4. "The Woodcarver": A Model for Right Action

I. THE TAO OF ACTION

If the poem "Active Life" were our only evidence, we might conclude that Chuang Tzu and Taoism simply scorn the life of action. Some Westerners misinterpret Taoism in this way, imagining that it counsels a go-with-the-flow passivity that disdains responsibility and real work. This impression is compounded by the fact that Chuang Tzu and other Taoist teachers frequently speak approvingly of *wu-wei,* a word often translated as *inaction.* But *wu-wei* does not mean inaction, and Taoism does not preach passivity. Instead, both point to what we might call *right action,* a form of action that is at once more disciplined and more liberating than the frenzy that we in the West often equate with active life.

The Way of Chuang Tzu contains a number of prose poems and stories that convey the Taoist sense of right action simply by portraying people in the midst of working, creating, caring. My favorite is the tale of Khing, the master woodcarver.

"The Woodcarver"

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand
Of precious wood. When it was finished,
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be
The work of spirits.
The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:
"What is your secret?"

Khing replied: "I am only a workman:
I have no secret. There is only this:

When I began to think about the work you commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting, I had forgotten gain and success.
After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.

"By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

"Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.

"If I had not met this particular tree
There would have been
No bell stand at all.

"What happened?
My own collected thought
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits."[1]

If we are tempted to write off "Active Life" as too cynical about the world of action, we may be equally tempted to dismiss "The Woodcarver" as too romantic. On the surface, this story seems to portray a person very unlike most of us, an expert who has the luxury of acting in a context more benign than most of our workplaces. The woodcarver is an artisan

engaged in the creation of beauty. He seems to be surrounded by people with deep aesthetic sense. And, wonder of wonders, he seems to have permission to take time off in the midst of his work to slow down and meditate. We, however, may not feel masterful at what we do; the people around us may not appreciate our work; and we certainly cannot take a week off to gain vision and to focus our energies!

But dismissing this story as too romantic is simply a way of distancing ourselves from its teaching, a way of shielding our own active lives from the story's scrutiny. As we move inside the story we will find that the woodcarver is not unlike us, his context not unlike our own. In fact, the pressures surrounding the woodcarver turn out to be more severe than those in my work setting—and, I suspect, in yours as well.

Many people feel hampered by the hierarchies in which we often must work, by institutional structures that curtail the independence that we think we need to do our creative best. But few people work in a setting as demanding as the woodcarver's. He lives in a feudal society of princes and peasants, and his "boss," the Prince of Lu, is very near the top of that rigid and unyielding order. When I ask Chinese scholars what would have happened if Khing had failed to produce a bell stand acceptable to the prince, they usually answer with a sweeping movement of the forefinger across the front of the throat. Khing was under considerable pressure to do the job and to do it right, on penalty of his life. It is unlikely that the prince had a personnel handbook with an employee grievance procedure in case things failed to work out. So the freedom of action Khing has in the story cannot be attributed to an enlightened employer.

But what about the fact that Khing is a "master carver," a craftsman who presumably has higher skills than most of us? Does this not make him special, exempt from the conditions that confine us amateurs? Once again our defensiveness is showing. We want to believe that we are so ordinary compared to "the experts," that our action cannot possibly be as

free and graceful as theirs, that we cannot be held to those standards. But, as I shall explore later, one of the critical moments in the story comes when Khing says, "I am only a workman: I have no secret." The quality of his action comes not primarily through his expertise but through his willingness to claim his common humanity, a claim that all of us, however amateur, can make.

Having meditated on "The Woodcarver" for years, I have come to see four critical junctures in the story. At each of these points a vital element of action is revealed, and the way we relate to each element determines the quality of our action. The four elements are motives, skills and gifts, "the other," and results. The woodcarver transforms his relation to each of these elements in a way that frees him from reaction in the world of objects, frees him to engage in *wu-wei*, rightly understood—in action that is harmonious with his own reality and with the reality around him. The woodcarver offers us a model of right action.

