

Consulting the *I Ching* at My New Residence---Sept. 12, '04

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I have been living in an old converted Masonic Temple. This is a building full of distant sounds and elusive presences. In the afternoon I hear the rhythmic cries of dance instructors from two dance studios. Later in the evening I hear rock music from deep in the bowels of the building, floating up from a basement venue called The Underground. At night my third floor room is quiet, and I am alone in this building. Once in a while the strong wind blowing off the wheat fields causes a windowpane to vibrate with long moaning sounds. My room has a stairway leading down to one of the large meeting rooms. My upstairs area is where the Masons used to don their regalia before they descended to appear in their ceremonies. So I have a large walk-in closet, almost as large as my bedroom.

In the morning as I walk downstairs to the bookstore on the first floor, I can smell shampoo scent from the beauty shop. This building has several shops rented out on the first floor, and the scents migrate through the building's joints. I also smell books---the particular smell of small-press poetry books and magazines which is different from books at Barnes and Noble or a university library.

Later in the morning I go to the classroom/lounge on the second floor. It has a pleasant smell of varnished woodwork which is exuding its hundred-year-old resin. There are glass cases along two walls, where the Masons used to show their trophies. Now the cases hold a collection of books and magazines put here as a resource for the poetry classes. Since I am holding a lecture series this term, the classroom has some signs of my presence---a number of books about the *I Ching* fill one shelf.

This building certainly has an uncanny atmosphere. There is a large social room with upholstered benches along three walls. One Saturday after our poetry reading, I was sitting on a bench talking to a few prospective students. I said the words "poet-in-residence," and the arm fell off the end of the bench. I found that a broken-off dowel was supporting the bench arm, so I put it back in place. As we kept talking, I said the words 'poet-in-residence' again, and again the bench arm fell to the floor. I can give names of three young men who will corroborate this. The dowel-end was barely resting in its socket, so it's no surprise that it popped out, but its motion showed uncanny timing. The only thing I can figure is that I lurched back unconsciously every time I said that phrase. But since we were having an animated conversation, my body must have lurched in emphasis of other points as well. Perhaps my body had a particular way of lurching when I said that phrase, unlike when I said other phrases.

I don't do very many divinations, and usually not with a head-on intention of getting an answer. Sometimes I sidle into doing one. I'm more willing to approach divination when I bear in mind that this oracle is a ground strewn with omens and coincidences. I'm not getting an answer: I'm framing a question and then encountering an omen. And maybe I'll run into a coincidence that keys me into

something.

An omen is something in the natural world that is fraught with significance for the observer. It assumes the dimensions of a symbol, while still being a natural thing one encounters. An omen for one person may not be an omen for another. Everyone meets with omens; everyone grapples with compelling signs which have indeterminate reference.

The oracle system of the *I Ching* attaches omens to an array of formally paired lines and diagrams. These omens are the sort of things one very naturally sees along the journey of life. But the oracle arranges them in a system and strews them in your way. Instead of taking a walk to see what omens you might see, you throw the *I Ching* coins.

Before my first lecture I framed a question: “How will these lecture-discussions on the *I Ching* go here in Walla Walla?” The result of my divination was #20 Guan (Viewing, Contemplation), with a moving line at the Fifth place. Again, an uncanny omen for me. Taken as six lines, the Guan hexagram is a fanciful diagram of a tower, a structure where one surveys the countryside. The trigram interaction reflects this idea too: the Kun trigram below is the land, which the tower overlooks. Above is a vantage point built up with the balanced effort of Xun.[1]

The word *guan* is an old name for a raised structure used for observing or communing with the phenomena of nature. In the “Fengshan Ceremonies” chapter in Sima Qian’s *Historical Annals*, a Han emperor received this bit of advice from the advisor Gongsun Qing: “It is possible to see the immortals, but your Majesty always goes to see them in such great haste, with the result that you miss them. I recommend that your majesty build a *guan* and set out food for them. The spirit-beings will be induced to come, and they are fond of living in raised structures.”

