

Who Moved My Happiness?

Yao Jingling

Once upon a time, there lived a gentleman by the name of Richard. He worked as a lawyer, famous in his field for his eloquence, integrity and kindness. He had helped the poor fight for justice at his own cost and participated regularly in community service to disseminate legal knowledge to the public with notable enthusiasm. Not only did his righteous deeds bring him reputation, but also more businesses to guarantee a decent income. As if those had not been enough to make him the object of envy, he also had a perfect family to balance the success in career, with an elegant, tender wife and a lively, pretty daughter aged eight.

Days would have passed by as happily and tranquilly as ever if it had not been for the tragic accident that very morning. Richard was driving his beloved daughter to school as usual when he suddenly got a call from his secretary for an emergency at work, which he had to fix as soon as possible. As his destination was just in the opposite direction of his daughter's school, he apologized gently and kissed her goodbye by the nearest subway station, which the child took sensibly. Seeing her off into the crowd, Richard didn't get the slightest idea that this would be the last time to behold his girl's figure. On his way hurrying off, a bomb blew off in the subway, cruelly sweeping out dozens of lives, including the innocent girl's.

On hearing of the tragedy, his wife, robbed of all her reason by the sudden death of the child, pinned all the blame on her husband, for his failing to drive the child to school had placed her on the cursed subway, the express to Hell. Overwhelmed by her own raging sadness, she overlooked the fact that he was bearing as much, if not more, and had reproved himself to death for millions of times. She claimed his irresponsibility and left him in wrath and despair. Struck by the death of his daughter and the departure of his wife consecutively, he felt the situation more than he could bear and found it impossible to concentrate on his work anymore. The once sweet home, every corner of which reminding him of all the beautiful memories, multiplied his agony so much that he had to move to his friends' as evasion. It was an apartment rent by his three best friends in university, Zhang the Taoist, Basil the Muslim and Arvin the Marxist.

Well aware of Richard's sufferings, the three friends empathized with his deep pain and sorrow, although for most time of his first week with them, he simply shut himself up in silence. In the hope of extricating him from the past misery, Zhang, Basil and Arvin invited Richard to an outing to the country on a weekend.

Walking along the lane across the flourishing field, Richard did seem relaxed by the mixed scent of moist mud and wild flowers, for he started pouring out his bitterness to his companions for the first time.

Richard Questions His Fate

“How come the misfortune settled on me?”

So abrupt, so incredible, and too much to take.

Vicki, such a lovely, high-spirited child,

Who can ever imagine her dying young?
O She was only eight, a bud that hasn't bloom,
Having not tasted the real joy of life yet.
As pure as the early morning dew,
As lissome as a summer cloud,
And as good-tempered as an angel,
How could a child like her perish?
What on earth had she done wrong?
If the punishment was directed against me,
Then in what sense was it justified?
I have searched my doings, as a lawyer, a husband, a father and a
citizen,
But found nothing that deserved retribution.
Haven't I stood by justice?
Haven't I reached out to the needy?
Haven't I loved and supported my family?
Haven't I always obeyed my conscience?
Why am I confronted by such a loss,
On top of which, Sarah also left for the very reason?
Drowned as she was in sadness herself,
She couldn't go so far as to desert me in the abyss of despair.
How should all these have ever happened?
How could I continue my life?
If the past happiness just served as an irony,
I wish I had never possessed it,
I wish I had never been brought to the world!"

Zhang the Taoist: Follow the Way without Questioning

“Richard, what is your point in keeping on asking why? Have you ever heard that ‘the great Way is ineffable’ and ‘the way that displays itself is not the Way’¹? The secret of the Way is far beyond us human being’s perception. It seems as though there is a True Ruler, but there is no particular evidence for Her. We may have faith in Her ability to function, but cannot see Her form. She has attributes but is without form.² We are no more than negligible creatures among myriad things, so small that we even don’t have the awareness of being so because of the incapability of imagining the great. In this sense, are we any different from the sparrow which laughs at the huge P’eng³? The Way is too profound for us to understand. Therefore, he who knows to stop at what he does not know has attained the ultimate.⁴

All transformations are but the splendid work of the Way. Life and death, preservation and loss, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat—these are all the transformations of affairs and the operation of destiny. Day and night they alternate before us, but human knowledge is incapable of perceiving their source.⁵ Therefore, we should not let them disturb our equanimity, nor should we let them enter our mind. What’s more, are there really distinctions between the seeming opposites? The only difference comes from our concepts and notions. Through the Way, myriad things all become one. There is neither creation nor destruction, for they all revert to join the Unity, which only the

1 From Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1998.). "On the Equality of Things".

2 *Ibid.*, "On the Equality of Things".

3 *Ibid.*, "Carefree Wandering".

4 *Ibid.*, "On the Equality of Things".

5 *Ibid.*, "Dechong Fu".

perceptive understand.⁶ So, all we should do is to conform to the Way, whose principles beyond our understanding, to accept the destiny without emotions and to rely on nothing.

