

Oscailt

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Front Cover: Some of the Electrical connections that are left **ON**. See Tony Brady article page 7.
(photo P. Spain)

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Oscailt

Our magazine title, **Oscailt**, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

DOES PRAYER WORK?

If a person were to ask me if I believed in God, I would start the reply by saying “Define ‘God’”. In fact, I’d also have to say ‘define believe’.

The same applies to the title of this address. Does prayer work? The quick and maybe obvious answer to us rational people is “No, of course not.” But what is meant by ‘prayer’? And more importantly, what is meant by ‘work’? If we mean the childish idea: ‘Dear God, please make me pass my exams’, no, prayer is probably ineffective. But that is not the whole story.

First, let me tell you what once happened to me. In 1992 there was a terrible accident on a ferry coming back to Ireland from Wales. A toilet in a cabin malfunctioned, and two children, a girl of 15 and a boy of 12, were gassed to death. Their little brother survived only because he had been upset and was taken into his parent’s cabin next door. I found myself terribly affected by this. My daughter and son were each about three years younger than the children involved, and we often used that and other ferries. In other words, it could have been us. I was sleepless for days. Then one night, as I lay in bed trying to sleep, I said into the darkness, “Whoever is there, please send strength and peace to those poor parents, and please, let me get to sleep.” I was asleep almost immediately.

So was that a prayer? Did it work? I think the answer to both parts of that question has to be yes, although I have no idea if the parents received the strength and the peaceful night I sent them. I think of them still occasionally, and send them a good thought. It can’t do any harm to them, and maybe I’m the better for it.

Another story, and this one is not mine. I have stolen it from Caroline Myss, (pronounced Mace) who is an American writer about spiritual subjects. She tells a story about a car accident. A woman was badly injured by the accident, and the ambulance was called. This was on a very busy road, and caused a long traffic jam. The injured woman was taken to hospital, and after a lot of treatment she recovered. She reported that while she was unconscious in the damaged car, she had lifted out of her body and had been able to

move back past the delayed cars. In most of them were people moaning about the delay, but in the fifth car back she noticed a woman was sending energy to her. The woman was thinking or saying, 'please help whoever is injured, let them be alright.'. The injured woman looked at the licence plate, and somehow memorised the number. And a few months later she was able to turn up on the driver's doorstep with a bouquet of flowers, to thank her 'for praying for me'. You can look this story up online, and will quickly find the comments "if this story is true". I don't see any reason to think it is untrue, it seems to me as likely to be true as not. But here in this church we are meant to be rational, to use reason as the way to interpret the world.

There are some times when reason doesn't give the best answers. The main one being in my opinion, when we *start* with "But that doesn't seem reasonable," in other words, judging what is new by what we already think we know. I have had a scientific education, and have worked in a field that believes in nothing but reason. I have seen the limitations of taking that approach. Because what we already know may not include the explanation for the strange fact we are now meeting. A person in 1600, if transported here and shown an electric light and its switch, would very quickly assume it was magic, or probably witchcraft, because it is not reasonable that pressing a knob on a wall should cause a light in the ceiling to go on. They might then send out a posse of men with weapons to hunt down the offending witch. We do the same, when we accuse the person who told this story of lying, or people with skills we don't understand of being charlatans. Some are, but some are not. The reasonable person often is uncomfortable with this uncertainty. When we can, and have the funding, we do research.

