

Aikido & Creation Spirituality

The Teachings of Morihei Ueshiba in Light of the Four Paths

by

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Contemporary theologian Matthew Fox made Creation Spirituality popular after publishing his controversial book, *Original Blessing*, in 1983, for which he was subsequently silenced and eventually excommunicated by Cardinal Ratzinger, the man who is now Pope Benedict XVI. But it is always important to remember that Fox did not invent Creation Spirituality, he only uncovered, or, if you will, rediscovered it for the modern age. As he wrote in his introduction, “Creation Spirituality is a tradition: it has a past; it has historical and biblical roots; it boasts a communion of saints.”¹ Some of the saints to which he refers are from his own tradition; saints like Thomas Aquinas who said, “each and every creature exists for the perfection of the entire universe,”² Meister Eckhart who said, “Every creature is a word of God and a book about God,”³ Hildegard of Bingen who said, “This Word manifests itself in every creature,”⁴ Mechtild of Magdeburg who said, “The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,”⁵ and Francis Assisi who prayed, “All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Moon and Stars; All praise be yours, My Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air; All praise be yours my Lord, through Sister Water.”⁶

But Fox also acknowledges that creation-centered spirituality is deeply ecumenical, meaning it can be found in every spiritual tradition. An ancient rabbinic teaching declares, for instance, “Creation is the extension of God. Creation is God encountered in time and space. Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite. To attend to Creation is to attend to God.”⁷ The Hindu Vedas tell us, “creation is not mechanical construction: it is a supreme spiritual act revealing divine splendor,”⁸ or, as a Hindu scholar surmises, “all creation is Brahman.”⁹ The Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hahn has said, “In East Asia, we speak of the human body as a mini-cosmos. The cosmos is our home, and we can touch it by being aware of our body.”¹⁰ He also says, “All beings in the animal, plant, and mineral world are potential Buddhas.”¹¹ This is also the idea behind the Navaho chant, “The Earth, its body is my body, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The Earth, its thoughts are my thoughts, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The Earth, its speech is my speech, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The sky, its life am I, *hozhoni, hozhoni*; The mountains, its life am I; The Sun, its life am I; White corn, its life am I; Yellow corn, its life am I, The corn beetle, its life am I; *Hozhoni, hozhoni, hozhoni*.”¹² “Hozhoni” means, “surrounded by beauty.” According to the Islamic Hadiths, Allah says, “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known: That is why I created the world,”¹³ and, “You thought yourself a part, small; Whereas in you there is a universe, the greatest.”¹⁴ We could go on and on with similar citations from virtually every tradition that has ever been, including the words of prophetic activists like Gandhi who said, “[People] should earnestly desire the well-being of all God’s creatures, and pray [they] might have the strength to do so,”¹⁵ along with psychologists like Erik Erikson, who said, “The true saints are those who transfer the state of householdship to the house of God, becoming father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter, to all creation, rather than their own issue,”¹⁶ and scientists as notable as Einstein who once

said, “Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

To comprehend the tenants of Creation Spirituality we can turn to all or any of these traditions, as well as many others. But here I would like for us to explore Creation Spirituality as expressed in the teachings of Morihei Ueshiba, best known as the founder of Aikido. For it is, in many ways, unfortunate, the work of this modern master, whose teachings are on par with the likes of Jesus, Buddha, and Lao Tzu, has become marginalized in the mainstream by his mere association with the martial arts. “The body should be in tune with the movement of the Universe,”¹⁷ he said, and his Aikido techniques are but an outgrowth of a much broader spiritual philosophy. During his 86 years of life between 1883 and 1969, he saw more than his share of war and violence, and, as a result, became a man who revered life and peace above all else. Indeed, the word *Aikido* is usually translated “the Art of Peace,” or “the Way of Harmony.” To be a soldier, one need only to know how to kill, but to be a true warrior, like Master Ueshiba, one must serve and protect life. “A warrior is charged with bringing an end to all contention and strife,”¹⁸ he said, “the true meaning of the term *samurai* is one who serves and sticks to the power of love.”¹⁹ He also taught that, “Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life.”²⁰ Unlike those who falsely associate power with taking life, Ueshiba recognized that genuine power is life itself. “When life is victorious there is birth;” he said, “When it is thwarted, there is death. A warrior is always engaged in a life and death struggle for Peace...”²¹ Rely on Peace to activate your many powers; pacify your environment and create a beautiful world,”²² and, “The Way of Harmony does not depend on weapons of brute force to succeed. Instead we put ourselves in tune with the Universe, maintain peace in our own realms, nurture life, and prevent death and destruction...²³ To injure an opponent is to injure yourself. To control aggression without inflicting injury is the Art of Peace.”²⁴

