others expected to succeed with them, rather than because of institutional authority. Power was based primarily on the ability of a leader to produce positive results. And as there was no institutional structure to coerce compliance, leaders were held constantly and directly responsible for their decisions. The power of a leader was in their ability to attract energy, rather than their ability to enforce compliance. Power was based on the principle of attraction.

In a church, the same principle applies. Our leaders, both ministers and laity, should come to understand that we lead based on our ability to produce positive outcomes, not on our institutional authority. But here is the conflict. We belong to a culture that understands power institutionally, and coercively. Power is a matter of roles and rules, positions and policies. I am reminded of the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, and

the terrible temptation of the Ring of Power. The ring twists and corrupts the ring-bearer, no matter how pure a spirit they may be.

And the ring exerts enormous influence over those who see it, so that they desire it despite all costs, even to their friends and family, even their own lives.

All love, all morality, and all reason collapses before a pure lust for the ring, the lust for power itself. The ring of power destroys a person's soul.

The ring is an emblem of status, its power is entirely in the effect it has on others. That power is a matter of law, not spirit. And law is about coercion, force, punishment, power-over rather than power-with. Most of us in this room hold far more power than an average person, due to our social status, education, income, ethnicity, etc. Is this the truth about our use of power? Speaking for myself, I know that there is some truth here, for me. I walk a razor's edge between using my power for service to others, and using my power only to gain more power. What I need is a theology that helps me to discern how to use the power I have.

### **A Misperceived Denominational Identity**

I have been a UU for a little over a decade, and I am often surprised by the gap between our self image as a movement, and our statistical description. For example, I recently heard a group of my colleagues saying that they were sure at least eighty percent of our members had graduate degrees. According to the UUA's own sources, a little less than half of us have completed bachelors degrees. We are supposed to be very affluent, but our average income is only \$34,000 a year, not much above average. We are supposed to be the ruling class, but my own experience suggests that most of us are educators and social workers, and many of us are technicians and craftspersons. We are supposed to be an ancient New England elite, but ninety percent of us are converts, first generation UUs, and many, perhaps even most, of us come from working class families. I have a sense that we may be trying to connect with power by associating ourselves with a mythological lineage, like claiming descent from the gods.

But in my opinion, we draw our power as a movement from being the ones who have gained some taste of liberation and empowerment. We come together to strengthen one another, and sometimes, to try to liberate others. We are a gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

I think that most UU's are survivors, drawn together by our desire for justice and liberty. We are survivors of inequities of ethnicity, and class, and gender; survivors of prejudice based on our politics, sexuality, or religion; survivors of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and substance abuse. We have survived all of these things and many more. But in being survivors, we are also victims, victims of the power others held over us. Power. We often act like it is a dirty word.

UUs are often very uncomfortable with power. I know that my own attitude toward power is extremely conflicted. I am torn by desire for it, insecurity about my competence to handle it, and intense resistance towards allowing someone else to have power over me.

### **Self-admitted Privilege**

At this point, I will have to self-disclose a bit more than I might like to. But I'll trust your goodwill, and take my chances. I come from a background of poverty that extended well into my adulthood. I feel like I have been very much one of the oppressed, and I hunger for power as a means of protecting myself from further exploitation. But another truth is that I have quite a bit of power. As a mature Euro-American male, with verbal skills, physical strength, college degrees, a profession, and a good suit, I have a great

deal of power, much more than most people could ever dream of having. I may not be the president, and I may be living below the poverty line again, thanks to grad school, but it is rare for me to walk into a room and not be given at least some privilege, just for showing up. And I definitely like having power a lot better than I liked not having it, and I don't mind having some, finally.

It may be a little risky for me to speak this frankly to you, as a room full of strangers. Yet I think that it may be helpful. I saw on many of your faces that you found your place on the list of what we have survived. We have probably all been victims of power, at least in some sense. And if for only that reason, I doubt that there are many people in this space that can honestly claim that they have no desire for power. Some of us may desire more than others, of course.

Most of us want at least some power, but many of us resent it when anyone has power over us. I am certainly subject to this critique.

### **Pragmatism and a Desire for a more Loving World**

Now, I am a pragmatist, all the way to the bone. When I look at the question of theism, for instance, I ask myself, what is God good for? I don't really care whether such a being is metaphysically real, or whether the existence of such a being is propositionally true or false. I want to know whether I can use God effectively to accomplish my ministry. God's track record on answering prayer is well below mediocre, not much different from random chance. But what I've found is that the word "God" is so loaded with cultural power, so loaded with emotion and authority, that I can't afford to abandon it. I have to use it, whether I like it or not. God is a source of what? Power.

But I'm a pragmatist because I am actually driven by a desire to create a more loving and nurturing world. I want to make life more enjoyable and meaningful.

I don't really need a fantasy of a heavenly utopia, a perfect world; I like the one I'm living in. But I do think that there is room for improvement, things that I think would make life more pleasant for all concerned. I think that we have simply gotten to the point where we, as a species, have so much power that we are having trouble finding constructive ways to use it. But we are being wonderfully successful in finding destructive ways. The thing is that we seem to be trapped in an abusive relationship to power. We want more and more and more, like addicts. We seem to have forgotten that our existence here could be just for the fun of it.

Now maybe you heard me say that our lives are really unimportant. That's not what I said; I said it might be just for fun. Here's a question: Where did the idea that there is a single, ultimate, infinitely serious intention to our lives come from? Where did we get the idea that we were living according to some higher purpose? What might that purpose be? Well that's three questions, but here's my point. We are some several billion people, with many billions of non-human companions, living on a rock, orbiting a middling star, on the outer arm of a pretty typical galaxy. Why don't we just make the best of it together?

### **Mountain Lions versus Humans**

But what about power? I think the reason we are so obsessed with power is that we are really a soft, sensitive, sensual species, with little to protect us except our gift for relationships. I understand that out west, they have reintroduced mountain lions into some of their parks. Now a mountain lion is more than a match for a person. They usually attack from above, stronger, faster, and heavier than we are, armed with teeth and claws like daggers. We are meals on wheels to a big predator. Human beings are the softest and slowest and weakest of prey animals, if one is a mountain lion. We only have our ability to communicate with one another, and mobilize collectively against a common enemy. But one secret of power is that it

exists as a matter of relationships, and how those relationships are structured. A predator that attacks a human being is likely to die of it. Oh sure, they'll get one or two of us.

We are soft, and slow, and weak. But we are also aggressive, clever, and social.

We come together, and there is hell to pay. For us, power is the ability to bring people together. I'll say that again, because that is a major part of the thesis. Power is the ability to bring people together.

### **Power and the Spirit of Life**

Now to start to pull all of this together, in what I've said so far, there are two basic premises. One is that power is the ability to bring people together. The other is that our life is about making the best of it together. I think that if we take these two statements, together, we might find a composite statement to serve as the basis of a theology of power. The purpose of power is to bring people together to make our lives better. The purpose of power is to bring people together, to make our lives better. That's pretty simple, but I think that's about right.

I want to invite you to think about power as the ability to channel the spirit of life. Power is the ability to enhance our lives together. How do we know if we succeed? We know because we dance. We know because people are drawn to us, and share their energy with us. We know because we are happier, more alive, more joyous. We know because the building gets built. But we also know because our friends become so free that they not only face their fear, but forget it altogether in their joy. The purpose of power is to bring people together to make our lives better. We must trust in the gift of the spirit flowing through all of us. Power is the flow of the spirit between us. Let's open ourselves to the spirit of life, and dance our joy together.

Blessed be!

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