

[Essay]

The Current of the Universe Acceptance and Being Here Now

William Irwin^{*}

Abstract

We are well advised to align ourselves with the flow of change. Things outside our minds are beyond our complete control. To let go of what is beyond our control, without even attempting to influence it, becomes easier, if we hypothesize that the world will run just fine without us. Attunement with the universe involves knowing what it “wants and needs.” This is not mystical; it is a matter of becoming more passive and receptive. The big picture takes the microscope off me and puts things in their proper focus. The wise person recognizes that we do not know what will turn out to be for the good in the long run. We lose attunement when we live too much in the past or future.

Accepting the Flow

The ancient stoics called it the logos; the Chinese call it the Tao; I call it “the current of the universe,” a force greater than the human, but without design or plan. The current of the universe is a useful fiction to fill the hole left by the loss of God, but it is not something outside of nature as God is often conceived to be. Acknowledging the current of the universe is a way of acknowledging that we ourselves do not have the power once attributed to God. Everything outside the mind runs outside our complete control, and yet there is some beauty and order to all of this.

To understand the current of the universe we might examine the world around us. An object in motion will continue in motion at a constant speed in a straight line unless acted upon by an outside force. The kicker is that on earth there is *always* an outside force; there is always friction, air resistance, and so on. If this law of motion is true of the physical universe, perhaps it also true of the metaphysical universe. Indeed, perhaps this law of motion is just a single manifestation of a greater law: things will go as they will go unless interfered with. When things are running straight and steady, so to speak, the best thing to

^{*} Professor of philosophy, King’s College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 18711, USA.

do is to let them be. Things, events, and situations do not ordinarily require our involvement and interference. Of course, though, things sometimes get knocked off course, and we are responsible for readjusting them. Because the current of the universe does not operate in a vacuum, things do not always run smoothly. But the better we can attune ourselves to the current, the more we will realize how little interference is required of us.

The world has a way of resetting its equilibrium, and so the best and most appropriate action is often letting go. We often have to “let go or be dragged.” If what I want is not being taken in the same direction as I am, even if I pull, it may not come my way. So if I decide to hold on, I will be dragged. Letting go can be difficult, but I am always glad when I “let go.” After the fact I never say “I should not have let that go.” On the other hand, lots of times I say to myself, “I should have let that go.” For example, my mother often says things that cast my father in a bad light, and I am usually tempted to point out her faults in return. I am always glad when I let go and say nothing, and I always regret it when I fire back at her. I cannot change the situation and change her mind by engaging in a verbal joust. I must let go to gain equilibrium.

We can naturalize and demystify the current of the universe simply by thinking of it in terms of change. All things are always changing; that is the current of the universe. So we are well advised to align ourselves with the flow of change. Things outside our minds are beyond our complete control. To let go of what is beyond our control, without even attempting to influence it, becomes easier, if we hypothesize that the world will run just fine without us. Believing there is such a current makes us more easily disposed to let go of things, and letting go of things makes it easier to believe there is such a current. The ideas feed off one another. We often fail to recognize how much all things are indeed in process, subject to change, changing before our eyes even when we do not see. We need to love change; to see it as necessary and embrace it; to know its rhythm is a soothing drumbeat, joining us to, and in, the eternal flow.

Consider the way a sailboat can harness the wind to sail in any direction. We must similarly learn to harness the “wind” or current of the universe. To do so we must acknowledge it, stick a finger up to see which way the wind is “blowing,” and then set our “sails,” adjust our thoughts and actions, accordingly. If I decide to move against the wind, against the current of the universe, I should do so only with good reason and prepared for adversity.

Attunement

Attunement with another person involves knowing what the other person wants and needs. Similarly, attunement with the universe involves knowing what it “wants and needs.” This is not mystical; it is a matter of becoming passive and receptive and not imposing oneself on what is incoming. To be small and attentive, one may need to be big and powerful — to successfully attune one must feel secure enough to make oneself open and vulnerable.

When it comes to attunement, we need to not so much go with a first impulse as with the “gut.” This is not to say we should make all decisions based on the gut. Clearly, we should not. But when a quick decision is required, the gut is superior to an impulse. Impulses are reactions, as out of fear or anger, whereas the gut is a judgment. Often the first impulse and gut will advise the same thing, but when they differ, we need to listen to the gut. Fear or excitement may shape a first impulse, but the gut is steadier and truer. The gut is not magical, but with it we can know things pre-verbally. Before we can form the words in our minds or mouths we can know something with our gut. For example, we can know we are in danger even before we verbalize it. This is the “gut.”

Attunement to the current of the universe shares something in common with sensing the “momentum” in a football game or other sporting contest. There is sometimes a palpable feel for how the game is going, and this feel, this momentum, can change directions. When the momentum favors my team, it is best to go with it and “strike while the iron is hot.” When the momentum is against my team, it is foolish to break myself against it, to force things that are unlikely to work. Still, not only can the momentum change, but players can act to change the momentum. Taking a timeout or slowing the pace may sometimes work in a game and in life. As we tune in to the momentum of a game, so we need to tune in to the current of the universe to live effectively.