Surely these teachings and others like them prove his deep commitment to life and harmony, and awaken us to his potential as a profound spiritual teacher to everyone, not just those who wish merely to master a fighting technique. “Your spirit is your true shield,”²⁵ he said, “Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow. You are here for no other purpose than to realize your inner divinity and manifest your innate enlightenment.”²⁶ As already mentioned, Creation Spirituality is deeply ecumenical, and the teachings of Master Ueshiba show us a man who was open to all paths because he understood they all begin and end in the same place. “Each and every master, regardless of the era or place, heard the call and attained harmony with Heaven and Earth,” he said, “There are many paths leading to the top of Mount Fuji, but there is only one summit—Love.”²⁷ Thus he concluded, “Aikido is the religion that is not a religion; it perfects and completes all religions.”²⁸ This is why he instructed his students, “Do not criticize other teachers and traditions. The Way of Harmony never restrains, restricts, or shackles anything. It embraces all, and purifies everything.”²⁹ He also said, “The Way of Harmony that I practice has room for each of the world’s eight million gods, and I cooperate with them all. The God of peace is very great and enjoins all that is divine and enlightened in every land.”³⁰

This openness to all paths and people is a natural outgrowth of the cosmic perspective

that stems from Creation Spirituality, the awareness that everything in the Universe is intimately connected. Creation is, as Fox explains, “the source, the matrix, and the goal of all things—the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega. Creation is our common parent, when ‘our’ stands for all things. Creation is the mother of all beings and the father of all beings, the birther and the begetter.”³¹ This must also be what Ueshiba understood when he said, “All things, material and spiritual, originate from one source and are related as if they were one family...³² the Way of Harmony is a celebration of the bonding of Heaven, Earth, and Humankind. It is all that is true, good, and beautiful...³³ The Way of Harmony functions everywhere on earth, in realms ranging from the vastness of space, down to the tiniest plants and animals...³⁴ When you bow deeply to the Universe, it bows, back; when you call out the name of God, it echoes inside you...³⁵ Each one of us is a miniature universe, a living shrine.”³⁶ Perhaps he put it most succinctly, however, when he simply said, “I am the Universe,”³⁷ later explaining, “I link myself with the cosmos through *aiki* and commune with all things—I feel as if I am transformed into the universe itself, breathing in all phenomena. Standing before the alter of heaven and earth, I am in perfect harmony with the Divine.”³⁸

Like all creation spiritualists, therefore, Master Ueshiba drew his strength from nature, and encouraged his followers to do the same. “Now and again,” he said, “it is necessary to seclude yourself among deep mountains and hidden valleys to restore your link to the source of life...”³⁹ Create each day anew by clothing yourself with heaven and earth, bathing yourself with wisdom and love, and placing yourself in the heart of Mother Nature...⁴⁰ Harmony originates with the flow of things—its heart is like the movement of the wind and waves. The way is like the veins that circulate blood through our bodies, following the natural flow of the life force. If you are separated in the slightest from that divine essence, you are far off the path.”⁴¹

