

ON LIFE AND OTHER PARADOXES, Bert Hellinger

From Introduction by **Ralph Metzner**

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Hellinger often uses an expression that was also a favourite of Martin Heidegger's: the wonderful German word Gelassenheit, literally meaning "letting-be-ness". Its feeling is something like "serenity", although there is no exact English equivalent.

Experience is meaningful when one leaves it behind.

Letting means: moving on, transformed.

When we can let something or someone be, we can stop judging, explaining, moralizing, imposing our concepts and interpretations, and instead perceive and acknowledge what really is, and thereby open up the possibilities of transformation.

We are released from evil, only when we can serenely let it go.

The concepts of letting-be, thus perceiving what is, and in this way transcending the dualities of "judgmentalism", are very reminiscent of Taoist and Zen Buddhist teachings. The ever-changing flow of water was for the Taoist sages both a metaphor for the natural way to live, the *Tao*, and emblematic of the desirable way to act. "Water is the softest thing in the world, but it overcomes stone, the hardest." It is both nourishing, the highest good, and it always sinks humbly to the lowest point. In the words of the *Hsin Hsin Ming*, by Sengstan, the third Zen patriarch, "If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything."

Hellinger's saying about the intrinsic order are reminiscent of another teaching of the ancient Chinese sages, namely the concept of *li*, which played an important part in both Confucian and Taoist thought. For the Taoist, according to Alan Watts, "*li* may be understood as organic order, as distinct from mechanical or legal order." In Confucius' thought, which is much more concerned with human relations in the family and society, *li* is often translated as "rite" or "propriety", the right way to do a sacrifice ritual, the right relationship between parents and children. "Without *li* humanity, righteousness, and morality cannot be achieved...correct relationships of rulers and ministers, superiors and inferiors, fathers and sons...cannot be achieved", says the *Records of Rites*, a Confucian classic. Confucian texts have explicit guidelines for the appropriate relationships between a first wife and a second wife, for example; just as Hellinger points out, there is a definite ordering principle at work for the relationship between former and present partners.

In pointing to some similarities between Hellinger's teachings and those of the old Chinese philosophers, I do not mean to imply that he derived his philosophy from these writings. It is

one of the remarkable features of his work that he is resolutely committed to the empiricism of phenomenology: that is, all of his statements are offered as observations made in the practice of family systems therapy, not as generalizable principles or truths. The “statements of empowerment” are not prescriptions, to be applied by rote; they were observed to be empowering, bringing about a resolution, in particular situations.

To those who would challenge his statements, Hellinger simply refers to his observations. The inherent order, he says, is not an opinion that one can have or change, at will. “It is not thought up, it is discovered.” The philosophical similarities to other teachings can function to clarify and deepen our understanding of some of these deepest paradoxes and mysteries of human existence.