It is interesting to note that later, in the medieval period, the word “*guan*” was used in religious Daoism for a phalanstery---a residence for contemplative priests.

The Image of the Hexagram says “Wind blows across the land. Thus the superior man uses the Way of spirits for edification.” The Xun trigram above is called the Gentle, and it’s natural image is wind or wood. Wind that blows across the land is an image for the sage’s influence. The land is equated with the people, who bow like plants before the gentle influence of the wind. The sage can have an influence because he has a vantage point: he sees the people and learns about them. At the same time, his self-tempering lets him serve as an example. His vantage point puts him where he can view and be viewed. Using the Way of spirits to edify is looking to the highest vantage point to put values in perspective.

The Hexagram Judgment says “Doing ablutions, not the offering; the atmosphere is solemn.” This statement encapsulates a transition in the history of religion: from blood sacrifice of animals to pure contemplation. At the time of this transition, what was to be a ceremony of sacrifice changes to an occasion for direct mindfulness. This transition can be seen in the Rig Vedas, where a ceremony of animal sacrifice, once practiced by a cattle-raiding people, shifted to being contemplation of Agni, the

life-force present in fire. A similar transition must have happened in China, where there had been rites of sacrifice in the Zhou ancestral temple. This hexagram speaks of an occasion where the mindfulness becomes more important than what you sacrifice. This is suitable to my situation, because I'm here to gain understanding, to commune and learn. I am not called to sacrifice myself or anything else.

This hexagram articulates my situation in many ways. All sorts of resources have been put at my service, starting with the good will that my host has built up in this town. That is, the serviceable land (*kun* trigram) has prepared materials for this building. Hard work (the *xun* trigram above) has raised this building, both as literal bricks and as a destination for lectures. It has long been a building for ceremonies in which people have taken mindful looks out over the life of their community.

I received the Fifth line, which is a yang line in a yang position, so that must mean I'm in the right place. The line statement says: "View my own life. Good fortune." In old Chinese the character for *sheng* ("life") was sometimes used to write *xing* ("self-nature"). So this line could also mean: "Look into my self-nature." This is not narcissistic self-absorption, it is knowing oneself well enough to know others. The unpacked meaning of this line can be seen in Ch. 54 of the *Daode Jing*:

“...Observe other persons through your own person.
Observe other families through your own family.
Observe other villages through your own village.
Observe other states through your own state.
Observe all under heaven through all under heaven.
How do I know the nature of all under heaven?
Through *this*.”

The Fifth is the position of a ruler. It's not that I am a king, but at least I can be masterful in contemplation. I am here, after all to write a few 'contemplative' essays. A person who writes essays must *command* the language. If essays are published they will command resources for the making of books. And if people take time to read them, they will command someone's attention, at least for a few minutes. Hence the ruling line, with its sense of incurred responsibility.

People who study books of the sagely Way may not be sages. But the Confucian sage, similar to the bodhisattva of Buddhists, is an ideal of self-development. Even an ordinary person can verge on sagehood at times, and people need to take turns being sages to guide each other well.

The *I Ching* is not always reassuring and positive. When the Fifth line of #20 Guan changes, it leads to hexagram #23, Peeling Away. This is a hexagram that portrays an *ancien regime*, in a land where people are suffering. It is about elites resting in favored enclaves as their structure crumbles. This result reminds me we cannot be isolated or insulated--reality will break in and awaken us roughly from our state. In a time of contemplation, we have to face everything that plagues our society unflinchingly, because sooner or later it will find us anyway.

Note: [1] The Treatise on Trigrams says that Xun is associated with 'work' and with 'advance and retreat.' It is the trigram of self tempering. Because of its gentle circulation and penetration it is given the natural image of 'wind'. Because of its toughness it is also given the natural image of 'wood'. I call it the trigram of the 'homeostatic field.'