II. MOTIVES

If we want to break out of the mechanistic and obsessive sort of action criticized in "Active Life," we must first learn to ask ourselves a simple question: "Why am I doing this?" This is the question of motives, and we hardly ever ask it of ourselves (though we are sometimes quick to inspect, and suspect, the motives of other people). Every action has some motive behind it, some impetus, a force-field out of which it arises. If we do not explore that force we will never act in a transcendent way; we will live out our active lives as automatons who move but do not choose.

Why did the woodcarver set out to create a bell stand? Again, it is easy to read the story romantically and imagine that Khing is a dreamy artist creating "art for art's sake." But that would grossly distort a story that tells us that Khing set out to make the bell stand because the Prince of Lu commanded him

to do it. The threat of the Prince's command and his potential displeasure hangs over the woodcarver's work like the sword of Damocles. As the woodcarver's action proceeds from this initial point of coercion, it does move toward the freedom of art for art's sake. But this is not a freedom granted by the prince or some other external authority. It is a freedom the woodcarver claims for himself, on his own inner authority.

Many of us act from motives that are not entirely benign, on terms that are not always our own. We may act, not by choice, but on demand; not for ourselves and our own reasons, but for others and their reasons; not for the sake of the act itself, but for the sake of the money or security or approval or prestige it will bring; not because we love working, but because we want to avoid the guilt of not working. Motives such as these are so common that we accept them as the inevitable launching pads of action.

But a launching pad is only temporary; once launched, the rocket is free of the pad's constraints. We often must launch our actions from motives and circumstances that are less than ideal. If we wait for the ideal motives before we act, most of us would never act; but if we allow our action to be confined by its original motives, our action may be slipshod, graceless, banal. What is the process by which we, like the woodcarver, might accept an undesirable impetus to action and yet allow our action to be transformed into something of beauty and truth that transcends its original constraints?

I suspect that the woodcarver began by understanding that sometimes we must be outwardly called to our own inward truth, and that these callings may come from the most unlikely sources—such as a ruthless prince. The call may come from the wrong place or for the wrong reason, but that does not mean that it is the wrong call.

A friend of mine tells the story of arriving at college for the opening of his freshman year, working all day to get moved in, going to bed that night and waking up the next morning with the thought, The only reason I'm in college is because

my parents wanted it, and that's not good enough. So he started packing up and moving out, but the job took the whole day and he had to sleep in the dorm again that night. When he woke up the next morning he thought, So what? My parents' desire for me to be here is as good a reason as any—and so he decided to stay. Obviously, he had gotten in touch with his own inner call to be in college, however inarticulate, and had transcended the external factors that had "forced" him to be there.

My friend was probably so afraid of the challenges of college that he railed against his parents as a way of evading his own fears. Such fears rise up in almost every form of action. We know that the woodcarver began his work fearfully, for he says, "I fasted in order to set my heart at rest," clearly indicating that his heart was agitated at first by the threat of the prince's command. The story of the woodcarver is instructive, not because he is fearless (which would make him very unlike most of us), but because he did not let his fears paralyze him. Instead, he walked into and through those fears that he could not get out of, and found the freedom to act on the other side.

The process by which the woodcarver found his freedom is more deliberate and disciplined than the process my friend went through, but at bottom it is the same: a process of contemplation by which we penetrate the illusion of enslavement and claim our own inner liberty. In the woodcarver's case, that process is called fasting. Taken literally, of course, fasting means abstaining from food. It is a discipline that requires us to override deep biological impulses of survival, to override the social conditioning that links eating with well-being. Through fasting, the body and, some say, the soul are purged of poisons and brought back to health.

We could read this story as an exhortation to clarify our action by abstaining from food for a while, and people who have tried that know that it can help. But Chuang Tzu has a larger lesson to teach. He opens up the metaphorical meaning of fasting by paralleling it with *forgetting*. The key to the

woodcarver's contemplation is that it enabled him to forget and therefore abstain from all sorts of psychic "junk food"—gain and success, praise and criticism, and even the Prince of Lu and his court.

The woodcarver's real fasting is his active refusal to ingest, to internalize, the poisoned baits that can kill the spirit of right action. Not only did the woodcarver fend off the allures of material gain, higher status, immunity from criticism, and guaranteed praise, but he even resisted the temptation to toady to his all-powerful employer, the prince. By the time he had fasted for seven days, he says, " . . . all thought of your Highness / And of the court had faded away. / All that might distract me from the work / Had vanished."