A piece of research was scientifically set up in 1993 in Washington D.C. It had been hypothesised that meditation could reduce crime, though the local police chief said the only thing that would reduce crime in the summer would be 20inches of snow. From 7th June to 30th July, 4,000 members of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi organisation - that is, people who practised Transcendental Meditation, all meditated for 'coherence creation'. This was done without informing or interacting with the local population. The crime figures were collected for then and for times before the experiment, and were corrected for the weather, daylight, and other factors known to

affect the crime rates. It was shown that 'HRA' crimes, which means homicide, rape and assault, were reduced by up to 23%. Robberies were not affected, and as far as I can find, no-one has any theory about this. Some other things were recorded, including the reduction of hospital trauma case, of emergency psychiatric calls, of accidental deaths, and of complaints against the police. Clearly, something happened. Materialists find themselves uncomfortable with the idea of energy, which is invisible, being the cause of anything, and can become quite forceful in their ridicule - 'the idea!' Our world, however, is not controlled entirely by things we can see or hear, and in some cases, not even by things we can measure. This may sound ridiculous to the rational man, but not only is it self-evident, it is commonly experienced. For example, we all respond to memories, we call it nostalgia, but we cannot see that energy. Our problem may be that we do not have enough education in Quantum Physics, which I suspect in time will explain many things that seem mystical to us now. Like the person from the 17th Century who knew nothing of electricity, we know nothing of whatever it is that caused that crime rate to drop. At the very least, we should refrain from crying "witch!"

So, back to prayer. Does this just mean begging a person in the sky for the impossible? I saw a silly film recently, in which an ordinary man for some reason had to take on God's work. His email inbox filled up with requests, he was overwhelmed with it all and in the end highlighted all the prayers and said "Yes! You can have what you want!". The next day he was in bad trouble, because everyone had won the Lotto, and were getting 17 dollars each, and were bombarding him with "that's no good" messages.

Of course that sort of prayer doesn't work. We all knew that. If those prayers worked, no-one would ever die, or get sick, no-one would ever be poor, everyone would get an A for every exam, and there would be no hunger or war in the world. And I would have had to choose a different career!

There are examples in many religions of group prayer, often using repetitive and very familiar forms of words. The closest to home is the Rosary. I have no personal experience of this, but it seems possible that the chanting in unison of words that are very familiar has a hypnotising effect, bringing on at the very least a feeling of belonging, and maybe of calm or peace. (The trouble

with the hypnosis side of this is that once the congregation is nicely entranced, any old rubbish can be put into their heads by the priests or pastors, or mullahs. But that is taking a step away from the value of prayer, so is a subject for another day.)

But what if we ‘pray’ more sensibly, or less selfishly? We can’t prevent our friend dying from the fatal disease they have been diagnosed with, but what if we ask for them to have emotional strength, or mental peace, to deal with their ordeal? How about we send cheering energies? I have no idea how to do this personally, so I just behave as though there is someone listening who can do it for me. Just frame the intention in your mind or heart, add a ‘please send’ thought, and that’s it sorted. (If there’s no one there to help us at least we have done no harm). The Quakers, I believe, hold people in light, which seems to me to be the same thing as sending good energies.

And for ourselves? It may not be on the cards that you will win the Lotto, so praying for it will produce no money, but how about asking for skill or assistance in managing the money you do have better? If you are facing into a difficult exam, how about asking, not to pass or get honours, but that you will have a clear mind on the day and be able to access all your knowledge without panic? If you don’t think this is prayer, in the sense that you are not addressing a Supreme Being, that’s fine. Maybe just articulating an intent within your own mind is enough to start tiny changes that could snowball into a useful result.

For example, saying Grace before meals. What is that for? God isn’t interested, and the farmers can’t hear you. But you can. So maybe if, instead of tucking into your food immediately, you took a couple of seconds to settle at the table and consciously appreciate what you are about to eat, your body would thank you. Maybe less heartburn, or fewer hiccups. Your mind would thank you, as you are putting aside the day’s problems. And your soul will thank you, as you are becoming truly present. This is the mindfulness that is having its turn of being popular. Maybe it is just another form of prayer. It is possible that ‘prayer’ works entirely within our own mind. “Please make me calm during the interview tomorrow” becomes a statement of intent, to be calmer. It is for this reason that worry has been defined as a “prayer for what you don’t want”, the worrier’s system confirming for them that the bad out-

come is a strong possibility. They are wearing the negative glasses mentioned in my reading earlier. We should all decide to look out through the positive rose-coloured ones.

