

The Class That Changed My Life

Rachael Smith

When I came to college, I had a pretty clear sense of what I wanted to do: I was going to study engineering. Things didn't go exactly as planned, I'm a philosophy concentrator. People have asked me how that happened. I usually just say that I took a philosophy class sophomore spring and fell in love, but that is really only half true. Today I want to share the other half of that story.

I like to plan ahead, and the engineering degree has an insane amount of requirements, so I had pretty much mapped out exactly which courses I was going to take each semester of college, before day one of Freshman year. But during shopping week my sophomore fall, my friend Mia couldn't shut up about this East Asian studies seminar she was taking. I guess I am a little too curious for my own good, because she convinced me to take it as a fifth class.

The seminar was on the major religious texts of East Asia. In that class we read ancient texts from the Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions. On the first day, Professor Abe encouraged us to think of the class as a book club. Rather than taking an analytical approach to the readings, we engaged with the texts personally. The idea was to put ourselves into the reading, not vice versa. At first I was a little nervous about the class because I had never really done anything like it. The classes I usually took taught me practical skills and facts about the world outside me. Instead, this seminar challenged me to explore the world within me; to understand who I am now, who I want to be, and why I want to be that.

A few weeks into the course I had to give a presentation on Chuang-Tzu, a Daoist text. While brainstorming I kept coming back to 'wu wei', a central ethical concept of Daoism. Daoist philosophy holds that the universe follows a harmonious plan, and the source of individual unhappiness is trying to go against this natural harmony. 'Wu wei' is an antidote to this unhappiness. It roughly means 'being' without 'trying to be.' You can think of it as 'going with the flow,' it is the idea that a person can better align their individual will with the will of the universe by living spontaneously. This idea of "being" without "trying to be" is illustrated by the metaphor of the uncarved block. To be like an uncarved block is to be completely open to experience and freed of any preconceived assumptions. According to Daoism, we are happiest when, like an uncarved block, we are open to life and live in the moment, because that is when we are our most natural selves.

For Chuang-Tzu, 'naming' represents 'carving' the block; it places unnatural restrictions on the thing named. So, when we label ourselves, for instance as "Harvard Students" it can have the effect of restricting us to thinking of our lives in terms of these labels. This prevents us from truly living spontaneously by shifting our focus to the goals and outcomes of our actions, rather than the actions themselves. For my presentation, I decided to talk about the different ways I 'labeled' myself, and how these labels impacted me. Chuang-Tzu challenged me to consider whether these labels reflect my true self or whether, unconsciously, they were placing unnatural restrictions on my life.

One way I defined myself was by what I studied. I was concentrating in engineering, so I would say I study chemistry and physics because I want to be an engineer. I wouldn't say I study chemistry and physics because I was really interested in them. Although both could have been true, I realized that because I had labeled myself an 'engineering student', I had begun to think of the things I did in terms of how they related to a goal rather than the value they had to me personally. I had been so focused on planning for and attaining that goal; that I had lost sight of *why* it mattered to me and even whether it mattered at all. But professor Abe's class helped me to step outside myself and reflect.

I remember sitting at my desk in Lowell that night, trying to remember what I actually liked about engineering. I thought back to the spring before, when on my birthday I stayed up all night to finish a problem set for the physics class I hated. I thought about how already my engineering class was my least favorite part of the semester and I realized- I was studying engineering because it seemed practical and because I had always been pretty good at math and science. I was on this path because it felt economically and academically 'safe', but not because I really loved anything about it. I dropped the engineering class later that week.

The rest of that fall was a really hard time for me. Sometimes I felt completely lost, like I had no sense of who I was anymore. I felt like I had failed. But as difficult as it was, that time of uncertainty is what gave me the space to discover what I was truly passionate about. In fact, falling in love with philosophy was the easy part. The hard part was stepping away from the path I had carved myself and taking a leap beyond what felt safe, so that I could find what felt right.

The virtue of being an 'uncarved block' is not its emptiness but its complete openness to change. Chuang-Tzu reminds us, "the life of things is a gallop, a headlong dash- with every moment they alter, with every moment they shift". Happiness requires some willingness to give in to this change, to accept that your identity is not static, that life is constantly in flux. I don't consider myself a Daoist, I don't live purely in the moment, and I don't think I want to. But I do think it is possible to strike a balance between having a plan and being blinded by it. Professor Abe's class changed my life, because it taught me to seek that balance.