It is a splendid moment in the story. Imagine that your boss asks you, "How did you manage to do this job so well?" and you respond, "Well, frankly, I simply forgot that you even exist!" At every possible level the woodcarver worked to forget the externals so that he could remember his inner truth.

I am struck by the centrality of forgetting in this story because I tend to do just the opposite when I am poised to act. I strain to recall everything—what I am doing, why I am doing it, who I am doing it for, how to do it, when it needs to be done, what the outcomes should be. For example, in my early years of teaching I spent hours and hours before each class rereading key books, writing and rewriting lecture notes, reviewing, rehearsing, remembering. But this sort of preparation did not make me a good teacher. Too often it stuffed me so full of external ideas and strategies, so full of myself, that I was unable to hear my students' questions and interests and needs, let alone respond to them. I had ingested so many externals that my teaching was leaden and graceless. Like the archer in the following Chuang Tzu poem, I wanted so desperately to do a good job that in my desperation I botched it.

"The Need to Win"

When an archer is shooting for nothing
He has all his skill.

If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind
Or sees two targets—
He is out of his mind!

His skill has not changed. But the prize
Divides him. He cares.
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting—
And the need to win
Drains him of power.[2]

Of course, there is a phase in the development of any art or craft when we are still trying to learn it, and so we must remember what we are doing. Khing was not always a master woodcarver; there was a time when he had to ponder long over which chisel to use, a time when he needed to recall how he had mangled his last project so that he could avoid making the same mistake again. But once we have learned we must paradoxically forget, trusting that our hard-won knowledge will arise when needed without our forcing it.

The forgetting of the woodcarver is like that of the major league shortstop who has no time to remember as he sweeps to his left to scoop up a hard grounder; or like that of a concert pianist who cannot afford to be encumbered by remembering as her fingers negotiate the rapids of a Bach fugue; or like that of the master surgeon who told her students that at one point in open-heart surgery, "You have only thirty seconds to tie off this artery—so you have got to take your time." Right action requires knowledge, but if we try to remember all that we know, that very knowledge can paralyze our action.

By forgetting what he knew about his craft and his context, the woodcarver paradoxically was able to remember the one thing most important to right action: his own inner truth, his own nature. The word *remember* literally means to *re*-member,

to reunite that hidden wholeness in us and in our world that is so easily torn apart by powers within and around us. The woodcarver refuses to allow himself and his action to be *dis*-membered by the forces of fragmentation. Through fasting and forgetting, he says, "All that might distract me from the work / Had vanished. / I was collected in the single thought / Of the bell stand." He does not say that he worked to "collect his thoughts" in the way that I might, but that he allowed himself to be "collected." Through fasting and forgetting he allowed himself and his world to be regathered into their original unity, to be re-membered, re-called, re-collected into that hidden wholeness that is the only context for right action.

There is another word that may describe the woodcarver's path to transcendence even better than *fasting* and *forgetting*. It is *dying*. By the final day of his fast, Khing says, "I had forgotten my body with all its limbs." I do not think he is telling us to ignore our bodies or try to discard them; people who fast often care more for their bodies than those of us who never abstain. Instead, I think Khing is moving beyond his sense of bodily separateness and allowing himself to be absorbed into the whole. This is death and why we fear it—the loss of our boundaries and distinctiveness, the annihilation of self. Driven by this fear, we act over and against things to prove our separateness, and in the process our action becomes adversarial, fragmenting us and our world, destroying the hidden wholeness.

The fear of dying must have been in the woodcarver, especially since the command that gave rise to his work carried an implicit death threat from the omnipotent prince. But the woodcarver, knowing that no one can get out of death, deals with his fear by walking directly into it. He fasts and forgets, denying himself the external resources that we commonly regard as necessary for survival. In the process he discovers the inner resources necessary for authentic life; he is re-membered to the hidden wholeness; he creates a work of surpassing

beauty. And it all began with the prince's high-handed and threatening command. If we are to transcend the motives and contexts that so often limit and distort our action, we must enter into our own versions of fasting, forgetting, and dying.