Once you have relied on nothing, Richard, you will slough off your limbs and trunk, dim your intelligence, depart from your form, leave knowledge behind, and become identical with the Transformational Thoroughfare⁷. Once you have attained this state of ‘sit and forget’, you will achieve a genuine carefree life.”

Richard’s Reply to Zhang

“Zhang, the carefree picture you have described does seem perfect, but isn’t it a bit too ideal to realize? I have to admit that I am far from the realm of ultimate Taoist thought, as I cannot alienate my daughter from myself and let her be at the disposal of the Way. Nor can I cease to question my destiny or take anything for granted. Zhang, if you were ever cast in my role, you would find the picture too vague and distant to console yourself.”

Basil the Muslim: Believe in God and Be Patient

“Richard, behold the Book!
 The Qur’an, the true guidance from God,
 Will build your faith
 And lead you to tranquil and happiness.
 For God has promised to believers,
 ‘No fear shall fall upon them, nor shall they grieve.’⁸

6 *Ibid.*, "On the Equality of Things".

7 *Ibid.*, "The Great Ancestral Teacher".

8 From Surah 2 "The Cow" in *The Qur'an*, tr. Tarif Khalidi (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 2008). 2:62.

Remember that God is Almighty, All-Knowing.
 He is not unmindful of what you do⁹ and what happens.
 Remember that He bestowed his bounty upon you¹⁰,
 Built up Gardens¹¹ for those who have believed and done good deeds,
 But set up Fire¹² for the unbelievers.
 He watches your every deed,
 And arranges results according to causes.
 If you are upright and blameless,
 Believe in Him and obey Him as ever,
 For He will never forget and desert believers.

Richard, seek help in patience and prayer;
 God stands with those who are patient.
 Do not say about those who are killed in the cause of God that they are
 dead;
 They are indeed alive, but you do not perceive them.¹³

He shall be testing us with some fear and famine, with loss of wealth,
 lives and crops:
 But give glad tidings to the patient,
 To those who, when calamity strikes,
 Say: 'We belong to God, and to Him we shall return.'
 Upon them descend blessings from God and mercy.

9 *Ibid.*, 2:85.

10 *Ibid.*, 2:46.

11 *Ibid.*, 2:25.

12 *Ibid.*, 2:24.

13 *Ibid.*, 2:154.

They are guided aright.¹⁴
And you should be one of them.

Remember when He made the covenant with us, and raised the Mount above us—‘Hold fast to what We have revealed to you!’¹⁵ Always render thanks to God, and you will be blessed and preferred.”

Richard’s Reply to Basil

“However, Basil, could you please reveal to me
The boundary between testing and punishment?
Where does the exploratory behavior end?
And where does the mean revenge begin?
Isn’t the plunder of my daughter’s life
Too fatal to be a test?
What else than her return to life
Do I wish for as blessings and mercy?
But how can it ever be possible?”

Arvin the Marxist: It is More a Social Issue

“Basil, I hope that you won’t take my words as offence but I have to say that religion may not as well be Richard’s solution. The more of himself he attributes to God, the less he has left in himself.¹⁶ Richard, I am sorry for your sufferings, but I’d rather see it more as social misery than individual pain.

14 *Ibid.*, 2:157.

15 *Ibid.*, 2:64.

16 From Karl Marx, “Alienated Labour”, tr. T. B. Bottomore, in *In Dialogue with Humanity: Textbook for General Education Foundation Program* (Hong Kong: Office of University General Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011).

I wonder if you three have looked into the cause of the tragedy. Anyway, I have, indeed. According to the investigation of the police, the murderer is a worker from the lower class, taking revenge on the society because he didn't earn enough to send his only son to hospital and watched him die. It is not a crime that originated from the individual's personality, but rather a tragedy produced by the capitalist world we live in. Since the accumulation of capital and the appropriation of property came into existence, workers have been alienated from their labor for hundreds of years. The product of labor is alienated; the act of production within labor is alienated; the worker's species-life is alienated; other men are also alienated from him.¹⁷ The labor no longer belongs to the laborers, who perform it, but is in the possession of the capitalists, who at the same time take control of the laborers.

The worker has become a commodity and the demand, upon which the worker's life depends, is determined by the caprice of the capitalists. Whenever the price is forced to fall, the worker is the first to suffer, for the extensive division of labor makes it extremely difficult for him to direct his labor into other uses and he is subordinate to the capitalist.¹⁸ Workers are placed at the mercy of capitalists, who actually spare no mercy but exploit workers as much as they can. The lower class struggles to live by the lowest possible wage, which is compatible with common humanity only with a bestial existence.¹⁹ In such a dreadful situation, how could we expect them to think good of the society? Does this revenge originate from nothing?

In conclusion I would say, Richard, your misfortune is the consequence

17 *Ibid.*, pp.444–446.

18 *Ibid.*, p.435.

19 *Ibid.*, p.436.

of the repulsive society. To prevent such calamity from happening again and bring comfort to the dead, you should promote the reform of the society, liberating the victims from capitalism. Pull yourself together, and strive for a better society!”

