

## FEATURE

# The Wisdom of Confucius

Can it really be so simple? **Civility, respect, courtesy, humility, trust.**  
Can these five be the key to universal harmony?

*A Sermon given by Reverend Krista Taves at the Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel in Ellisville, Missouri on March 19th, 2006*



**T**here came a day when the man we know as Confucius could take it no longer, and he quit his job. It was no ordinary job. Confucius had attained the office of minister of justice in the state of Lu. He was revered for his wisdom and his discipline. He was capable, he was loyal, and he was also committed to a life of virtue. And that is why he quit. His boss, the Marquis of Lu, had, under the guidance of Confucius, taken the state to unprecedented heights of prosperity and moral order. But the Marquis had fallen off track, tempted into immorality and selfishness. Confucius worked hard to bring the Marquis back. In his mind, moral order and prosperity went hand in hand. Lose the moral order, lose the prosperity. But the Marquis was resistant, and so Confucius walked

out, determined to find a statesman who was ready to hold himself to the kind of moral uprightness that Confucius believed was called for in good leadership. Confucius didn't have much luck. For 13 years, he walked from state to state, visiting dignitary after dignitary, presenting them with his ethical code, and no one bit. At times he even found his life in danger by those who opposed him.

What was it about his teachings that so threatened the leaders of his day? Confucius was promoting a moral standard that he believed had been handed down from the ancients, moral standards that would promote social stability and orderliness. He offered five rules of personal conduct that he believed would lead to universal harmony were they to be followed:

*Do unto others that which you want others to do unto you.*

*Do what is right, regardless of what others do. Be courteous and civil.*

*Learn as much as you can, for learning takes you into knowledge.*

*Trust in your fellow human beings, and earn their trust by demonstrating your reliability.*

*(from notes of T.C. Peng, a retired scientist and Confucian lecturer, October 1996)*

Now what could possibly be so threatening about that?

Confucius was born into a society that was rigidly hierarchical. Everyone knew their place. That hierarchy began in the family, which was more than often multigenerational in his time. The primary relationship was between

husband and wife, for between them they provided for and nurtured the family unit. Within that unit was a strict hierarchy - The elderly had more power and prestige than the young and were to be obeyed. Men had more authority than women. Children were to respect their parents and do what was asked of them. Based on your place in the family, you knew what was expected of you.

Society as a whole modeled the family structure. You knew what was expected of you and what you could expect of others based on your rank in society. Higher class people wielded more power, and lower class people were obligated to respect that power. Confucius never challenged or questioned this. This was 2400 years ago, and I imagine at that time this system made sense, even though much of it may offend our modern sensibilities.

What concerned Confucius was the abuse that he saw taking place within that system. In a society as rigid as his, the powerless were very vulnerable to those with power. Confucius believed that the powerful had a moral obligation to use their power responsibly and compassionately. But his world was a world of chaos. This was warring times, and with war comes political corruption and social disintegration. In war, then as now, it's the poor and the powerless who suffer the most. The powerful will always have ways to take care of themselves. Confucius was frustrated with the prevalence of leaders who focused more on using war to increase their own power than on using their power to better the lives of those beneath them, and everyone was paying the price.

**Why was Confucius so threatening? Basically, he was telling those who have power, "It's not about us. It's never been about us. It never should be about us. Leadership is about those we serve. They are our priority."**

In a political climate based on suspicion and distrust, he advocated trusting others and making yourself trustable. In a time of war, he was asking them to play fair, to be civil. He was

asking them to do the right thing, even if no one else did it. In the face of aggression, he promoted restraint. In his insistence on continuous learning, he promoted humility, for you must never become arrogant or conceited. There is always something you don't know. No wonder his message was not received well. He proclaimed a path to universal harmony in a political system where the powerful had a stake in disharmony.

**Sound familiar?** We live in a society, in a country, in a political system, that has a stake in disharmony. We live in a culture that promotes, maybe even needs, distrust. We seem to be in a vacuum of competent political leadership. And there is moral chaos all around us in the form of the injustices that happen to the least and the most powerless in our society. Not unlike the China of 2400 years ago, we too are in a time of political and military unrest and those least able to protect themselves are paying the price.

What I find most interesting when I look at the teachings of Confucius, is that **some things don't change**. We have high expectations for those that we ask to lead us, to take care of us, to provide direction and focus, to set policy, and to ensure the security of our way of life. And when our leaders fail us, we feel betrayed, as if some great moral code has been violated. In this country, strong links are made between the morality of leaders and their ability to lead. And we don't just look at their public morality, but at their private morality as well. This country's citizens claim ownership of their leaders' private lives in a way not seen in most other western countries.

Not unlike many in Confucius' time, we want there to be harmony and unity in our world. We want leaders who represent what we consider to be noble and true. Some of us want a leader who is strong and decisive. Some of us want a leader who is a nurturer. Most want some of both. All of us want a leader who promotes justice. The fact is that even though we don't live in a rigidly hierarchical society, we are still dependent on and

vulnerable to our leaders. Their choices impact our lives in minute ways.