III. SKILLS AND GIFTS

The skill necessary to act is the second element of action that the woodcarver transcends and transforms in the course of his story. Khing is described as a "master carver," a status he could attain only through years of hard work. Having invested so much time and energy in learning his craft, he might have been tempted to use his *mastery* in the negative sense of that word: a process of forcing something or someone into slavery to serve one's own ends. Khing must have been tempted to assume that he knew it all, that his long years of experience had conferred on him the right to envision the perfect bell stand and force that vision onto the tree. After all, he had worked hard to attain the status and power of an expert. Why not go ahead and do whatever he wanted to do?

The story suggests that Khing was surrounded by the sort of adulation that can easily tempt experts toward an inflated sense of self. "All who saw [the bell stand] were astounded. They said it must be / The work of spirits." And the Prince of Lu, Khing's employer, further tempts the woodcarver toward a sense of superiority when he asks, "What is your secret?"

But the woodcarver will have none of it. With a candor that can come only from deep self-knowledge, he deflects all this praise and puffery by saying, "I am only a workman: I have no secret." He insists on the humanness of his work and refuses to shroud it in mystique.

What a contrast there is between this candid woodcarver and some of the "masters" of our time who thrive on mystifying the public about what they do and how they do it. By guarding their secrets and pretending to have secrets where they don't, some professionals try to protect their markets

from laypeople who might do for themselves what the experts do for a price. But Khing has no need to aggrandize his own mastery in ways that discourage other people from discovering theirs.

The question is, Why do so many people want to be mystified by expertise? Why are the people around Khing convinced that his bell stand "must be the work of spirits" rather than of human agency? Why does the Prince of Lu ask Khing for his "secret" rather than affirming Khing for his gifts and his hard work?

Perhaps jealousy is at work here. Perhaps neither the people nor the prince want to give Khing his due because their own work seems so inferior to his. But perhaps the deeper reason for their response is not jealousy but fear. By spiritualizing and mystifying Khing's action, the people and the prince distance themselves from it and evade the challenge implicit in its very humanness. If they were to embrace the notion that Khing is "only a workman" who has no secrets (which Khing clearly wants them to do), they would have to reflect upon and revitalize their own active lives. Instead, they let themselves off the hook by attributing the bell stand to something other than Khing's hard work and his faithfulness to his gifts.

Sadly, some contemporary spirituality errs this way with its notion that anything good that we do is clearly the work of "the Spirit." Behind such language often lurks the idea that it is egotistical to claim our work as our own. But an authentic spirituality of action will celebrate our desire and capacity to co-create the world with the gifts we have been given.

In my experience, more people suffer from a sense of incompetence or impotence than enjoy feelings of superiority about their powers of creation. In a world where so many people feel unable to do a masterwork, the story of the master carver can seem utterly irrelevant: "I have no special skills. I am the master of nothing. How can this fairy tale possibly have a bearing on my life? I could never achieve the beauty of the bell stand in anything I do."

There is good news for the person who feels this way, but the good news contains the very challenge that the prince and the people were trying to evade: Every human being is born with some sort of gift, an inclination or an instinct that can become a full-blown mastery. We may not see our gift for what it is. Having seen it we may choose not to accept the gift and its consequences for our lives. Or, having claimed our gift, we may not be willing to do the hard work necessary to nurture it. But none of these evasions can alter the fact that the gift is ours. Each of us is a master at something, and part of becoming fully alive is to discover and develop our birthright competence.

Discerning our native gifts is difficult for many reasons. We live in a culture that tells us there is no such thing as a gift, that we must earn or make everything we get. Social forces such as racism, sexism, and ageism press poor self-images upon us. Various inner pathologies may lead us to embrace those images despite the obvious damage they do. But the most subtle barrier to the discernment of our native gifts is in the gifts themselves: They are so central to us, so integral to who we are, that we take them for granted and are often utterly unaware of the mastery they give us.

The skills we are most aware of possessing are often those we have acquired only through long hours of study and practice, at considerable financial or personal cost. Precisely because these skills once cost us effort to acquire, and still cost us effort to employ, we are acutely aware of owning them. Ironically, these self-conscious skills are often not our leading strengths; if they were, they would not be so effortful. But they are the strengths upon which we sometimes build our identities and our careers—though we build on an anxious, uncertain foundation. Meanwhile, our native, instinctive gifts either languish unused and unappreciated or get used unconsciously without being named and claimed.

