

## The Tao of Willie Nelson

Rev. Julie Forest

Perhaps you saw the title of today's worship service and thought, "Willie Nelson, right on!" Perhaps you saw it and thought, "I know UUs are liberal, but how is this topic holy or sacred?" Well, we can approach this question several different ways. If you turn to your grey hymnal in the front of the book, right underneath the 7 principles that we as UU's affirm and promote, you will find our six sources. And one of our six sources is wisdom from the East. When we say wisdom from the East we are referring to Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist scriptures, stories and teachers. When studying the life of Willie Nelson, I found that he not only knew about Taoism through the study of it, he lives his life within Taoist principles. Willie says, "There is no single definition of the Tao, but I like to think of it as finding a balance between resistance and surrender. If you try to walk against the current in a flowing stream, your journey will be a constant struggle. If you lose your footing and are carried away by the current, no matter how much you struggle, you may drown. But if you float with the current, you will become part of the river and will be carried on an incredible ride and you will find a safe harbor. In the same way, if you let yourself join the River of Life, you will be carried on an amazing journey, and find it easier to let go of the unimportant stuff."

The Tao Te Ching is a philosophy of life based on a Chinese text translated as the Way and its Power. The Tao Te Ching is the work of several writers who were inspired by the teachings of a guy named Lao Tzu, who lived about 600 years before Jesus of Nazareth. Like all of life, the Tao is an eternal mystery and has so much meaning that it may be easier to say what it is *not*, rather than what it *is*. This is made clear in the very first lines of the text: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The Tao that can be known is not the eternal Tao." The Tao is not a traditional religion. It has no gods and can be helpful to Jews and Buddhists as well as to Christians and folks that practice earth-based spirituality. Although the full mystery of the Tao can't be measured and quantified it can be experienced.

The Tao connects the personal with the universal. It is a link between you and other people. It is the link between you and the natural world, the link between you and the universe. And, of course, the Tao is the link between you and yourself. The Tao is a way of life and it is the art of living in both the impermanence of life as well as the mysterious. The Tao is the deepest well of the purest water. You cannot see it or hear it, touch or taste it. And yet, you cannot use it up.

The Tao presents several challenges for us western strivers. First, according to the Tao we are supposed to go with the flow, to surrender. Many of us find this challenging and live under constant pressure to succeed and to exert our will on our personal lives, in our homes, with our families, at work and even at church. Somehow, we believe that if we strive and struggle and insist on our way, that we are better and more worthy people. Often it just means that we are tired, sitting in judgement of ourselves and other people, fueled by ego and are living unsustainable lives. And by unsustainable, I mean it in both personal terms, and in relationship to the earth. Earth gets used up and so do we. The Tao is pointing to living in a spiritual and earth sustaining way that doesn't exhaust our personal resources or our earth resources.

The next challenge of the Tao is to live an authentic life. If you live your life in accordance with your own essential nature, then your life will be empowered by the Tao. Shakespeare described it in his own words when he said, "To thine own self be true." The opposite of the Tao would be to live your life in defiance of your original nature, in which case your chances of finding tranquility are pretty much shot. Willie provides a living example of this.

By being true to what is unique about himself, Willie connects each of us to the best parts of ourselves. In his book [The Tao of Willie Nelson](#), he writes, "This book is my way of sharing a little of what I've learned in 70+ years of making music and making friends on this beautiful planet. The way my life has changed seems pretty amazing to me. Somewhere along the way, the freckle faced, dirt eating kid from Abbott, Texas, ended up being happy. Despite all my ups and downs, one of the things

I've learned and practiced is to quit trying to be someone else. Trying to be someone else is the hardest road there is.”

Some people say that Willie helped to heal the great divide between hippies and rednecks. Willie learned that when you put your life in a good place, good things follow. Willie is comfortable around millionaires, billionaires and bums. And it's not that he is different around each of those kinds of people; he's the same person no matter who he's with. He talks to Congressional leaders about farm policy, and later he'll jam with a punk rock band. Being true to what is unique about himself, he illuminates that which connects each of us to the best parts of ourselves.

Willie Nelson is an American icon. His voice is as comforting as the American landscape and his songs as familiar as the color of the sky. His face is as worn as the Rocky Mountains. His appeal crosses nearly all social and economic lines and he has been instrumental in shaping both country and pop music. Emmylou Harris once said, “If America could sing with one voice, it would be Willie’s.” He has cut more than 250 albums, written 2,500 songs and sold 50 million records. Throughout most of his life he has remained true to himself and has accumulated some wisdom about life that is worth sharing.

He is resilient. Many times he has picked himself up and dusted himself off and got back on the road again. Willie has seen the best and worst life has to offer. He was born in 1933 in Texas, during the Great Depression. He was abandoned by both his mother and his father, while still a young child and was raised, with his sister Bobbie, by their grandparents. He wrote his first song when he was six and has played in bands since his early teens. He began to pay attention to his inner self as a child, and this practice has continued and grown as he himself has grown.

One of Willie’s life lessons is: Don't be afraid to ask yourself if something sounds right to you. Willie was raised in the Methodist faith but found that some of the lessons that he was taught did not sit easy on his mind. He did not believe, for instance, that if he smoked or drank alcohol that he would burn in hell for eternity. In fact, Willie Nelson is a Universalist in his theology, because he does not believe in hell. I think his story resonates with most of us in this room, as we come from

different religious traditions that did not feel right or sound right to us at our core and so we too have journeyed toward a new faith that feels right to us.