For example, when my father-in-law died at the age of ninety-two, my wife told me the wake and funeral would be eight hours away in Grove City, Ohio. This arrangement did not make sense to me. Why not just have the wake and funeral here in Pennsylvania? But respecting the wishes of my wife and her family, I said nothing. I tuned in to the flow. To my surprise, it turned out that it made perfect sense to have the wake and funeral in Ohio. Hundreds of people came to express their condolences, and that was a great comfort to my wife and mother-in-law. I would simply have been trying to force my own way and I

would have greatly regretted it, had I resisted or questioned the value of having the wake and funeral in Ohio.

We need to learn to improvise and adjust. The current of the universe sometimes changes directions, and sometimes we can be mistaken about its direction. When that happens we can keep going in the direction we were heading anyway or, better, we can adjust. Rather than attempting to plow over the obstacle, we can go around it or in the other direction. No good comes from resenting the road block or complaining that it should not be there. Like water running into a rock, we need to gently go around it. (Ironically, of course, the water wears down the rock eventually, over the very long run.) It is foolish to be so committed to a plan of action that we stick to it no matter what. We need to be flexible, ready to go whatever way is indicated. We need to be ready to improvise and adjust goals. Sometimes the good is the enemy of the best; so we need to be ready and willing to change course for something better if it reveals itself.

Aside from becoming mindful of such situations in the midst of them and acting accordingly, we can learn attunement and adjustment by engaging in naturally improvisational activities. Caring for my children quickly taught me that the children are not under my control; but, tuned in to the children, I can “take” them wherever I need to go. Or, consider playing Tetris. As in the game, so in life, stuff comes down at us and we need to make it fit with what is already there. And, of course, we do not know and we do not get to choose what stuff will come down at us. Instead, we get to choose our attitude. Indeed, Tetris teaches and requires the spontaneity, improvisation, and creativity we need in life. Consider also what Shakespeare did when Will Kemp, who was skilled at playing the clown, left the bard’s acting company. Shakespeare didn’t continue writing parts for a clown but instead wrote parts for the company’s new actor, Robert Armin, who was skilled at playing the fool. This brought Shakespeare even greater success and created such characters as the fool in *King Lear*.

The lesson is that mutation and change can lead to adaptation and improvement. Maybe I forgot to pack my toothpaste, and that means I will need to use the toothpaste in my host’s bathroom. Perhaps I will discover that I like it better than my brand. I need to look at unexpected changes and disruptions as ways to break out of old patterns and perhaps discover something new and better. And even if nothing new and better is discovered, new appreciation for the old is gained.

Driving can teach us a lot about the current of the universe. In particular, we can tune in to the current of the universe by stopping at all stop signs, not just the octagonal ones. I used to merely pause at stop signs — I was always in a rush, even if I had nowhere important to go. Now I stop and take a deep breath. Not only is this better traffic safety, it is better mental hygiene. Hurrying is a sickness and takes us out of attunement. Life is right there at the stop sign, not at the time and place I am rushing towards.

Similarly, through the course of a day things pop up that seem to call for us to stop and give them due acknowledgment. They do not impede our progress, as they might appear to, but give us a chance to attune. Rather than do the equivalent of the rolling-stop-pause, it serves me well to stop and take a deep breath. For example, when my Internet connection goes down, I take this as an opportunity to tune in to other things and realize how relatively unimportant my e-mail is.

The current of the universe is beyond our control like the flow of traffic or the pattern of traffic lights. So we are well advised to get in line with it. In driving we do not get to determine the perfect speed; the flow of traffic and the speed limit determine that. Once, clearly out of tune, I nearly caused a terrible accident when I ran through a red light. I skidded to a halt, as did the car coming from the other direction. The light was not yellow-turning-red when I went through it. No, I have to admit it had definitely turned red before I went through it. Still, I thought I could make it through without a problem. I was wrong. I am now embarrassed to think how many times I had done this before. That kind of risk-taking is like playing Russian roulette. There is a live round in the chamber, and sooner or later the odds catch up with you.

I have since resolved to drive in the slow lane. In town I will drive behind whoever is in front of me. On the highway (and in life) I will set the cruise control at the speed limit and drive in the slow lane, letting others pass by. Rushing with no particular point shows a profound lack of respect for, and understanding of, the current of the universe. The flow of traffic is bigger than I am, and except in the case of a true emergency, it does not pay for me to drive faster than the flow.

Of course I mean all of this metaphorically, but I also mean it literally. Exerting influence over the flow of traffic (just like any other part of the current of the universe) always comes at a price. The price in this case appears small in the moment because it is not collected every time, but rather in one large sum

when an accident results. Still, that price is enough to override any small advantages that may be gained in the moment by beating a light. Of course there are times when one should exert influence and be ready to pay the price, but these are few and far between. In the case of a true emergency, for example, it makes sense to speed to the hospital. But ordinarily the default position should be to accept the flow, even if I do not get where I am going as quickly. This acceptance more than pays for itself in the peace of mind that accompanies such practice. Driving more slowly — like meditating and exercising — paradoxically turns out to be a time saver. It drains me less and leaves me with more energy.