Richard’s Reply to Arvin

“Arvin, you have pointed out the necessity of the calamity, but what about the contingency involved? I have made my efforts to promote equality and justice within my capability, which still fails to hold back all the occurrence of hatred and revenge. More to the point, why me? Why was my family sucked into the incident? ” Pausing for a few seconds, Richard continued, “I am grateful to all your consolation and enlightenment. However, the acceptance of the removal of my past happiness and the key to the future one, hopefully, need more time and my own contemplation.”

Richard wandered forward with his eyebrows frowning and minds churning, in the compassionate gazing of Zhang, Basil and Arvin behind.

Two days after their conversation, an unexpected visitor called at the apartment when Richard was alone. It was his sister-in-law, Emily, who had been volunteering in India until her return after the disaster. Richard received her with surprise and the worst expectation that she brought his wife’s divorce agreement for him to sign. To his relief, it was not the purpose of her visit.

Emily the Buddhist: Emptiness Helps Transcend Fear

“Richard, I dare say that I can feel your pain and despair, for I have been with Sarah and shared her grief these days, but it shouldn’t be the end for either of you. Maybe you have been cursing the impermanence of life, the same as

Sarah since receiving the heartbreaking news. Perhaps hard to understand, it is impermanence that makes everything possible.²⁰ Yes, impermanence brings about incidents we are most reluctant to face, while it is, at the same time, the spring of hope. Look ahead, Richard, and you will realize that changes do fall upon the dreadful current situation, thanks to impermanence.

Have you heard of emptiness, the pivot of Buddhism? I would suggest you to empty yourself to overcome the pain. Emptiness has the least to do with nothingness and despair. To be empty is to be empty of a separate self.²¹ It does not mean nonexistence, but co-existence and inter-being,²² even more than existence. Everything consists of everything else and every being is inter-being. Therefore, everything is neither produced nor destroyed, so is Vicki. You may ask, “Vicki has left us! How can you claim that she is never destroyed?” But keep in mind, that to die means that from something you become nothing,²³ which proves impossible in the light of inter-being. She just takes on other forms of being. As the falling leaf has its life’s continuation in the tree, Vicki lives on through our lives, through our memories and our eternal love for her.

Don’t complain about sufferings, for everything is inter-related, everything is made up of everything else.²⁴ At last, it turns out that there is no suffering, no origination of suffering, no extinction of suffering and no path.²⁵ Existence and non-existence, happiness and sufferings, are merely our

20 From Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (NY: Parallax P, 1988). “Long Live Emptiness”.

21 *Ibid.* “Empty of What?”.

22 *Ibid.* “Empty of What?”.

23 *Ibid.* “Happy Continuation”.

24 *Ibid.* “Roses and Garbage”.

25 *Ibid.* “The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra”.

notions. As long as you grasp the interdependence of everything, you are an awakened being, transcending sufferings and overcoming all pain.²⁶

When it comes to the current situation, though, your first and foremost task is to understand Sarah. Perfect understanding calls for penetration, to enter each other and be everything in each other.²⁷ Both of you were indulged too much in your own emotions to penetrate each other at first. Nevertheless, Vicki is the favorite of you both, and nobody other than you two suffers the deepest pain of losing her. Communicating your sorrow might be torturing for a while, but reciprocal consolation between yourselves serves as the best medicine to cure the same wounds. I have convinced Sarah of this fact, and now whether the change is to occur depends on you.”

With no more hesitation, Richard followed Emily to meet Sarah. With tears in the eyes of both, they hugged tightly and kissed as the symbol of restoration. There followed so much to talk, to listen and to feel that I would not express it here.

A week later, they moved back to their home and Richard took up his job again, as ardent and discreet as ever. Both of them played more active parts in community service and charity works. Richard even joined the legislation committee to improve the distribution system and protect the rights of the poor. It was less than two years before Sarah gave birth to a boy, Victor, to whom they devoted as much love as to Vicki. Richard still missed Vicki, but felt as if she was never absent, as an inspiration to his every effort to a better world for her younger brother, as well as millions of their contemporaries.

²⁶ *Ibid.* “The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra”.

²⁷ *Ibid.* “The Way of Understanding”.

Although he was not turned into a Buddhist, the essence of emptiness led him to believe that Vicki lived in every child, the happiness of whom he was held responsible for, and this added to his happiness.

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Teacher's comments:

Jingling's essay is a beautifully written, powerful, and often poignant reflection on the human condition and the search for happiness. Asked to create a modern figure of Job, who suffers loss and is counseled by four philosophical friends, Jingling tells the story of the successful lawyer Richard, his wife and eight-year old daughter. The narrative is eloquent, even at times poetic, and the characters are vividly drawn and imaginative. What is most impressive, however, is the compelling dialogue between Richard and his university friends who are cleverly named, Zhang the Taoist, Basil the Muslim, Arvin the Marxist, and Emily the Buddhist. Their efforts to explain and justify painful and seemingly undeserved suffering faithfully represent their respective beliefs derived from the texts of our course 'In Dialogue with Humanity'. The story's ending is especially effective. This delightful essay instructs, yet at the same time inspires and moves its reader. (Robert Gurval)