Another one of his lessons is that a song in your heart will take you far. As I mentioned, he was born in the height of the Depression and was picking cotton in the hot Texas sun by the age of seven. He learned from his grandma that you can get through hard times if you have a song in your heart. This is one way to put it. Another way to look at it is that his grandma taught him to be resilient at an early age. Willie has had a lot of opportunities to practice those lessons of resiliency. He has seen some hard times. He was physically abused by his first wife. One of his children committed suicide. When he was living in Nashville, in the '70s, his house burned down. This was the final straw. He took the destruction of his home as a sign to quit the music business. He had struggled trying to make it in the music business of Nashville during the '50s and '60s. But he had been iced out because he was different. Willie was on hard times, so poor that he'd sold some of his best songs like "Nightlife" and "Family Bible" for a few dollars. After his house in Nashville burned down, he realized that he was sick of trying to be something that he was not. He let it all go and he embraced emptiness. No job, no house: goodbye Nashville.

He moved back home to Texas and rejected all the financial and social pressures to be like, play like, and look like other country singers and song writers. He surrounded himself with family and only played music for fun. The move back to Texas, originally born of despair, gave birth to the Willie we know today. This cocoon eventually transformed him into a butterfly with new wings. Willie said, "When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around"

The Tao reminds us:

*If you want to become whole,  
let yourself be partial.  
If you want to become straight,  
let yourself be crooked.  
If you want to become full,  
let yourself be empty.*

*If you want to be reborn,  
let yourself die.  
If you want to be given everything,  
give everything up.*

Willie gave up the known dream for the unknown when he left Nashville. Speaking of emptiness and giving everything up, at one point even though he had nothing the IRS handed him a \$32 million bill. Much of his personal property was seized and auctioned off. In addition to the IRS problems, he's made some bad investment choices and he's got lung problems. And way back at the beginning, his parents weren't able to raise him and his sister. Any one of these things could've laid a person low. Some of them, like the suicide of a child, I can't even imagine recovering from. And yet, Willie Nelson, though he certainly has suffered, remains in the thick of the River of Life, remains in the mysterious swirl of the Tao, fueled by a power that never extinguishes, singing the songs of his heart for all of us.

Willie believes that we seem to know who we really are at our core, and in our essence, when we are young children. He experienced himself, and observes in other children, that kids have a magical sense of the universe and that it is healthy to get that back. Somehow, reason, logic and the practicalities of life, dampen the sense of the mystery that surrounds us. And he reminds us that, "Who we were in our childhoods isn't all that different from who we are now." I resonate with this and invite you to reflect on if and how it is true for you. The things I enjoyed doing as a child -- like reading, looking at the stars, swimming, listening to music, my dream life, and telling and listening to stories -- are still the things that nourish me the most. And I have found that it is often when I escape the practicalities and the pettiness of life and the constraints of reason, that I find and rest in pockets of wisdom and restoration.

I also find Willie's practice of believing in the power of positive thinking to be restorative. When I take time to count my blessings, my attitude shifts. When thinking about some of the things I am grateful for, ... I rest in a joyous place. I am thankful for

my wife. I feel such joy that after marrying me in 1993, she was willing and even eager to marry me in 2013, when our marriage was finally recognized as legal. I am grateful for my kid and how creative and courageous and honest he is. I am grateful that I have people in my life, friends from every decade. I am grateful that I got to go for a desert hike and experience the oasis the other day. I am thankful that I lived in the same world and the same time that the Beatles lived. I am grateful that I get to share my ministry with you, such a wonderful and caring congregation. These are just a few of the things I am grateful for. Practicing gratitude is one of the most significant characteristics of resilient people. And we all need to grow our capacity for resilience because the winds outside are blowing turbulence, fear and hate. And part of our work as a church community is to grow our communal sense of resistance so that we can survive and thrive under challenging conditions.

Finally, looking at Willie's life reminds us not to be afraid, or even reluctant, to embrace the paradox that we are. If nothing else, Willie Nelson is an awe inspiring collection of paradoxes. He truly loves people, and he visits, remembers and spends real and genuine time with his fans; yet, he loves to be alone on his bus. Often his wife (number four -- he is just the marrying kind), when she travels with him will sleep in the hotel while Willie sleeps on his bus. He is a cowboy and yet is also part Native American. He is a redneck and a hippie. He is a member of the Grand Ole Opry and the progenitor of outlaw country. In addition to creating the genre of outlaw country, he is also a bonafide outlaw. Not only was he being chased by the IRS, he's been arrested many times, mostly for possession of marijuana, yet he has also been a frequent guest at the White House. And in 2015 he was awarded the Gershwin Prize by the Library of Congress.

He is not only an outlaw, he is also an activist. He was one of the founders of Farm Aid. He has been a co-chair of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. Following the attacks in September 2001, he participated in the telethon *America: a Tribute to Heroes*. He advocates for bio diesel, has worked for better conditions for animals, especially horses and cows, and he is a supporter of LGBT rights since at least 2006.

In addition to being an exemplar of the nonwestern thought embedded in the Tao, Willie Nelson is also a prophet, using his voice, fame and connection to grow the common good, and he is always seeking to find common ground on which we can meet each other and sing and dance together.

Perhaps when we as a church community find our hearts and wills and resistance tightening about something here at church that we don't like or an opposing point of view that we disagree with, perhaps we can call upon our inner Willie Nelson and find a way to seek and celebrate our middle ground. May we take inspiration from the ways he has mastered being in the flow of life. May we grow our resilience. May we cherish and nourish our inner child. Blessed Be. Amen

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This sermon was inspired by the book:

Willie Nelson. (2007). *The Tao of Willie Nelson: A Guide to the Happiness in Your Heart*. Penguin Publishing.