I believe that we have agreed before we come into this life that certain things will and will not happen. This is why I say that winning money may not be on the cards for you, so there is no point in praying for it. But there are many less dramatic things that are not fixed in advance. Your attitude to adversity, how you react to circumstances, whether you are able to forgive: These are all things for which it may be worth praying. And even the much mocked requests for parking spaces – the Universe, whatever that is, doesn't care if you can park conveniently or not, so has no reason to refuse you – so why not ask? After all, as the Bard had Hamlet say: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

And moving from the Arts to the Sciences, Albert Einstein's words may be an encouragement to us to keep praying, whatever we mean by that. He said:

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed."

©*Madeline Stringer*
Dublin Unitarian Church

April 2022

Sorry Fridge, All is forgiven.

My wife Fran is the Quaker representative on ECO Congregations Ireland. Fran is the original Eco-warrior. She has used the mantra “*Reduce - Reuse - Recycle*” for over four decades.

As part of our effort to reduce our environmental impact we installed solar panels late last year and they have been a huge success.

People of course ask: “When will the savings equal the expense, how can the expense be justified?”

And of course, at our age and in the absence of extraordinary improvements in healthcare, there is no way that we will recover the cost of the solar panels in our lifetime. But making the cost of solar power pay over a short number of years is not the point. Energy is given off by the Sun. It is harnessed as a matter of routine by plants and why cannot we human beings, with all wonderful technology at our disposal, harvest the same energy and avoid burning fossil fuels which exacerbate the environmental crisis facing planet Earth.

And, even if you want to look at this from a purely economic point of view, there is the fact that money put into energy saving will give you something comparable to interest in the form of reduced energy bills, whereas money sitting in the bank these days offers no interest at all. For people unfortunate enough to have lots of money the bank will charge interest for the holding of it. Strange times indeed.

Anyway to the point of this article: Following the installation of the solar panels we were provided with an App which allows us to see the energy coming in from the panels, the energy being stored in a battery (battery storage is an important part of the set up) and the energy being used in the house at any particular time.

We were intrigued and disappointed to find that even when we were away from home for a couple of days there was constant usage of energy showing up on the App. This usage varied between 100w and 200w in a regular pattern. We put this non-stop average usage of 150w down to the fact that our medium sized fridge/freezer was the only appliance that was constantly on

during our periods of absence.

As a result of earlier environmental efforts our electricity consumption in the year prior to the installation of the solar panels was only 3,000kW

This unexplained constant use of 150w amounts in a year to 1,314 kW, more than 1/3 of our usage and I jumped to the conclusion that our fridge was the culprit

We then set out to find a new fridge which would use less energy. We learned that on the 1st of March 2021 a new energy labelling system came into effect. The old A+, A++ and A+++ ratings were discontinued in favour of a simpler A to G ranking system.

That seemed promising and much simpler to follow but if you check any of the stores in Dublin selling fridges and freezers you will find hardly any with even a C rating -mostly the rating is F - so there is much to be done by the manufacturers in that respect.

Following our failure to find a fridge freezer with a satisfactory energy rating we turned our attention again to the question “where is the energy going?” We tuned off the fridge temporarily to see what the result would be. This introduced us to the world of *phantom power*, the power being used by appliances when they are plugged in but not fully switched off. An immediate example is the microwave oven. The clock in our microwave oven has been working away for something like 30 years. This is using some energy but, which of us reading this, ever uses the microwave oven clock for the telling of the time. This appliance can easily be switched off until it is needed.

