

Course: Understanding the Profane and the Sacred

To: Fr. Louis Ha

Unit 6: 患在有身 念在有身 Membering the Body?

Assignment: March 21, 2025

### 1. 患在有身

吾所以有大患者，為吾有身，及吾無身，吾有何患？

“The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?” *Tao Te Ching* 13 (Trans by D.C. Lau, 1964)

The line resonates with me as I grow older and feel the various pains on my joints, sometimes the hesitancy of finding balance, and just on the edge of my consciousness a sense that there is less spring in my step. In other words my body that has served me well, and that I have often taken for granted, is showing signs of wear and tear. Indeed it is telling me that I am mortal.

And possibly what we grieve more than our own aging and mortality is to observe the decline of close relatives and loved ones. It is more aggravating in some ways because we often assume the role of caretaker, a task that can stretch our physical, mental and spiritual resources. Then to witness the diminishment of physical and in some cases mental capacities of the person whom we have looked up to, or depended on, or cherished, or admired for as long as we can remember. Is that the same person? What makes up the allegiance of filial loyalty, marital love, or fraternal kinship? If bonds fray for lack of reciprocity or due to stress, do we still owe that allegiance, and to whom? We live in an age of mechanical production and technological obsolescence. God forbid, will we and the ones we love one day “outlive our usefulness”?

The poet, [Stanley Kunitz](#) (1905-2006), who was twice appointed Poet Laureate of the United States, the second time in 2000 when he was ninety-five years old, was active well into his 100<sup>th</sup> year, tending to his poetry as he would his garden in Provincetown, Massachusetts -- growing and clearing. One discerning reader commented that Kunitz, having "continued to write poems of a startling richness at an advanced age . . . has arguably saved his best for last." The following poem is from *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected* by Stanley Kunitz (W. W. Norton, 1995):

Touch Me<sup>1</sup>

*Summer is late, my heart.*  
Words plucked out of the air  
some forty years ago  
when I was wild with love  
and torn almost in two  
scatter like leaves this night

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/36987644>



present seriously -- the understanding of it, the awe of it -- actually prunes back the years, "and like a child again/ marveled to hear so clear/ and brave a music pour/ from such a small machine./ What makes the engine go?/ Desire, desire, desire." If you listen to the poet's own reading of the poem (footnote 1), notice that "Desire, desire, desire," that holy superlative, is said in a measured tone, without impatience, ecstasy or regret.

To a gardener, trees and wood are tactile companions with whom one grows old together. Video interviews also present Kunitz comfortably inhabiting his old house. So there is something organic, perhaps reassuring in these lines:

"So let the battered old willow/ thrash against the windowpanes/ and the house timbers creak."

In the last line of the poem, the poet speaks to his wife of many years "Darling, do you remember/ the man you married? Touch me,/ remind me who I am." As we grow older, still creative and battered, it is a blessing to have people who knew us, and who love us still, to remind us who we are. It is significant that Kunitz asks to be reminded of "who I am," not "who I was." The choice of the latter word would have spelled pathos. By ending the poem in the present, I feel Kunitz is affirming the integrity of the person. Yes, identity is fragile (underscored by words such as "late," "battered," "old," "thrash," "creak"), and needs to be reminded. But to stand/ kneel in the here and now, to gaze at who I am, the garden that is around, and tomorrow that will come, "I am" is immanent and transcendent, no change. Or there is life.

## 2. The Interlude 損之又損

為學日益，為道日損，損之又損，以至於無為；無為而無不為矣

In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day;

In the pursuit of the way one does less every day.

One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone. (*Tao Te Ching* 48)

The counter-intuitive idea of doing and becoming less is a Daoist version of *via negativa*. In the Christian tradition, "the *via negativa* refers to a way of speaking about God and his attributes. Because God is a being far beyond our capacity as human beings to comprehend, anything we can say of him is necessarily limited by our finite human understanding and his reality far surpasses our power of expression."<sup>2</sup> The more we try to nail down, to accomplish or to possess, the less do we know, and the farther away are we from the way. In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul holds up the radical example of Jesus:

Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://aleteia.org/2013/03/04/what-is-the-via-negativa> (accessed on March 15, 2025)

But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being,

he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Christ himself “did not count equality with God something to be *grasped*,” so he “*emptied* himself [of his godhead], taking the *form* of a slave [that is, taking on the body, senses, emotions ... all the qualities that make up a human person], becoming as human beings are.” In short, he lived and died as a human being,

For followers of Christ, Jesus’ radical humility, his *via negativa* becomes not only a way of knowing and describing God, but an example of letting go of one’s wealth, station, pride. To empty oneself for love – no matter if the other person is aware, can reciprocate or lay claim to our love. Following Christ, it is a way of being for which death is not the end --

And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names;

so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus

and that every tongue should acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

To embark on such a way is challenging indeed. It can be an everyday struggle, the promise of glory notwithstanding. Just when we throw up our hands and cry it's impossible, there is, for want of a better word, *subversion*. Christ’s emptying to become human turns the unknowability of God on its head. Perhaps the way is not unreachable. Surprisingly God reminds us that God wants to be in touch, to be known by us, to relate to us not majestically but intimately, not infinitely but immediately.

### 3. 道成肉身 Incarnation

The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

I have experienced the incarnation when I held my niece and nephew in their infancy, feeling their weight in my arms, and smelling their scent of milk, also whenever I helped change their diapers!

I found it intriguing when Fr. Ha juxtaposed 患在有身 with 念在有身. I think Fr. Ha brings the experience of the Incarnation with particular focus on the Eucharist. He suggests three ways of extending 念在有身: for the sake of; remembering; and keeping in mind.

As followers of Christ, our way of being, and how we approach our everyday encounters are for the sake of love, as the Lord has loved us. “Do this in memory of me,” as we remember and renew the sacrifice at the common altar. Keep in mind the mission and the experience of love that inspires it.

The issue with these three extensions, if you will, is that they seem to be premised on absence. We remember something that is no longer, for instance. Recently I came across some quotations from the spiritual writings of a teacher who practised Contemplative prayer inspired by Zen meditation.

In fact it is the practice of Zen which helped me to understand that the final step is not to follow Christ or imitate him, but to be animated by him, because he lives in us.... Christ is no more an object of contemplation, but the one who, living in us, stirs in us this intent of love which turns our attention toward God himself, the God which cannot be known by knowing, but only by unknowing.

As I remember Christ and is a member of Christ's body through breaking bread and sharing the cup, and through the breath of the Holy Spirit (animate), I would like to invite God (knowing that God would be curious) to participate even more, with all his power in the experience which we live.

I will close this rather rambling assignment with the lines from Kunitz's poem, "Passing Through,"<sup>3</sup> written on his *seventy-ninth birthday*.

... Sometimes, you say, I wear  
an abstracted look that drives you  
up the wall, as though it signified  
distress or disaffection.  
Don't take it so to heart.  
Maybe I enjoy not-being as much  
as being who I am.  
Maybe it's time for me to practice  
growing old. The way I look  
at it, I'm passing through a phase:  
gradually I'm changing to a word.  
Whatever you choose to claim  
of me is always yours;  
nothing is truly mine  
except my name. I only  
borrowed this dust.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49265/passing-through-56d22b2e72e1f> (accessed 15 March, 2025)