His love of nature is indicative of the first of four spiritual paths identified by Matthew Fox in his explanation of Creation Spirituality. Upon this first path, the *via positiva*, the positive path, we are able to experience the Divine, in Fox’s words, “In the awe, wonder, and mystery of nature and of all beings, each of whom is a ‘word of God,’ a ‘mirror of God that glistens and glitters...”⁴² It was in this same spirit that Master Ueshiba taught us to seek wisdom from the natural world. “Study the teachings of the pine tree, the bamboo, and the plum blossom,” he said, “the pine tree is evergreen, firmly rooted, and venerable. The bamboo is strong, resilient, unbreakable. The plum blossom is hardy, fragrant, and elegant...⁴³ Do not fail to learn from the pure voice of an ever-flowing mountain Spring splashing over the rocks...⁴⁴ Do not overlook the truth that is right before you. Study how water flows in a valley stream, smoothly and freely between the rocks... Spring forth from the Great Earth, billow like Great Waves, stand like a tree, sit like a rock...⁴⁵ Everything—even mountains, rivers, plants, and trees should be your teacher.⁴⁶ The awe and wonder of creation we experience while on the *via positiva* fills us with such contentment and joy, that Master Ueshiba, despite living through many wars, including the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in his own country, was able to remain positive, teachings his students, “Always practice the Way of Harmony in a vibrant and joyful manner.”⁴⁷

Yet sometimes we experience nature as “breathtaking,” or, as San Juan de la Cruz exclaimed after a journey into the wilderness, “Let your sight and beauty be my killer.”⁴⁸ Creation Spirituality also has a negative path, the *via negativa*, upon which we experience the Divine, in Fox’s words, “In darkness and nothingness, in the silence and emptying, in the letting go and letting be, and in the pain and suffering that constitute and equally real part of our spiritual journey.”⁴⁹ Master Ueshiba often expressed this “Dark Night of the Soul,” in his own words, saying things like, “If you have not linked yourself to true emptiness you will never understand the way of Harmony...⁵⁰ Always keep your mind as bright and clear as the vast sky, the great ocean, and the highest peak, empty of all thoughts...⁵¹ He also understood, in light of the negative forces in life, that we must sometimes knowingly enter into the face of adversity, a move known as *irimi*, or, entering, in Aikido training. “One should be prepared to receive ninety-nine percent of an enemy’s attack and stare death right in the face in order to illuminate the path,”⁵² he said, “Do not look upon this world with fear and loathing. Bravely face whatever the gods offer...⁵³ Each day of human life contains joy and anger, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, growth and decay. Each moment is etched with nature’s grand design—do not try to deny or oppose the cosmic order of things.”⁵⁴ It is only through our willingness to experience life’s pitfalls by willingly entering upon the negative path that we can, as Ueshiba advises, “Be grateful even for hardship, setbacks, and bad people. Dealing with such obstacles is an essential part of training in the Way of Harmony...⁵⁵ Failure is the key to success. Each mistake teaches us something.”⁵⁶

Sometimes the negative way means letting go of baggage we cling to, that holds back in life. Sometimes it just means letting thing be, especially the people, events, and circumstances we’d like to control. Sometimes it means facing our fears, and enduring pain. But in the end, no matter how we might experience this path, it’s about purging ourselves of all that dilutes our lives and prevents us from growth. “Cleanse the body and spirit by leaving behind all malice, selfishness, and desire...”⁵⁷ Ueshiba instructed, “...leave behind all self-centered thoughts, petty desires, and anger. Those who are possessed by nothing possess everything...⁵⁸ The penetrating brilliance of swords wielded by followers of the way, strikes at the evil enemy, lurking deep within their own souls and bodies.”⁵⁹

Yet he also understood there must come a time when we transcend the darkness by leaving our personal hells. In ancient times the notion of Hell was not a place of endless torment. It was just a place, as Persephone learned, that all of must visit now and again. As Jean Shinoda Bolen points out, “...research indicates that the pre-Christian ‘hell’ was a uterine shrine or sacred cave of rebirth, denoted by the Norse *hellir*. The Earlier notion of *Hel* was a cauldron-womb filled with purgative fire.”⁶⁰ This is the same way Creation Spirituality views the Dark Night, as a place of purgation and rebirth. For if we are truly open to our own suffering, then we recognize the suffering of others, and compassion is born in us. In Hebrew, the word for compassion and womb is the same, and Joseph Campbell once remarked that in mythology a male’s wound becomes his womb. Suffering makes us all mothers, makes us all creators.