Gadgets which make use of a remote control sit in low power mode watching out to receive a signal from the remote control. This requires energy too. It is not practical of course to switch off a broadband modem completely nor is it possible to switch off the likes of a Satellite TV Box. But items such as the TV itself, DVD player, speakers, virtual assistants all require a little amount of energy whether they are in actual use or not. You might think ‘Surely it must be a pain to have to completely turn off everything in this category?’. But that need not necessarily be so. These less critical gadgets which are near one another can be attached to one (switched) extension lead from where they can be turned off all at once and left powered off until they are required. (see picture front cover, how many devices do you recognise)

I am sure many of us find that we leave our chargers plugged in even when the devices to be charged are already fully charged. There is a suggestion that chargers left plugged in, even with nothing plugged into them, are using a small amount of electricity. They should be

plugged out or switched off when not in use.

Remote control equipment is a magical invention. But many of us, we live dangerously sedentary lifestyles with serious implications for our health. According to WHO, 60% to 85% of people in the world—from both developed and developing countries—lead sedentary lifestyles, making it one of the more serious yet insufficiently addressed public health problems of our time.

So surely, we should not object to the benefit that might be attached to getting up to turn on our lights or close our curtains and blinds by hand. Tasks that require us to move are medicine in themselves.

When buying new appliances we need to carefully look at the energy ratings. And watch out too for Energy Star appliances. These have to conform to standards that minimise energy use.

So, was it worth it? Yes, it proved to be an interesting exercise and by watching out for phantom power we have recovered about 50% of the “lost” electricity, by switching off the microwave.

And as for the solar panels, yes, they are working well. Naturally in the winter-time there is less daylight and sunshine but even then there is quite a contribution made to the electricity supply. From March onwards the input from the panel has been beyond expectations.

If anyone who would like to hear more about our environmental projects all they need do is ask. Let each of us do all we can to tread more lightly on this good Earth. The combined actions of all of us, adds up, no matter how small and together we can make a big difference.

And yes, sorry fridge, you were accused in the wrong, please forgive us.

Tony Brady

Dublin Unitarian Church



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for March 2022.**



APEIROGON

by
Colm McCann

Apeirogon, A polygon with countable number of sides

This is a very unique book telling the factual stories of two fathers who lost their daughters in the Palestine / Israeli conflicts. Bassam Aramin is a Palestinian Muslim whose daughter Abir, at aged ten was shot by an Israeli soldier with a rubber bullet while she was on her school break buying sweets from the local shop. Rami Elhanin is an Israeli Jew whose daughter Smadar was out shopping with friends on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem when a suicide bomber set off his bomb.

Both Bassam's and Rami's lives and experiences of living through years of the conflict is revealed throughout the book and you get a very real sense of what it is like from both perspectives. McCann gives a very balanced view of both sides showing that there is no right side when it comes to war.

He explores their family histories and how they have arrived at where they are today, friends united in grief and loss. They are both active members of the anti occupation organisation called Combatants for Peace and through their talks, seminars and activities they continue to tell the stories of Abir and Smadar. By this retelling over and over again they keep the girl's memories alive in the hope that some form of peace will be achieved.

The structure of the book takes on the form of 1,001 parts or motifs and alludes to the tales of 'One Thousand and One Nights'. This can be a bit confusing at times and off putting but it is intentional as McCann unsettles you and takes you out of your comfort zone just as you would be unsettled living in what seems to be a chaotic place. He says "Confusion can put us on the verge of understanding."

He takes us down many rabbit holes with these various motifs, of which there are too many to mention but here are some:-

The migration of birds, drone technology, the significance of water in the region, the river Jordan and the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea Scrolls, a

19th Century Irish religious explorer called Costigan, various musical compositions such as John Cages 4'33 piece, the writer Borges, correspondences between Einstein and Freud, Francois Miterrand, Falconry. The facts and details can be a bit overwhelming and at times repetitive, but he draws connections between the motifs in a very clever way so that by careful reading you eventually 'Get It'.

These motifs could have taken away from the central stories of Abir, Smadar, Bassam, Rami and their families but McCann holds it all together with his skillful writing and his empathy and compassion in the telling of the girl's lives and final days. Like an Apeirogon there are a countable number of sides to every story.

