

On Zhi: and the Applications of Learning Along the Way

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Sometimes Zhi, or wisdom, only comes from failing, flailing, and falling. The Research Institute for Creating New Paradigms Based on Eastern and Western Wisdom emphasizes that wisdom is more than just a noun but is also an action that extends beyond knowledge alone. Zhi is the act of taking knowledge or learning and doing something with it (Taguchi). Zhi also catalyzes us and keeps us going even when life throws us lemons. Yet the sources of where we can find or practice Zhi can be difficult to identify. We can be so easily distracted or diverted by the noise that surrounds us through false information on social media or through people we know or are sitting next to while transiting, that if we are not careful, we can lose our Zhi. When we lose our Zhi, we risk losing the ethical versions of ourselves entirely. Virtues, like morals, serve to keep us grounded and moving forward in productive ways. The essential is not to get so discouraged by the elusiveness of finding virtues that we decide they no longer exist altogether. Zhi is something that is a practice, as well as an essential element that guides literally every decision we make. Or at least, guiding these decisions is what I think Zhi should do. I learned the hard way that it is critical to practice the virtue of searching for and creating Zhi, or wisdom, in every one of our actions. I learned this through making hard mistakes despite having words given to me as discreet gifts, or a form of Zhi, that I chose to ignore. Of course, I learned that losing touch with the virtue of Zhi in my decisions and subsequent actions always came back to haunt me.

I am lucky to have been born in Burkina Faso. You may have never heard of this country, but it is a small former French colony in West Africa. Traditionally in my country the words of our elders are revered in a similar way to what Confucius referred to as Zhi. In Burkina Faso, like many collectivist cultures and societies, generations have been taught to listen to our elders as guides to ensure fulfilling and productive lives. Whenever I had a question or problem

growing up, I was pointed towards my elders as people who could help guide me. Essentially, when I look back at it, their Zhi came from their own life experiences and failures, as well as those of their elders. Their words were a gift, or a long trail of learning, imparted from one generation to the next. Zhi has also been referred to in other areas that I have been exposed to as I get older and learn more about the humanities and social sciences at school. Zhi implies not just avoiding doing wrong or bad things, but making sure that learnings and ethical behavior, which includes using virtues such as wisdom through our actions and not just something we observe and talk about, are applied to every aspect of our personal and professional lives (Holton). As I get older, I now see it as my duty to convey the wisdom that I have learned through the trials and tribulations of my life with younger persons that I am confronted with in my daily life, or directly responsible for such as my daughters, stepchildren, nieces, and nephews.

You may be thinking, “wow, it sounds like Stephane has a lot of Zhi,” but I will admit, I am stubborn and it took me a while to arrive to these conclusions and where I am today. When I was 9 years old my mother was given the opportunity to work as a diplomat in Egypt, so I abruptly moved there and lived as an expatriate through my formative high school years. However, as the child of a single mother, try as she might, I got lost for a little while along the way. I started hanging out with older friends who I mistakenly thought had Zhi, but it turns out that instead I followed them on a path that led to me not completing high school. My mother was desperate to see me succeed, so she thought maybe I could at least try my luck in the United States. The thing is, when I arrived in the United States I was a lost teenager who was still learning English and who had accustomed myself to running with people who, let us just say, lacked Zhi. I also quickly learned that being a Black man did not afford me much room for error as society expected to see me make mistakes and fail. To make a long story short, all of this

ended with me becoming a single father to twins at a young age, forcing me to find a serious full-time job before I could ever even think about returning to school.

What happened next is perhaps luck, or perhaps because somewhere deep inside I was able to tap back into my roots from Burkina Faso and recognize the importance of a virtue like Zhi. As I continued to work over the years, I sought out colleagues and other mentors who could give me advice. They were successful, at least it seemed that way to me, and some of them took me under their wing and gave words and guidance along the way. They encouraged me and helped me to re-find the virtue of Zhi in myself by giving me Zhi through their words that resonated deeply with me as I tried to figure out how to ensure my children's future. I want to ensure that their lives are better by imparting on them what I can regarding the mistakes I made, and the spirit of both trying to stay on the right path while never giving up. All of this ended up in me deciding to take advantage of the remote course offerings during the initial shut-down associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than throwing my hands up in despair as my work hours were cut back and the world seemed to be hurling towards some devastating place. I enrolled in school and decided to pursue a career in criminal justice, a field where I feel like I can make a difference by supporting persons who are trapped in a vicious cycle where they have lost touch with appropriate sources of Zhi. I know I was lost and found it again, and I want to help others find it again.

Although I never read any of the works of Confucius growing up, I realize how deeply influential he has been on many of our societies ideas of what is virtuous versus wrong. His influence helped to create a world where we explicitly think about certain virtues as nearly universally important, though not everyone is lucky enough to stay focused enough to live by

them (Schuman). I was lucky to have never found myself behind bars, but with all the bad sources of information out there, the noise can make people lose touch of the virtue of Zhi.

Misinformation, temptation, and other forms of noise are not lacking in this world. Believe me, I know this very well. While I find all of the virtues outlined by Confucius to be important and interlinked, I think of Zhi like the road or light that guides a person along his/her/their way. Knowing who to go to as a source of wisdom, recognizing and learning from a failure, and fulfilling our duty to then impart this knowledge on the generations that are looking up to us is so crucial. This is especially true in an increasingly digitized and busy world where we are literally bombarded by different forms and sources of information from daybreak until the time we go to sleep. It is easy for any of us to be duped in a context like this, as we all get tired sometimes! However, I strongly feel that while we will always make mistakes as humans, making mistakes does not obfuscate us from also being wise. The more in sync we are with our Zhi, the better our lives will be.

References

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