And, not unlike many in Confucius' time, we too look to the family unit as the basis for how we want to order society. Political theorist George Lakoff argues that most Americans are drawn to one of two moral systems – the authoritarian father morality, and the nurturing parent morality. Conservatives prefer the authoritarian father morality. This system emphasizes obedience, black and white understandings of right and wrong, and strict discipline coupled with a father who leads and a wife and children who follow. Liberals tend to prefer the nurturing parent morality. This system emphasizes mutuality, caring and nurturing. Rather than father leading family, this family is egalitarian. Both parents share equally in making decisions, they involve their children in the choices they make, and discipline involves more reconciliation than punishment. George Lakoff believes that the way we run our families tends to be the way we want to run our world, whether we're talking about our work places, our schools, our churches, and our governments. We want political leaders whose leadership style mirrors the kind of parenting that we consider to be moral.<sup>1</sup> So in some ways, we are not so unlike Chinese society 2400 years ago.

**Did you ever think** that what happened inside the walls of your home mattered so much? Gives a whole different meaning to the term “family values”, doesn't it? So often we think of “family values” as a term that belongs to the moral majority and the right wing. But that's just not the case. They just happen to have the loudest family values. We all have family values. We just use different moral codes to express them.

Confucius looked at the marital couple as the primary and most important relationship in society. If the marital relationship was in good order, the family as a whole would be in good order, and society as a whole would be in good order. Why was the marital relationship privileged in this way? If you look at that

relationship, it embodies both the experience of sharing power, and the experience of wielding power. As a unit, you and your partner have to figure out who does what, and respect and care for each other while you're doing it. As a unit, you also have power over your children. If you can embody right relationship in that circumstance, you have put in place the cornerstone of right relationship with all who are dependent on you.

**And what makes for right relationship?** Do unto others that which you want others to do unto you. Do what is right, regardless of what others do. Be courteous and civil. Learn as much as you can, for learning takes you into knowledge. Trust in your fellow human beings, and earn their trust by demonstrating your reliability.



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I don't know about you, but when I hear the idea that the marital relationship is the basis for universal harmony, I feel cynical. What about the rest of us? Many of us aren't married. Some of us can't get married. So what about us? When I hear the phrase, “universal harmony,” I also feel cynical. Isn't that what the 60s was about, and what really lasted from that time of free love? I don't feel cynical about using those five principles to deepen and improve my personal life. But I do feel cynical about their ability to change the world, to bring universal harmony. I watch CNN. I listen to NPR. I watch the Daily Show. I sometimes even dare to watch Fox! Things don't seem to be getting better, and I feel increasingly distrustful of my world. We do not live in peaceful times. We have a stake in disharmony. We live in a punishment based society. When it comes to social programs our country has a scarcity mentality, but when it comes to war there are always the resources to make it happen. And

we live in a culture where it is all about us and the satisfaction of our needs. Can those five simple principles really be enough to get us out of this mess?

Perhaps such cynicism can be justified as a human response to injustices that just seem to keep getting worse, but perhaps cynicism is also a form of avoidance. Cynicism gets us off the hook. We can say, "It won't make a difference anyways, so why try?" Maybe cynicism is what we use to mask the fact that we are afraid to be creative and imaginative for fear of failure.

**What if we started small.** With the primary relationships in our lives. Now, not all of us are parents, not all of us are married, so if we start small, we need to be a little more expansive in what we understand as our primary foundational relationships. Each of us have relationships that are equal, each of us have relationships where we have power over another. And each of us has relationships where someone else has had more power than us. We all know that relationships are no easy thing. All kinds of things get in the way – misunderstandings, old baggage, resentment, pride, and the desire to use that relationship for our own benefit. **Our relationships get in trouble when we think it's all about us.**

We are in a religion where we have often allowed it to be all about us. Unitarian Universalism, with its emphasis on individualism, has often descended into a smorgasbord of personal likes and dislikes. We often shop for religion rather than do religion. So although our focus on individual freedom is our hallmark, and probably one of the strongest features of our religion, it is also our Achilles heel, our vulnerable spot, where we get in trouble. And it is why we are redeveloping our theology into a theology of relationships. Confucius can help us do that because his philosophy that is focused on the principle that it's not all about us. It's about us in relationship. It is in relationship that we heal, that we change the world, that we hold out hope for a better way, that we might even

recover the likelihood of universal harmony, even though it feels so very very far away.

It must have felt very far away in Confucius time. After 13 years of traveling from state to state, Confucius gave up lobbying political leaders. But he didn't give up. In his travels, he had gathered disciples, those who wished to learn from his example. He returned to Lu and spent the remainder of his time with those who wanted to be changed by his philosophy. And 2400 years later, his philosophy has spread throughout the world, and it is still changing lives.

**So let's be creative. Let's be imaginative. Let's start small and let's reclaim that hope for universal harmony, even if we feel crazy doing it, even if others declare us crazy for trying. What do we have to lose? So be it.**

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<sup>1</sup> George Lakoff., *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* 2nd Edition. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002.