

A Meditation on the Art of Not Trying

New York Time, Dec 15, 2014

Just be yourself.

The advice is as maddening as it is inescapable. It's the default prescription for any tense situation: a blind date, a speech, a job interview, the first dinner with the potential in-laws. *Relax. Act natural. Just be yourself.*

But when you're nervous, how can you be yourself? How can you force yourself to relax? How can you try not to try?

It makes no sense, but the paradox is essential to civilization, according to [Edward Slingerland](#). He has developed, quite deliberately, a theory of spontaneity based on millenniums of Asian philosophy and decades of research by psychologists and neuroscientists.

He calls it the paradox of wu wei, the Chinese term for "effortless action." Pronounced "ooo-way," it has similarities to the concept of flow, that state of effortless performance sought by athletes, but it applies to a lot more than sports. Wu wei is integral to romance, religion, politics and commerce. It's why some leaders have charisma and why business executives insist on a drunken dinner before sealing a deal.

Dr. Slingerland, a professor of Asian studies at the University of British Columbia, argues that the quest for wu wei has been going on ever since humans began living in groups larger than hunter-gathering clans. Unable to rely on the bonds of kinship, the first urban settlements survived by developing shared values, typically through religion, that enabled people to trust one another's virtue and to cooperate for the common good.

But there was always the danger that someone was faking it and would make a perfectly rational decision to put his own interest first if he had a chance to shirk his duty. To be trusted, it wasn't enough just to be a sensible, law-abiding citizen, and it wasn't even enough to dutifully strive to be virtuous. You had to demonstrate that your virtue was so intrinsic that it came to you effortlessly.

Hence the preoccupation with wu wei, whose ancient significance has become clearer to scholars since the discovery in 1993 of bamboo strips in a tomb in the village of Guodian in central China. The texts on the bamboo, composed more than three centuries before Christ, emphasize that following rules and fulfilling obligations are not enough to maintain social order.

These texts tell aspiring politicians that they must have an instinctive sense of their duties to their superiors: "If you try to be filial, this not true filiality; if you try to be obedient, this is not true obedience. You cannot try, but you also cannot *not* try."

That paradox has kept philosophers and theologians busy ever since, as Dr. Slingerland deftly explains in his new book, "[Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity](#)." One school has favored the Confucian approach to effortless grace, which actually requires a great deal of initial effort.

Through willpower and the rigorous adherence to rules, traditions and rituals, the Confucian "gentleman" was supposed to learn proper behavior so thoroughly that it would eventually become second nature to him. He would behave virtuously and gracefully without any conscious effort, like an orator who knows his speech so well that it seems extemporaneous.

But is that authentic wu wei? Not according to the rival school of Taoists that arose around the same time as Confucianism, in the fifth century B.C. It was guided by the [Tao Te Ching](#), "The Classic of the Way and Virtue," which took a direct shot at Confucius: "The worst kind of Virtue never stops striving for Virtue, and so never achieves Virtue."

Taoists did not strive. Instead of following the rigid training and rituals required by Confucius, they sought to liberate the natural virtue within. They went with the flow. They disdained traditional music in favor of a funkier new style with a beat. They emphasized personal meditation instead of formal scholarship.

Rejecting materialistic ambitions and the technology of their age, they fled to the countryside and practiced a primitive form of agriculture, pulling the plow themselves instead of using oxen. Dr. Slingerland calls them "the original hippies, dropping out, turning on, and stickin' it to the Man more than 2,000 years before the invention of tie-dye and the Grateful Dead."

Variations of this debate would take place among Zen Buddhist, Hindu and Christian philosophers, and continue today among psychologists and neuroscientists arguing how much of morality and behavior is guided by rational choices or by unconscious feelings.

"Psychological science suggests that the ancient Chinese philosophers were genuinely on to something," says [Jonathan Schooler](#), a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "Particularly when one has developed proficiency in an area, it is often better to simply go with the flow. Paralysis

through analysis and overthinking are very real pitfalls that the art of wu wei was designed to avoid.”

However wu wei is attained, there’s no debate about the charismatic effect it creates. It conveys an authenticity that makes you attractive, whether you’re addressing a crowd or talking to one person. The way to impress someone on a first date is to not seem too desperate to impress.

Some people, like politicians and salespeople, can get pretty good at faking spontaneity, but we’re constantly looking for ways to expose them. We put presidential candidates through marathon campaigns looking for that one spontaneous moment that reveals their “true” character.

Before signing a big deal, businesspeople often insist on getting to know potential partners at a boozy meal because alcohol makes it difficult to fake feelings. Neuroscientists have achieved the same effect in brain scanners by applying magnetic fields that suppress cognitive-control ability and in this way make it harder for people to tell convincing lies.

“Getting drunk is essentially an act of mental disarmament,” Dr. Slingerland writes. “In the same way that shaking right hands with someone assures them that you’re not holding a weapon, downing a few tequila shots is like checking your prefrontal cortex at the door. ‘See? No cognitive control. You can trust me.’ ”

But if getting drunk is not an option, what’s the best strategy for wu wei — trying or not trying? Dr. Slingerland recommends a combination. Conscious effort is necessary to learn a skill, and the Confucian emphasis on following rituals is in accord with psychological research showing we have a limited amount of willpower. Training yourself to follow rules automatically can be liberating, because it conserves cognitive energy for other tasks.

But trying can become counterproductive, as the Taoists recognized and psychologists have demonstrated in an experiment with a pendulum. When someone holding the pendulum was instructed to keep it from moving, the effort caused it to move even more.

“Our culture is very good at pushing people to work hard or acquire particular technical skills,” Dr. Slingerland says. “But in many domains actual success requires the ability to transcend our training and relax completely into what we are doing, or simply forget ourselves as agents.”

He likes the compromise approach of Mencius, a Chinese philosopher in the fourth century B.C. who combined the Confucian and Taoist approaches:

Try, but not too hard. Mencius told a parable about a grain farmer who returned one evening exhausted from his labors.

“I’ve been out in the fields helping the sprouts grow,” he explained, whereupon his worried sons rushed out to see the results. They found a bunch of shriveled sprouts that he’d yanked to death.

The sprouts were Mencius’ conception of wu wei: Something natural that requires gentle cultivation. You plant the seeds and water the sprouts, but at some point you need to let nature take its course. Just let the sprouts be themselves.