The *via negativa*, then, leads us to the third path of Creation Spirituality, the *via creativa*, the creative way. Having experienced our own pain, we envision a world in which the pain of others is eased. We envision a better world. Thus, I like to also call this third path, the visionary path. For just as an artist creates an image out of paint, or stone, or clay, each of us has the power to create a better image for the world, a vision we can share and take to others in creative ways. "...in our imaginative output," Fox explains, "we trust our images enough to birth them and ride them into existence."⁶¹ Thus, Master Ueshiba, like all genuine Creation Spiritualists, often spoke of birth and creativity in his teachings. "Just as a lotus blossom springs from the mire to bloom splendidly, the interaction of the cosmic breath causes the flower of the spirit to bloom and bear fruit in this world."⁶² He also said, "Even though our path is completely different from the warrior arts of the past, it is not necessary to abandon totally the old ways. Absorb venerable traditions into this new art by clothing them in fresh garments, and build on classic styles to create better forms."⁶³ Aikido, the Way of Harmony, is exactly that, a venerable tradition clothed with fresh garments, a better form of a classic style. Some might even choose to call it "swordless sword fighting," for Ueshiba based its technique on traditional samurai moves. Each Aikido move happens as if the practitioner wields an invisible sword, enabling one to remain centered and balanced. Just as Matthew Fox has written about the "reinvention of work" and the "reinvention of education," Master Ueshiba reinvented the samurai arts for a new generation. That's the kind of creativity expressed through this third path.

The fourth and final path of Creation Spirituality is called the *via transformativa*, the transformative way. This is the path upon which we strive to make our vision for a better world a reality. It is the path upon which we seek the divine, as Fox explains, "In the relief of suffering, in the combating of injustice, in the struggle for homeostasis, for balance in society and history, and in the celebration that happens when persons struggling for justice and trying to live in mutuality come together to praise and give thanks for the gift of being together."⁶⁴ In brief, the transformative path concerns itself with the welfare of others by working toward a more just world. The word "harmony" is another word for "justice," the sort of balance depicted by the Greek statue of a Blindfolded goddess holding a pair of scales in her hand. Thus, Aikido, the Way of Harmony, can also be called, the "Way of Justice."

Ueshiba proved his commitment to transforming the world, and, like Jesus, he taught about God within us, and heaven on earth, saying things like, "The divine is not something high above us. It is in heaven, it is in earth, it is inside us,"⁶⁵ and, "One does not need buildings, money, power, or status to practice the Way of Harmony. Heaven is right where you are standing, and that is the place to train."⁶⁶ The *via transformativa* keeps us grounded in the here and now, not the sweet bye and bye. The Creation Spirituality of Aikido does not allow us to be so heavenly minded we're no earthly good. It calls upon us to make a real difference in the world by maintaining peace, creating balance, and working for justice. Such pragmatism is often expressed in Ueshiba's teachings; "Economy is the basis of society. When the economy is stable, society develops. The ideal economy combines the spiritual and material, and the best commodities to trade in are sincerity and love."⁶⁶ He also spoke about the ideal

government, saying, “Universal love functions in many forms. Each manifestation should be allowed free expression. The Way of Harmony is true democracy.”⁶⁷ Thus, he concluded, “Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life...⁶⁸ The Way of a Warrior, the Art of Politics, is to stop trouble before it starts...⁶⁹ Step in and act!”⁷⁰

At an age of such great suffering and injustice, not only among helpless and impoverished people, but also among our fellow creatures; plants and animals that are becoming extinct at the rate of 140 species each day; and the Earth itself, whose vital systems are in the process of shutting down, the creation-centered spirituality of teachers like Morihei Ueshiba offer us hope and direction in desperate times. It is a journey that requires us to place ourselves in the heart of Mother Nature with gratitude and joy; to bravely feel our own suffering that we might have compassion for all creatures; to reenvision and reinvent the kind of world we want us and our children to live in; and to courageously take a stand for the cause of justice whenever and wherever there is imbalance. Or, as Ueshiba put it, “The Way of a Warrior is to establish harmony.”⁷¹

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