Our tendency to identify ourselves with our acquired skills rather than our natural gifts is one of the less desirable habits of the ego. It is the ego that decides what skills it prizes, the

ego that exerts the effort to develop those skills, the ego that manipulates and markets those skills once it acquires them. Because the ego's identity is so heavily invested in these acquired skills, it does not want to acknowledge the natural, untrained, effortless gifts over which the ego has no ownership or control. Indeed, the very fact that we have gifts that the ego did nothing to earn is threatening to the ego, which desperately needs to believe that nothing comes into being without its own authorization or agency. In fact, the ego can sometimes be so insistent on its status that it would sooner diminish us than be humbled by our gifts. If we have no formal training, no acquired skills, the ego may insist that we have no competence at all rather than honor our native gifts.

We need ego-strength to live and live fruitfully. But it is a paradoxical truth that in order to gain the strength that comes from knowing our gifts we may have to fight the ego's drive to dominate our lives. The woodcarver fought through fasting, forgetting, and dying to the false demands of his ego. In that process he penetrated the ego's self-delusions and arrived at a truth about himself, his gifts, and his relation to the reality around him, a truth that allowed him to transcend the traps inherent in the skillfulness necessary for action.

It is important to realize that the woodcarver's native gift may not have been the obvious one—his capacity to employ woodworking tools with consummate skill. Even if he had been born with the manual dexterity that woodworking requires, his skill with those particular tools surely took him years of practice to perfect. A careful reading of the story shows that the woodcarver possesses several other gifts, all of which are essential to the mastery he demonstrates: the capacity to wait patiently for insight to emerge, the capacity to trust in the outcomes of an uncertain process, the capacity to take risks even under pressure, the capacity to speak his truth even when it is not what people want to hear. Any of these may be his birthright gift, without which his technical ability to carve would make him no more than an average artisan.

So when we seek our own birthright gifts, it is important not to equate them with the techniques our society names as skills. Our gifts may be as simple as a real interest in other people, a quiet and caring manner, an eye for beauty, a love of rhythm and sound. But in those simple personal gifts the seeds of vocation are often found, if we are willing to do the inner and outer work necessary to cultivate our mastery.

Some readers may remain unconvinced that everyone is born with some gift, some mastery. For them—wounded perhaps by an ego or a culture that says people are incompetent without training—the notion that we are all given expertise at birth may sound like the largest illusion of all. I cannot offer definitive proof of this claim for people who do not intuit its truth, but I can offer some supportive evidence.

Over the past decade a new approach to vocation seeking has emerged that draws on the insights of *depth psychology*.[3] In this approach people are encouraged to begin, not with their credentials, but with the question, "What are my leading gifts and abilities?" There are various ways to answer this question, but many of the new career counselors urge people to start by writing a childhood autobiography. Some job-seekers find it odd to be asked to explore their earliest childhood memories of how they spent time, what brought them pleasure, what they could not abide. How could this information possibly help one identify marketable adult skills?

What the exercise does, of course, is to circumvent the ego, to take us back to those days when we acted more from natural inclination than from the ego's images and demands. Some of the most powerful clues to our true gifts are buried deep in childhood, when we said and did and felt things without censoring them through external values or expectations. As we grow older, various social pressures may divert us from our native gifts, and we may experience much personal and vocational frustration as a result. But by recalling the activities that evoked our energies during childhood's innocence, we can get in touch with our own version of the woodcarver's mastery.

IV. THE OTHER

A third element of action that the woodcarver transcends and transforms is his relation to "the other." In the woodcarver's case the other is a tree, the wood that he carves. But every form of action involves an other. For a teacher it is students; for a doctor, patients; for a plumber, pipes; for a parent, the child; for a writer, words. In every action there is an other with which the actor is in partnership and on which the action in part depends.