SOME OF THE COMMENTS FROM THE BOOK CLUB READERS:



“Amazing and very moving, this book had a big effect on me.”

“Bowled over by the writing, a very human story of forgiveness”

“A very special book and an evenly told story of both sides”

The structure was a bit difficult and challenging, emotionally heavy going”

Tedious and repetitive, felt the author was trying to be too clever with the structure with his sights on a literary prize”

“Challenging at times but the message that we are united in grief and loss shows the humanity of the people involved”

“ A compelling read, very moving and a magnificent achievement but could have done with a bit of editing”

“ A very interesting book and a different way to write about the Palestine/ Israel conflict, the central stories of Bassam and Rami were heart-breaking and moving “.

“A complex wonderful book, a piece of modern literature”

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian Church

A Book of Contradictions

In an address of a few weeks ago, entitled “God’s Holy Word”, I spoke about how all religions have their sacred scriptures. These texts are used as a guide as to how members of that faith should live. People believe that their scripture is a communication from God and as such should be treated with the utmost respect. Readers of scripture and religious leaders try to discern the essence of what we call “God” from their scripture.

And yet, the three great historic religious thinkers Sidharta Gautama, Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad, who are responsible for the religious allegiance of millions; these leaders never committed a word of their teachings to paper. All writings concerning these great belief systems are the work of other people. They are historic accounts of the lives and teachings of others.

To day I want to explore a different text. The book called the Tao Te Ching is an ancient Chinese wisdom text. It is attributed to an individual called Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu is said to have been born about 604 BCE. He was a contemporary of Confucius and tradition says that they met. It is said that in his old age Lao Tzu was dispirited by people’s lack of religious endeavour and seeking greater solitude he decided to leave his country.

As Lao Tzu passed through the border riding his buffalo into the sun set; the border police engaged him in conversation. They were quick to appreciate his wisdom they asked him to write down his philosophy. In a few days Lao Tzu wrote the Tao Te Ching and then disappeared forever.

The text has many translations into English and as with any translated work the translator has to interpret those parts that have no direct translation. Hopefully the translator is sufficiently skilled to maintain the essential spirit of the text. Of course some translations are more accessible than others.

The Book is a slim volume there are only eighty one stanzas in the text. One can read the book in a couple of hours however like all spiritual texts it has deep layers of meaning that continually reveal fresh insight. The writer is an expert in the use of language. A short line speaks volumes;. An example is the observation. “Knowing others is intelligence; knowing oneself is wisdom”. Lao Tzu has summed up volumes of philosophy in just eight short words.

The Tao Te Ching is a book that lends itself to opening it at random to read a verse or sometimes just a line to ponder on its meaning. The book covers a range of topics including advice for good government.

I gave this address the title “A Book of Contradictions” and the Tao Te Ching lives up to the title; the book has many contradictions and its au-

thor often uses analogy to elucidate a point. The first contradiction is in the translation of the author's name. Lao Tzu is often translated as "the old boy" at other times it's translated as "the Old Master". The term "Old boy" is a contradiction. The text has no detail about the individual responsible for the text. The writer remarks "I have just three things to teach; Simplicity, Patience, Compassion"

Most of the book is observations about life that are razor sharp.

The title of the book, the Tao Te Ching, can be translated as "The Way and its power". It is taken for granted that understanding the meaning of the title "Way and its Power" will change with time, with context and in response to life experiences. I have found that the best approach is to read the book over once quickly and then return to the stanzas that you may have found useful.

As I said Lao Tzu had advice for governments. In the context of the meeting in Singapore during the week, between U.S. president Mr. Trump and Chairman Kim, the truth of Lao Tzu's words rings out across two and a half millennia.

"The more weapons you have the less secure people will be".

I think Lao Tzu would have been a Brexiteer. He wrote "The more subsidies you have, the less self-reliant people will be" (57) and later "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish. You spoil it with too much poking" (60)

Let's look at what Lao Tzu has to say about those perennial questions that engage humanity.

