

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 89 – Kelly Ottman – China Rising

Finding Joy in Purpose

And now a personal word,

I have not been to China. I would love to go. It seems the 21st century is in rapid development there. I imagine this is how many people viewed America in the 19th and 20th centuries. This burst of ambition and energy recasting possibility.

There are differences between the two nations that seem profound. America was and remains in comparison an infant nation populated by immigrants. We are or mostly have been a democratic capitalist society. Our politics are riotous on the surface and stable underneath. Our institutions work based on consent. China is a modern and ancient place at once. Chinese traditions and culture are thousands of years old. For nearly its entire history China has been suspicious of foreigners. Today it is a Marxist capitalist society. It is a one-party Communist state in which politics are firm on the surface and troubled underneath.

Kelly Ottman takes her students to China to meet with Chinese and American business people. They build relationships, they experience culture, they manage logistics, they participate in servant leadership projects, and they challenge their own perceptions. They develop and appreciate Guanxi, the social bonds that facilitate business and personal dealing. In addition, Kelly teaches courses on organizational behavior, management and team dynamics. She has her own practice coaching executives. She is leading faculty development in her college furthering her scholarship of teaching and learning. She is doing all this work after seriously considering a mission and vision for her life. Kelly finds joy in the purpose of her work and further joy and purpose in exploring purpose and joy.

There is a connection between what she considers and who she is. There always is. For all of us. We are what we think about most of the time.

In an article entitled *Ancient Chinese Philosophical Advice: Can It Help Us Find Happiness Today?*, professors Guoqing Zhang and Ruut Veenhoven explore the three main classic Chinese schools of philosophy, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, which all deal with the question of how one should live. The authors review the ancient recommendations of each tradition and consider whether they promise a happy life in modern-day society. They say classic Confucianism and Taoism offer the most apt

advice as they are life-affirming philosophies: Confucianism emphasizes our relationship to family and community, and the benefits of work, governance, rites and rituals. Confucianism celebrates wellness and prosperity. Moral virtue and love of learning are elements that infuse Confucianism with action in this life. Well-being results from effort and merit. Taoism is a very different tradition, more of a religion, a metaphysical exploration, inviting us to follow the eternal Tao, the way of nature. It is not necessary to strive or to seek perfection of virtues. These efforts are vain and self-defeating. Instead of seeking material conditions of a good life, Taoism teaches our attention should be on our inner life. Our focus should be on being present. On reflection. On a freedom of spirit.

Kelly Ottman expresses this duality. She is Confucian in that the quality of her life is hers to determine. She is dutiful and she strives. She is Taoist in that she knows that there is much in life outside our control. Things happen. With acceptance comes contentment.

We are wise to see the connections. We are better when possibility is recast.

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