The woodcarver's relation to the tree is obviously different from our society's relation to the physical world. For us, the world consists of raw material whose value depends almost entirely on our transforming it. But the woodcarver values the tree in and of itself. He knows that the tree has an identity and an integrity even as he himself does. He knows that if his work is to be true he must discern and keep faith with the nature of the tree. Where we would fell a thousand trees and make a thousand identical bell stands, the woodcarver enters into a "live encounter" with "this particular tree" that allows "the hidden potential in the wood" to emerge. So the action in this story does not belong to the woodcarver alone. It is a joint action, the result of a dynamic meeting between an actor and an other, and the bell stand that comes out of it is clearly a co-creation.

Chuang Tzu is not a romantic who tells us that the only right action is to leave everything alone, to leave nature untouched. For all his respect for the tree, the woodcarver still cuts it down and carves it up; the bell stand must be made. But in the midst of his realism Chuang Tzu insists that we must know and revere the nature of the other if our action is to be fruitful. This means giving up one of the most cherished but destructive myths of our technological society—the myth that all things are plastic, malleable, capable of being molded into any shape we require or desire. It is a myth at work in almost every sector of our lives.

Tired of your body? There is a diet or exercise program that promises to give you an entirely new shape. Tired of your personality? There is a therapy that promises to make you into a new person. Tired of the aimless meandering of that river? There is a technology that promises untold benefits from damming it up, creating a lake, generating hydroelectric power, and building resorts along the shore. Tired of the differences between cultures, of the threatening pretensions of cultures alien to your own? There is a military, economic, or political intervention that promises to make them just like us.

But these are false and destructive promises that can result only in violence to the other and to ourselves. Right action requires knowledge of the other's nature, which means knowledge of its potentials and limits, of what it can and cannot do. Good farmers know the nature of their soil; they know enough not to deplete it. Good teachers know the nature of their students; they know enough not to discourage them. Good mechanics know the nature of their machines; they know enough not to damage them. Good writers know the nature of words; they know enough not to stretch them out of shape. With such knowledge we can help the other fulfill its potentials, while respecting its limits, distorting neither the other nor ourselves as we act.

When we violate the nature of the other, we violate ourselves as well. At the very least, we despoil the environment that we ourselves inhabit. When we build dams in the wrong places, we diminish our own lives by destroying beauty and damaging the ecology. When we impose military "solutions" on alien societies, we make the world more dangerous for ourselves and for our descendants. When we force our values on our students or on our children, we create environments of hostility that corrode our own souls.

Sadly, destructive actions such as these tend to perpetuate themselves through vicious circles. Adults who have grown up with hostility tend to be hostile towards the young. People who have been victimized by the violence of their own culture tend to victimize those of other cultures. People who do not feel at home on earth tend to abuse the earth itself. So the key to action that knows and cares for the other is to know and care for ourselves.

That, of course, is exactly how the woodcarver came into fruitful relation with the tree—by knowing himself. He did not prepare for his work by conducting a scientific study of the external properties of trees, though his years of woodcarving clearly had given him knowledge of wood. He prepared by going into himself, by penetrating the illusions that had him in their grip (illusions about success and failure, for example) in order to touch his own truth. What he found inwardly was not an ego that wanted to impose its own designs on the tree, but a self that sought its rightful place in the scheme of things, its rightful relation to the prince, the people, the tree, and the task at hand. This is what the "live encounter" of right action is all about—an encounter between the inward truth of the actor and the inward truth of the other that penetrates all external appearances and expectations. If the actor lacks self-knowledge, the live encounter will never take place, and the action will be trapped in externals.

For example, one reason that we sometimes have bad teaching in our schools, teaching that does not touch and transform students, is that teachers are sometimes paralyzed by unexamined fears. They fear the ridicule of young people, the exposure of their own ignorance, the generational conflict of values, the loss of control. The authoritarian methods that bad teachers use—methods that put vast and arid distances between students and teachers and subjects—are unconscious attempts to keep these fears at bay. If such teachers understood themselves and their fears better, the result might be teaching that comes from within the teachers' self-knowledge and that makes learning into a live encounter once more.

Some people find the woodcarver's story flawed in the fact that the tree did not resist being cut and carved, while most of us work with people and systems that resist constantly. These

critics wonder if the tree would have agreed to being cut down and carved into a bell stand if it had not been mute. They wonder how the woodcarver would have responded if the tree had been an animate object able to fight back.

