

Lesson 6: Accountability and Ownership

Handout: The Empty Boat

The Empty Boat

A Taoist Folk Tale

Chuang Tzu was a fisherman. He lived his life by gathering fish along a small river in southern China.

One foggy morning on a narrow river Chuang Tzu was rowing his small boat up the river, a difficult task, for even though the river was not large, its currents were strong enough in some places that rowing upstream made for a strenuous activity. However, the best fishing hole was upstream from his home, so upstream he went. Suddenly, out of the fog he saw another boat coming downstream towards him. Chuang Tzu yelled to the pilot of the boat: "Look out! Get out of the way!"

The boat kept coming. Chuang Tzu looked to the left and right, but rocks on either side prevented him from maneuvering. He called out again to the pilot of the boat. "Look out!" No response. As the boat drew nearer and nearer without changing course, Chuang Tzu grew angrier and angrier. "He is doing this deliberately!" he thought. "It is probably that no-good Hao Li, up-river. He's always trying to cause me pain and suffering!"

Chuang Tzu's rage grew larger as the boat drew closer, and rather than slowing his own rowing, he decided to row even faster, thinking "I'll show him!" Just as the boats crashed into each other, Chuang Tzu stopped rowing enough to reach out and grab the gunwale of the other boat. Boiling with rage, ready to yell and scream and beat up the driver of the other boat, Chuang Tzu rose from his seat, only to find that it was an empty boat that had come loose and was just drifting down the river with no one inside. There was no one to blame, no fault, no one to beat up, and Chuang Tzu was left with no catch of the day but a netful of powerful feelings and nowhere to dump them.

Questions to think about and discuss:

1. In this story, who is responsible for Chuang Tzu's anger?
2. Does it feel better when we can blame someone else for how we feel?
3. What is it about anger that makes us often want to find someone to point it toward?
4. One definition of "Accountability" is "accepting responsibility for our actions." How could our conflicts be different if we look at our anger as just ours (rather than something someone else did *TO us*), and then sort out how to fix the source of the conflict separately?