The book is predicated on the belief in the existence of an eternal power; this power was unborn and pre-existed the birth of the Universe.

He writes (25) There was something formless and perfect
before the universe was born.

It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name,
I call it the Tao.
It flows through all things,
Inside and outside, and returns
To the origin of all things.

These words about the infinite or the Tao I think are echoed in the opening words of John's Gospel "In the beginning was the word"

“There was something formless and perfect
before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.”

Of this “power” the writer says (7)

The Tao is infinite, eternal.
Why is it eternal?
It was never born;
Thus, it can never die.
Why is it infinite?
It has no desires for itself.
Thus it is present for all beings.

Lao Tzu compares the Tao as being like a well.

“used but never used up.” (4)

Elsewhere he says (5) “The Tao is like a bellows:

It is empty, yet infinitely capable,
The more you use it, the more it produces;
The more you talk of it, the less you understand.”

This description of what we call God rings more true than God as a Father in heaven.

The Tao does not concern itself with what happens after we die. It is a guide for living. If asked to sum put its teaching for good living, I would say that it says we must accept life exactly as it is, so no moaning about what we wish life to be; we must accept the world as it is. We should do the work we are called to do. We do what needs doing and then let go of all expectations. We don't expect reward or praise.

A while ago I wrote about how we judge experiences. Win the lottery “good” illness “bad” and so on.

Lao Tzu's admonition against making judgements goes much further than judging our life experiences. Don't judge.

(2) When people see some things as beautiful
 Other things become ugly.
 When people see some things as good.
 Other things become bad.

So we are not to make any judgements. A small example will

demonstrate the point. We all have a favourite view- a view that when we see it; it restores our spirit. If we chose to settle so that we always have that view- over time our appreciation of the view diminishes. We take it for granted. On the other hand if we only experience the view as a treat. We relegate all other views as being inferior.

Lao Tzu says all things and all our experiences are simply to be accepted just as they are without judgement and without attachment to them. Later he writes

- (44) “Fame or integrity; which is more important?
Money or happiness; which is more valuable?
Success or failure; which is more destructive?”

 If you look to others for fulfilment.
 You will never truly be fulfilled.
 If your happiness depends on money.
 You will never be happy with yourself.

 Be content with what you have;
 Rejoice in the way things are.
 When you realise there is nothing lacking.
 The whole world belongs to you.”

Lao Tzu has wise words for us about our insatiable attraction for material things.

- (11) “We join spokes together in a wheel,
 But it is the centre hole
 That makes the wagon move.
 We shape clay into a pot.
 But it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.

 We hammer wood for a house but it is the inner space
 That makes it liveable.”

Lao Tzu does not highly rate organised religion. He remarks that “ritual is the husk of true faith” and later he says “when the Tao is forgotten goodness and piety appear.” ...Ireland in the early years of the last century was filled with religious practice but little Christianity.

In summary Lao Tzu tells us that we should accept life as it is, without making judgements. We should fulfil our work without attachment to the results. We do something because it is the right thing to do; then we let it go. We should let go of expectations. We cannot control life so we do not fight

against how life is. Live simply.

When we live in simplicity and in harmony with life accepting life as it is without trying to control the world; life becomes effortless. He uses the analogy of a newborn child for how easy life is when we live as we are meant to live.

“He who is harmony with Tao is like a newborn child.
Its bones are soft, its muscles are weak yet its grip is powerful.....
It can scream its head off all day
Yet is never becomes hoarse.”

The child is living as a child is meant to live and so what it does makes no strain on it. If we live as we are meant to life will flow as it is meant to.

In summary life is not about being the strongest, the most powerful. It is knowing that we are not in control of the world. It is accepting the world as it is. In this way we discover our power and our joy.

Rev. Bridget Spain
Minister Dublin Unitarian Church

Dublin 17th June 2018