

JOHN ALGEO on HARMONY

‘A THEOSOPHICAL VIEW OF WAR AND VIOLENCE’ (About shared responsibility) (*The American Theosophist*, October 1982)

As members of the Theosophical Society, we are called upon to lead lives of *ahimsa*, which means striving to join that small, select company of the perfectly just, those whom we call the Masters. We are called upon to become like them—rooted in the **One Life**. Our efforts in that direction, no matter how small, will eventually bear fruit. But the personal effort must be made. All of us must do what we can. As in the lyrics of a popular song: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

‘DISCORD IS THE HARMONY OF THE UNIVERSE’ (*QUEST*, nov-dec 2005, pp.218-22)

We can differ from one another, and yet be harmonious. We can disagree harmoniously. Indeed, harmonious disagreement or discord is essential to progress. The world cannot become a better place without it. The word *discord* means etymologically "being of opposite hearts." How then can opposite-hearted discord be the harmony of the universe? Mahatma Letter number 120 explains that paradox.

"In 1883, a great controversy arose in the London Lodge between two parties. One of the parties, led by Anna Kingsford, wanted to focus on Christian esotericism; the other, led by Alfred Sinnett, wanted to focus on Buddhist esotericism. The controversy eventually came down to the question of which of those two persons should be president of the Lodge and thus set its focus. Finally, the Master KH had to intervene himself and direct that Mrs. Kingsford should be president, but that a council consisting of equal numbers from each side should direct the Lodge's activities.

The Master consequently wrote a letter (*Mahatma Letters* no. 120) to the members of the London Lodge, explaining his decision and the importance of both sides working together within the Lodge. He illustrated that importance with a homely metaphor: "It is well known that a magnet would cease to be a magnet if its poles cease to be antagonistic." And he went on to observe that Mrs. Kingsford and Mr. Sinnett were the two poles of the Lodge: "The direction and good services of both is necessary for the steady progress of the Theosophical Society in England." But both could not be presidents, and the Master explained why Mrs. Kingsford was the better choice under the circumstances then existing.

However, the Master also generalized the particular discord in the London Lodge to a wider statement that is applicable in many situations, including some all of us frequently encounter:

It is a universally admitted fact that the marvellous success of the Theosophical Society in India is due entirely to its principle of wise and respectful toleration of each other's opinions and beliefs. Not even the President-Founder has the right directly or indirectly to interfere with the freedom of thought of the humblest member, least of all to seek to influence his personal opinion. It is only in the absence of this generous consideration, that even the faintest shadow of difference arms seekers after the same truth, otherwise earnest and sincere, with the scorpion-whip of hatred against their brothers, equally sincere and earnest. Deluded victims of distorted truth, they forget, or never knew, that discord is the harmony of the Universe. Thus in the Theos. Society, each part, as in the glorious *fugues* of the immortal Mozart, ceaselessly chases the other in harmonious discord on the paths of Eternal progress to meet and finally blend at the threshold of the pursued goal into one harmonious whole, the keynote in nature *Sat* [What really is].

In that passage, the Master articulates a profound truth, one that is often difficult for us to realize and to act in accordance with. That truth is the fact that we progress only as a result of reconciling or accommodating discordant ideas, so that we maintain a "wise and respectful toleration of each other's opinions and beliefs"—and thus bring harmony out of discord. Those who forget or ignore that truth become "seekers after the same truth, otherwise earnest and sincere," who nevertheless apply "the scorpion-whip of hatred against their brothers, equally sincere and earnest."

The Master's musical analogy is a powerful one: namely, that sounds by themselves may seem to be discordant, yet they can be combined in a symphony to produce magnificent harmony. The same metaphor was used by J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Silmarillion* to explain how good can result from disagreements that are subsumed within a great plan. And it was also used by the seventeenth-century English poet, John Dryden, to whom we return at the end of these remarks.

A different, and much humbler metaphor, namely the making of a pot of soup, was used in the Confucian tradition to explain the meaning of one of the Analects of Confucius: "The large-minded person pursues harmony rather than agreement; the small person is the opposite" (13/23). A commentator named Yang Po-chin explained that verse with this story about a ruler (the Marquis of Ch'i) who complained that, of all his ministers, only one, named Chi, supported him in what he wanted to do:

The Marquis of Ch'i said, "Only Chi is in harmony with me!"

The scholar Yen Tzu replied, "All that Chi does is agree with you—wherein is the harmony?"

"Is there a difference between 'harmony' and 'agreement'?" asked the Marquis.

Yen Tzu replied, "There is. Harmony is like making soup. One uses water, fire, vinegar, sauce, salt, and plum to cook his food, and burns firewood and stalks as fuel for the cooking process. The cook blends these ingredients harmoniously to achieve the appropriate flavor. Where it is too bland, he adds flavoring, and where it is too concentrated, he dilutes it with water. When you partake of this soup, you feel most content. The relationship between ruler and minister is the same.

