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As Poetry Recycles Neurons, Winter 2013

Abstract: Craig Holdredge's "delicate empiricism" is the practice of learning something while maintaining the spirit of curiosity of the moment of discovery. This essay is an account of my spontaneous engagement in an ancient and complex discipline some have spent their lives learning. I approach it not as a discipline but an expressive practice, focused on the experience of doing it, fueled by the curiosity that comes from not knowing how.

I is for Ink:

An independent study of the art of Chinese calligraphy

(insert letter I)

I is for Introduction

When I look at words, my focus tends to automatically go straight to the meaning encoded in them, bypassing the aesthetic structure. Even in another language, my mind gets stuck on "what does it mean" instead of looking at each word as if it's a piece of art; but that's what it is—a culturally agreed-upon visual representation of a thing, or an idea...

I is for Ideographic language

English is pictures of sounds, but even these evolved from pictures of ideas at some point. And the sounds are just ideas anyway. How does a culture come up with a symbol for an idea?

"Ts'ang Chieh was an historian in the days of the Yellow Emperor. According to legend... he closely observed the movements of the heavenly bodies and the patterns on the shells of tortoises and marks made by birds. He recorded what he observed and derived words from the patterns he recorded."

-T.C. Lai, *Chinese Calligraphy* (page 2)

In Chinese culture, where words are both what we would call pictograms and ideograms, there is room for the observance of visual language as art: calligraphers are honored as carrying on an important discipline, and words are viewed for their aesthetic value the way we would look at paintings in a museum. The meanings encoded in the language are kept alive by these artists as they repeatedly summon the idea of the word and capture new images of it.

I is for Inspiration

While reading from the Tao Te Ching for a class on Sacred Texts, I began looking at the intricate ancient Chinese versions of these simple verses scrawled vertically down each opposite page, and I wanted in: I wanted to look at those strange shapes and see not just shapes but layers of meanings, ideas set next to each other to create larger ideas; I wanted to see the poetry.

A month ago, I attended a three-day “Tai Ji Retreat” with the much-heralded Chungliang Al Huang. His teaching was a joyful process of coaxing your controlling mind to let go its grip on your body and allowing your movements to flow naturally with the energy of life. This practice and philosophy became my window into the spirit of calligraphy. Tai Ji is about balance: earth and sky, mind and body, work and play, poetry and prose: all elements can be woven together into a flowing dance of life. The art of embracing this flow and feeling it in all we do as we go about our human lives is called Tai Ji:

(insert Tai Ji page)

Chungliang taught Chinese words as movements in this dance, each stroke a Tai Ji gesture. The word Tai is a human with arms outspread, receiving energy from above, letting it flow outward through all the limbs, and centering it. The open, centered, and receiving person is ready to become part of the process of Ji, the union of the opposites. The left side of Ji is a tree, rooted in earth and stretching toward sky, receiving energy from both directions. The right is a human between heaven and earth,

receiving in the same way as the tree and letting that energy flow through the mouth (on the left) and the hands (on the right). Tai Ji is an alchemy of elements in the human being.

I is for Center

The whirling dervishes of Islamic mysticism twirl around in circles with arms raised, right palm upward to heaven, left palm downward to earth. They are receiving energy from above and below and centering it in themselves: the thin, motionless line moving down the center, like the hole in the middle of a spinning record, is where they believe God exists in all of us.

(insert Tao Te Ching #11)

“Thirty spokes share the wheel’s hub;

It is the center hole that makes it useful.

Shape clay into a vessel;

It is the space within that makes it useful...”

-from the Tao Te Ching, verse 11

Both Tai Ji practice and calligraphy require a centering process:

I align myself with that empty center as if hanging on a string;

I become a vertical conduit of xylem, limbs at rest,

Gathering Fire from the sun above, I see the brush and hold it

Loosely with an open fist, parallel to my spine.

The center of the brush is empty.

I allow my body to become as light as the bamboo flesh of the brush.

The air around me moves my body as my fingers move the brush;

Spiraling downward, I immerse the tip in water--

The many hairs of the brush gather together into a single point

As the scattered thoughts in my mind center around a single intention.

Animated by my breath, the brush carries the water

And reunites it with earth: the black carbon of the ink.

With circular motions I saturate the brush,

Centering my mind and body around the empty center of invisible circles,

Tracing them in the air, and then finally uniting the ink with the wood of the paper,

Bringing them to life.

(insert circle practice page)

I give imperfect form to the perfect idea of a circle.

The places where the brush touches the paper are,

Like this world,

Only the visible part of a much larger dance.

The movements of the brush continue outward, upward,

Blending in with my morning Tai Ji.

The movements of my morning Tai Ji ripple outward, forward,

Becoming the actions of my life.