No doubt this story would have had more punch for some of us if the other had been an unwieldy organization or a foot-dragging child. But anyone who has ever worked with wood knows that it is not mute, that it has a voice, a will, a nature. The story is not explicit about this, but in his carving Khing must have been listening and responding to the wood's voice, engaged in a dialogue of common language, despite the absence of vocal sounds. Had Khing not allowed the tree to tell him whether it wanted to become a bell stand and what kind of bell stand it wanted to become, no work of such surpassing beauty could have emerged.

The question is, How did Khing—and how do we—negotiate those moments of miscommunication, resistance, contradiction, and conflict that any live encounter is likely to involve? An answer is given in Chuang Tzu's "Cutting Up an Ox," the story of a butcher who is as skillful at his craft as Khing is at his. This butcher has used the same cleaver for nineteen years: "It has cut up a thousand oxen. Its edge is as keen now as if newly sharpened." The butcher's master, Prince Wan Hui, asks him how he could have cut up so many carcasses without dulling his blade, and the butcher responds,

> "There are spaces in the joints;
> The blade is thin and keen:
> When this thinness
> Finds that space
> There is all the room you need!
> It goes like a breeze!
> Hence I have this cleaver nineteen years
> As if newly sharpened!"
>
> "True, there are sometimes
> Tough joints. I feel them coming.
> I slow down, I watch closely
> Hold back, barely move the blade,

> And whump! the part falls away
> Landing like a clod of earth."
>
> "Then I withdraw the blade,
> I stand still
> And let the joy of the work
> Sink in.
> I clean the blade
> And put it away."
>
> Prince Wan Hui said,
> "This is it! My cook has shown me
> How I ought to live
> My own life!"[4]

When we are faced with a resistant other, we can respond the way the butcher does when he encounters a tough joint: He slows down, he watches closely, he holds back, he barely moves. He engages in a form of contemplative action that tries to discern the true nature of the other, action that does not attempt to accomplish its goals by main force. Despite the fact that the butcher is cutting up an ox, his action is essentially nonviolent, not unlike the contemplative actions with which Gandhi dissected the British Empire in India.

We can also find clues for our own action in the butcher's attitude before and after he acts. The butcher begins with a clear vision that "there are spaces in the joints," that he is not dealing with an impenetrable monolith that needs to be overwhelmed by brute force. There are such "spaces" in every person, every system, every problem, and seeing them is essential to right action of every sort. The butcher ends by withdrawing the blade, standing still, and letting the joy of the work sink in. He reveals the reverence that makes a live encounter possible, reverence for self and for other and for the dance of co-creation.

V. RESULTS

The fourth element of action that the woodcarver transcends and transforms is results. Perhaps the obsession with getting

results deforms our action more than any other element of the active life. Too often we think of action not as an experience to be lived for its own sake but as a means to some end, and if that end is not achieved we regard the action as a failure. Furthermore, we believe that we must have the end clearly in view before the action begins and that every step in the action must be logically related to the end. Otherwise, how could we ever achieve results; how could we ever "make" things happen? But Chuang Tzu understands that the tight logic of means and ends can easily lead to banality or worse. If the woodcarver had acted this way he would never have created a bell stand of such grace.

It is easy to describe the fatal flaw in action that is rigidly oriented toward results, though acting differently is difficult. When we invest much time and energy in imaging a certain outcome, that image becomes more real for us than what is happening as we act. We become blind to the clues that action itself yields, clues to the reality of both the means and the ends, clues that call us to change course or speed or style if we want to stay in touch with what is really going on. We ignore the fact that right action is a process of birthing that cannot be forced, but only followed. Yes, we can exercise some influence over the course of the action and what comes out of it. But there is no way that we can predict outcomes, since they emerge from the intricate interplay of the actor, the other, and the setting of the action.