Where the ruler considers something workable and yet there are problems, the minister should indicate what is problematic, and carry out what is workable with zeal. Where the ruler considers something problematic and yet there are workable elements, the minister should indicate what is workable and shunt aside what is problematic. Accordingly, political affairs will function harmoniously without violating right order, and the common people will not be rebellious. Thus, the *Book of Songs* states: 'Where there is harmoniously blended broth, . . . the gods will come and partake of it without rancor, and above and below will be free of contest.'

The Former Kings blended the five flavors and harmonized the five notes to bring contentment to their hearts and completeness to political affairs. . . . Now Chi is not acting accordingly. Whatever you say is right, Chi also says is right; whatever you say is wrong, Chi also says is wrong. If you add water to flavor water, who can eat it? If you keep playing the same note on the lute, who can listen to it? The failing of 'agreement' lies then in this." (adapted from David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987)

The point made by both the Master K.H. and the Confucian scholar is that harmony is not uniformity. Harmony is an appropriate balancing of disparate things. Evolution does not proceed by bland uniformity. Evolution proceeds by a harmonious equilibrium of discords, that is, a harmony of people who have their hearts on opposite sides of an issue.

That discord, however, must not be violent. It must not be one in which each side says, "I must have my way. You must be sensible and see things as I do." When each side takes such a stance, the result is violent conflict, and that is never helpful. On the other hand, when only one side takes that stance and the other side agrees by surrendering, the result is not harmony, but uniformity. And uniformity does not create progress, but stagnation. To progress, we must have harmony, but harmony is a balance of differing views in a creative tension that allows a change for the better.

Harmony is a well-made and expertly seasoned soup. Harmony is a symphony of contrasting sounds produced by a master musician.

We can see the truth of the Master's words and of the Confucian parable all around us. Consider that, within a group, there may be two parties having opposing views on some subject. They can discuss their opposing views. Each party can have a turn at putting forth its opinion. But finally a vote must be taken and a decision reached. Those in the majority must respect the differing views of the minority, acknowledging that they have a point of view that needs to be kept in mind. And keeping the minority's view in mind may suggest to the majority things it can do that will both accommodate the minority and help to achieve a better outcome than would result from a one-sided insistence on the majority position. On the other hand, the minority must accept the majority's decision, without surrendering their own conscience about what is best, but continue in the group as a reminder to the majority that there is another way of regarding the issue on which they disagree. If both parties follow that plan the result is creative disagreement. And out of such discord comes a greater harmony.

The rather abstract situation set forth in the preceding paragraph has many concrete realizations. In the United States at this time, there exists a discord between "Blue States" (who supported the Democratic candidate in the last election) and "Red States" (who supported the Republican candidate). That discord has continued and has threatened to stymie the work of the Congress. Another concrete realization is between those who supported the invasion of Iraq (chiefly the present American administration and the voters who elected it) and those who opposed it and decry the handling of its aftermath (much of the rest of the world). Another concrete realization is the long antagonism between Protestant Northern Ireland and the Catholic Republic of Ireland. Yet another concrete realization is the historical and still existing discord between Theosophists who focus on Western Hermeticism and those who focus on Eastern Esotericism; or, for that matter, the different discord between Theosophists who value only the writers and teachers in a particular tradition, generally of early times, and those who value also other writers and teachers of later times.

The number of such sectarian groups that we human beings form is infinite. And it is precisely such sectarian groups that the Master probably had in mind when he referred to "the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two thirds of the evils that pursue humanity," and that he identified as "religion under whatever form . . . those illusions that man looks upon as sacred" (ML 88). By "religion" the Master almost surely did not mean just formal organizations of the sort we call religions, but anything we regard as of ultimate value, that is, the illusions we look on "as sacred." Religion in that sense includes not just churches and priests, but also science (or scientism), capitalism and communism, or indeed any system or thought, any organization, any set of practices that come to be regarded as uniquely "true" and supremely important. Only by giving up an exclusive adherence to one organization or set of values that excludes all others can we achieve harmonious discord.

But I will give you a personal example of a different sort. Not long ago I edited a collection of the early correspondence of H. P. Blavatsky (*The Letters of H.P. Blavatsky*, volume 1). In that collection I included a number of letters that some good people thought should not have been included. Those good people would have omitted the particular letters for two reasons: first, because the letters give a picture of Blavatsky that does not agree with their conception of what she was like and, second, because they believe the letters to be forgeries. Those two reasons are in fact connected. In the case of one group of letters, no one today has ever seen their originals, although we know that Blavatsky wrote letters to the correspondent to whom the disputed letters were addressed. The good people

who believe the disputed letters to be forgeries hold their belief that those letters were forgeries because, in those letters, Blavatsky appears in a character they think is not appropriate for her.