(insert eternity/ripples)

I is for Eternity

As I practice drawing circles, an image emerges of ripples in water. At the bottom of the page, I copy a Chinese character of what at the time I think is water. Later I discover that the little dot on the top of the character changes the meaning. Without that dot, it means water (Shui). The dot means centering. Water plus this centering is the word *Yung*: Eternity.

As the ripples move outward, they become more subtle until they are one with the pond.

“Fish swim and birds fly and humans move—all in the Tai Ji dance.”

-Chungliang Al Huang, *Essential Tai Ji* (page 73)

I is for Imitation

I begin my study by copying Chinese words out of library books. The meanings are strange and the strokes are complex. My first pieces look awkward and childlike. As I become comfortable with the flow of my own handwriting, I start to care less about what my characters mean, and more about what they look like: They may be sloppy Chinese, but they are a part of me, and they are beautiful.

I is for Self

I copy a cursive form of a word meaning “wind”.

What looks back up at me is none other than myself.

A single word has become a self-portrait!

(insert wind)

Every word is a self-portrait. Every self-portrait contains the whole world.

I is for Change

The word “I”, pronounced “E” as in “I Ching”. Used in conversation it can also mean “easy”. It looks like a chameleon. Its head is the sun and its body is the crescent moon. Like the chameleon of ink on my page, I am also made of sun and moon.

Embracing both sides of my nature, change becomes easy.

(insert change)

I is for Love

The word meaning Love is pronounced “Ai”. It sounds like the English “I” or “Eye”.

The English self-sound is the Chinese love-sound?

(insert love)

Every Chinese word is a poem. The top part of the word Love means a slow unfolding process. The middle part is the word “hsing”, which could be translated as either heart or mind. It means both, and it means neither. This language does not separate the two concepts as we do. The bottom part of love means relationship or friendship. The word is a poem about the slow unfolding of a heart/mind relationship. The phrase “I Love” is pronounced “Wo’ Ai”. It sounds like the English “Why?”

I Love: Wo’ Ai. Why Ai? Why I? I don’t know why. I only know Wo’ Ai.

I is for Impatience

(insert grass script poem)

This language is so alien to me! Is this “I” like “Eye” or “I” like “Aye”? The book won’t tell me. I want to write poetry with these beautiful words. But I is for Insufficient funds: I don’t have nearly enough words to compose anything yet. I is for Ignorance: After hours of study, I know next to nothing about this deep fractal of a language. I copy down verses without any idea what they say. After copying down a short poem in cursive grass script, I begin to fill in the empty spaces on the page with words from a different piece of grass script writing by a different author. What have I done? Is this collage poetry? Citational poetry? Composition by visual juxtaposition? What am I doing here, a foreigner in someone’s language again?

I is for Intruder

In Poland, an amateur artist was caught sneaking his own paintings into a museum and hanging them up next to great masterpieces. Several of his works hung in the museum for months without anyone noticing they didn’t belong there. He was not invited to display his work in the museum, but his artistic expression there became valid through the force of his own willpower.

Likewise, I have not been invited to write poetry in Chinese. Social convention makes me feel as if I should leave this art to those who know what they are doing. But I’m sneaking in. Poetry is putting words next to each other. I can still do that, I just have to arrange them according to what they look like instead of what they mean. Like the ancient historian Ts’ang Chieh, I observe patterns and record them, creating my own language. This way, the experience of the art is primary.

“Once upon a time, human sat observing nature around him. So inspired by the world around him, he began to dance, imitating the elemental movements as he saw them. He opened

himself to the forces of nature and became what he saw and felt: sky, earth, fire, water, tree, flower, cloud, bird, wind. That person was the originator of Tai Ji. This could have happened thousands of years ago, or it could be that it is happening right now, at this moment, anywhere in the world. This person could be you.”

-Chungliang Al Huang, *Essential Tai Ji* (page 10)

Strange creatures dance up and down the page of a book:

some like raised fists or sprouting mushrooms,

some like ghosts or flying phoenixes;

but most like nothing but themselves.

I know them not at all; not their names, not what they do or where they work—

But I shake their hands. I ink my brush. I paint their portraits. We dance.

(insert pages of Chinese poetry)

Texts read and studied:

Al Huang, Chungliang. *Essential Tai Ji*. London: Singing Dragon, 1989. Print.

Al Huang, Chungliang. *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain*. London: Celestial Arts, 1973. Print.

Chiang, Yee. *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to its Aesthetic and Technique*. Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1973. Print.

Feng, Gia-Fu, and English, Jane (translators), Lao Tsu (attributed to). *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.

Holdrege, C. (2005). Doing Goethean Science. *Janus Head*, 8(1), 27-52.

Lai, T'ien Ch'ang. *Chinese Calligraphy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973. Print.