I feel sorry for teachers (to take one example) who are required to spell out precise "learning objectives" long before a class begins so that they can measure their own "effectiveness." I feel sorry for their students, too. Education dominated by preconceived images of what must be learned can hardly be educational. Authentic teaching and learning requires a live encounter with the unexpected, an element of suspense and surprise, an evocation of that which we did not know until it happened. If these elements are not present, we may be training or indoctrinating students, but we are not educating

them. In any arena of action—rearing children, counseling people, repairing machines, writing books—right action depends on yielding our images of particular outcomes to the organic realities of ourselves, the other, and the adventure of action itself.

But this yielding requires us to confront our fears once more. Behind our obsession with projecting results and gearing our actions toward them is our need to control the other and the situation; and behind our need to control is our fear of what will happen if we lose control. If we lack confidence that life is trustworthy, that a life of live encounters will take us toward wholeness, then we will forever feel the need to manipulate, and goal setting will be one of our major strategies. But once we begin to see that life is a live encounter whether we like it or not—once we begin to understand that we can't get out of it, so we must get into it—then this concern for results will take its proper place in our active lives. Never in this world will we be free of a concern for results, but we can transcend and transform that concern the way the woodcarver did.

Our culture's fearful obsession with results has sometimes, ironically, led us to abandon great objectives and settle for trivial and mediocre ends. The reason is simple. As long as "effectiveness" is the ultimate standard by which we judge our actions, we will act only toward ends we are sure we can achieve. People who undertake projects of real breadth and depth are very unlikely to be "effective," since effectiveness is measured by short-term results (never mind the fact that such people may be creating cultural legacies by their "failures"). But people with small visions will win the effectiveness awards, since those projects are so insignificant that they can almost always "succeed" (never mind the fact that they contribute nothing of real merit to the commonweal).

When I think of the great works we are called to in our lives, works we avoid at peril of our souls, I think of works in which we cannot possibly be "effective." I mean such things as

loving other people, opposing injustice, comforting the grieving, bringing an end to war. There can be no "effectiveness" in these tasks, only the commitment to work away at them, and if we judge such work by the standard of measurable outcomes, the only possible result will be defeat and despair.

I remember talking with a friend who has worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily she tries to respond to waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as surf in that community. Out of my deep not-knowing I asked her how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better. I will never forget her enigmatic answer: "The thing you don't understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!"

I have another friend who has devoted most of his adult life to resisting the madness of war through actions of justice and peace. He has done everything from painfully unearthing the seeds of violence in his personal life to living in poverty so as to stay below the taxation level. He owns nothing in his own name because, if he did, the government could collect it as back-taxes. The money he "should" have given the government over the years, and more, he has donated to peace and justice projects.

Does he have any results to show for his efforts? Has he been effective? Hardly—at least, not by the normal calculus. His years of commitment to peacemaking have been years of steady increase in wars and rumors of wars. So how does he stay healthy and sane? How does he maintain a commitment to this sort of active life? His answer completes the koan offered by my friend at the Catholic Worker: "I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful." He judges his action, not by the results it gets, but by its fidelity to his own calling and identity.

Again, results are not irrelevant. We rightly care about outcomes; we have to live with them, and being accountable for

them is part of right action. But to make results the primary measure of action is a sure path to either inanity or insanity. The only standard that can guide and sustain us in action worth taking is whether the action corresponds to the reality of the situation, including the reality of our own inward nature.

The paradox, of course, is that faithful action does get results. Though my friends in the Catholic Worker and the peace movement have not achieved a just and warless world, they have certainly compelled others, including me, to search for ways we might live in faith with these visions. The results of faithful action cannot be foreseen, but they are sure to come about. For faithful action is action faithful to the nature of things, and when we act organically, our action has consequences for the organism. Surely the results will be healthier, more whole, when our action is freed from fear, from the need to control, from our idealistic fantasies, from the discouraging facts that surround us.

The woodcarver clearly wanted to co-create a bell stand, or else he would not have taken such care. But he took care to attend to reality without getting fixated on results, to the point that he was willing to risk no results whatsoever: "If I had not met this particular tree / There would have been / No bell stand at all." Of course, the woodcarver and my faithful friends never come up empty-handed, even when they do not meet the right tree. Finally, what they are crafting is not bell stands or justice or peace. They are crafting themselves. And the sort of selves they are becoming is their finest contribution to the increase of peace and justice and beauty in this world.