Now, it may be the case that those letters are indeed forgeries. I do not know. And neither does anyone else now living know. People have opinions, but no one knows. In the published collection of letters, it was the editorial policy to include all letters that have been attributed to Blavatsky and that have not been shown by convincing evidence to be forgeries. In those cases in which I could point to reasons for believing that a letter, as we have it, is probably not accurate but a distortion of Blavatsky's original, I did so. But as an editor, I assumed that readers would draw their own conclusions about what in the letters is genuine and what is not. It was not my business to tell them that without firm, objective evidence. Including letters in a collection of her correspondence is not giving them a "Good Theosophist" seal of approval, or bestowing upon them a canonical status as Theosophical scripture. It is simply acknowledging the facts that those letters have been attributed to Blavatsky and that we have no objective reason for excluding them.

However, some Theosophists have developed a feeling about Blavatsky that exalts her above ordinary human limitations and foibles. One of the great Blavatsky authorities and fans, Geoffrey Farthing, did not share that feeling. He wrote, in part, about the disputed letters: "These small passages relating to some of H. P. B.'s imperfections could very well have been written by her because she never in any sense regarded herself, as a personality, to be in any way perfect and was mindful of her defects and deficiencies, as indeed were the Masters" (personal letter of 25 May 2004). Yet, a purely scholarly and nonsectarian approach to the disputed letters has scandalized some good and devoted Theosophists. So here we have a discord of views. What to do about this discord that might achieve harmony?

On the one hand, I cannot, as an objective scholar, reject letters in which Blavatsky talks in ways that some Theosophists believe to be uncharacteristic of the character they attribute to her. But, as Tevye, the Milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*, was wont to say, on the other hand, they have a point. Their point is that we cannot be sure that the text of a letter was really what Blavatsky wrote, unless we have the original letter in Blavatsky's own handwriting. In fact, that lack of surety extends to most of the Blavatsky letters we have, because comparatively few survive in autograph copies. Most of her correspondence now exists only in copies that other persons have made and that those persons often clearly modified in the process of copying or publishing. Therefore, discrimination is required on the part of readers; each reader has to decide for himself or herself which letters are genuine in their entirety and which have been doctored, either in praise or in denigration of the Old Lady.

Now, what is the obligation of an editor in such a situation? First, it is certainly his obligation to make clear whether each published letter is based on a copy in Blavatsky's handwriting or not. That was done in *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky*, volume 1. It is also his obligation to point to any objective evidence that the text of certain letters has been tampered with. That was also done. But furthermore it may also be seen as his obligation to enter a demur when there is a subjective reason to suspect that the available text of a letter may not be fully faithful to its no longer available original. In fact, that is implied in the published volume, as in every case in which the available text is not Blavatsky's autograph, we can suspect tampering, deliberate or accidental.

To what extent should an editor respect the sensibilities of those who do indeed regard Blavatsky, "as a personality, to be . . . perfect" and who have, as Geoffrey Farthing goes on to say, "put her up on too high a pedestal"? Should such respect be expressed by a cautionary note on every non-autograph letter, pointing out the fact that we cannot be sure of the genuineness of the letter, or only

on those that present Blavatsky in a light that some readers do not approve of? But in that case, whose sensibilities should be catered to, and whose sense of the appropriate deserves such attention? It is, as the King of Siam is reputed to have said, a puzzlement. As editor of the letters, I will consult with a much expanded advisory committee for the second volume, including all the advisors from volume 1, but adding other very competent people with perse skills and competencies. Specifically, I will consult them about the best way to deal with this problem of disputed letters.

I cannot be sure that universal harmony will arise from this particular example of discord, as the achievement of universal harmony requires a master musician or a Cordon-Bleu soup maker. But it is at least possible to show a willingness to seek the way to a "harmonious discord" on this or any other issue. We can, indeed, never be sure that anything we do will achieve harmony. Harmony cannot be forced; like grace, in Christian theology, it just happens. But we can put ourselves into a frame of mind and a habit of behavior that will open us to the possibility of both grace and harmony (which may ultimately be the same thing).

As Theosophists, we are inclined to believe that harmony is the natural state of affairs: not uniformity, but the harmony of balanced discords. Theosophists are inclined to agree with John Dryden, who in his "Song for Saint Cecilia's Day" (of 1687) wrote:

This universal frame began;
From harmony to harmony
Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
The diapason closing full in Man.

Dryden's harmony is at the root of things, but it is not uniformity because it has run through all the notes, concordant notes and discordant notes. And the diapason, or burst of sound, in which it fully closes is Man. Note the capital letter. It is not "man," that is, you and me, but rather the model of what it is that we are to become: Primordial or Archetypal Humanity, the goal of all our becoming. And we will reach that goal in one way only. That one way is for us to demonstrate that "discord is the harmony of the universe."