The Big Picture and the Long Run

I need to live here in the present, while considering the big picture and the long run. The big picture takes the microscope off me and puts things in their proper focus. I am not the center of the universe. The world is not just about me in my car at this particular moment; it is about the person in front of me too, who is *not* driving slower than the speed limit simply to tick me off. A spectator looking at me in the big picture would find me silly and obnoxious for cursing the other driver.

The “long run” refers to the future. What looks bad in the short term, in the present, may turn out to be a good thing in the long run, in the future. A friend of mine, who had been using a cane for years, got a new dog, and the obnoxiously energetic mutt caused him to hurt his leg on a neighbor’s fence. Now my friend really had trouble walking, and the dog needed to be walked twice a day to be kept under some semblance of control. After recovering from the injury, my friend began to walk the dog every day, and, remarkably, after several months no longer needed the cane he had relied on for years. The dog, which looked like a bad thing, turned out to be a good thing in the long run.

The long run can be pretty long, but it generally does not run much longer than my own lifetime. Saying that something will not matter a thousand years from now or a million years from now is a hollow consolation. But realizing that what bothers me at the moment will not make any real difference — indeed I will not even remember it — a year from now is wise and worthwhile. And, of course, oftentimes what looks bad at the moment will turn out to be good some time down the road. Borrowing from a Chinese proverb, let’s consider this

scenario. What if my friend's dog, who freed him from his cane, bites a child who then misses a school trip? That would seem to be bad. But if all of the child's classmates are killed in a bus accident on that trip, it would then seem to be good that the dog bit the child. But what if the child then grows up to be a mass murderer? You get the point. The wise person recognizes that we just do not know what will turn out to be for the good in the long run.

The long run is part of a future we cannot foresee. And we lose attunement to the current of the universe when we live too much in the past or future. So we should not look to the past as if things were somehow better then; almost certainly they were not. And we should not feel the past as a weight that holds us in an undesirable state. It can take years of work and perseverance to overcome the past — to live in the truth that the past is over — but it can be done. The break up of a relationship or the memories and wounds of abuse take time to dissipate and heal. But they will heal by living life now. With time, the defaults and automatic ways of thinking that anchor us to the past change, slowly, and the past no longer hurts.

The future does not matter if the present is not lived well; and the future takes care of itself if the present is lived well. Living well in the present does not mean disregarding the future, but it does mean not worrying about the future. Similarly, so long as we have made amends for past wrongs, living well in the present takes care of the past. As the Sanskrit Proverb instructs us:

Look to this day, / For it is life, / The very life of life. / In its brief course
lie all / The realities and verities of existence, / The bliss of growth, / The
splendor of action, / The glory of power— / For yesterday is but a dream,
/ And tomorrow is only a vision, / But today, well lived, / Makes every
yesterday a dream / of happiness / And every tomorrow a vision of hope. /
Look well, therefore, to this day.

So we need to be-here-now, tuned in to the current of the universe. We need to remember what is important; being, not having; here, not some imagined elsewhere; now in the present, not in the past or future. The person who talks on a cell phone while sitting across from someone at dinner is not “here.” The person checking her Blackberry at a basketball game is not “here.” Pushing my daughter in her stroller with the sun setting on a summer evening, I thought about work and was not “here.” How sad.

Children know this moment is to be appreciated, stretched out, enjoyed for all it is worth. We need to be childlike in our love of the moment. But how? More contact with the natural world helps. Seeing the way nature cyclically takes care of and restores itself puts us at ease. Much of modern industrialized society feeds on and encourages our anxiety about the future, our need to keep up with the Joneses at work, at play, all the time. Freeing ourselves from technology and the traps of consumer society and the workplace would be helpful. Ironically, the technologically advanced society that made worry about daily survival unnecessary has increased our level of worry and anxiety. So I don't wear a watch when I don't have to; I allow myself to forget the day and the date when possible; I play games with my children to lose track of time. Developing a different temporal orientation allows me to feel and experience time differently.

Escaping into fantasies about the past or future, like fantasies of other places, leads us astray and devalues what has the greatest value, the here and now. "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans," John Lennon sang. The Buddhist practice of right mindfulness is an antidote — be here now even, or especially, when what you are doing is as simple as washing the dishes or chopping wood, certainly when you are eating or having sex.

Having clear and definite goals might seem antithetical to flowing with the current of the universe, but in fact it is not. Plans simply need to be flexible. A rigid plan closes off other options by closing one's eyes to those options. Both the journey and the destination are to be enjoyed and each in light of the other, so long as one does not close off sight of the other. We need to enjoy the journey on the journey and enjoy the destination at the destination. We need to live in the present, not the past or future. "Look well, therefore, to this day."