Finding My Way Back to Harmony and Flow

At a recent mindfulness retreat, we were asked to think about the people we most admire. They did not have to be people we knew. They could be historical figures, people from our own lives, even fictional characters. The important question came next:

Why do you admire them?

I chose William James, Benjamin Franklin, Plato, and a personal friend I will simply call Lynne. At first, they may seem like an odd assortment.

William James was a psychologist and philosopher whose curiosity about consciousness, habit, religion, emotion, and the practical consequences of ideas helped shape modern psychology and formed a solid foundation for my graduate studies. Benjamin Franklin was endlessly curious and inventive, but also deeply interested in how one might deliberately construct a good life. Plato has been part of my intellectual life since I was a college freshman. I spent nearly every Sunday that year analyzing *The Republic*. Decades later, I remain struck by how many of the questions Plato raised—about character, knowledge, justice, leadership, education, the organization of society, and the relationship between our inner and outer worlds—remain relevant. And then there is Lynne, someone I have known personally for decades and admired not for historical accomplishments but for how she moves through the world.

When I considered what these very different people had in common, the answer became clearer. I admire people who are thoughtful about life.

- ✓ They are curious.
- ✓ They are willing to examine assumptions.
- ✓ They are innovative without needing novelty merely for its own sake.
- ✓ They are authentic. They know who they are and try to live those values daily.
- ✓ They can be kind and diplomatic without surrendering or sacrificing their values.
- ✓ They can listen to another point of view without immediately feeling that their own must disappear.
- ✓ And somehow they seem able to engage seriously with life without constantly fighting with it.

The retreat leader then asked us to turn the question around. If these are the qualities we admire, what do they tell us about our own ideals? How would we like to be in the world? The first words that came to me were:

Harmony and flow.

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That surprised me a little. I did not think first of success. Or accomplishment. Or learning. Or even happiness. I thought of harmony and flow. It takes me back to something that my friend Lynne used to say – ***Life does not have to be a struggle***. Not necessarily an easy life. Something closer to:

Life at ease without everything being easy.

- ✓ A way of moving with life rather than continually trying to force it or struggle with it.
- ✓ Working with people rather than reflexively working in opposition to them.
- ✓ Allowing projects to evolve rather than insisting that they unfold exactly as I first imagined.
- ✓ Having values without needing every person around me to share them.
- ✓ Taking action without believing that I must personally control every outcome.

As I sat with those words, another realization came. The times in my life when I have felt most joyful and most deeply content were not necessarily the periods when nothing difficult was happening. There were still obstacles. There were still responsibilities and disappointments and difficult people and uncertain outcomes. But internally and environmentally there seemed to be greater congruence. I was not spending so much energy pushing against everything. Life seemed to have room to breathe.

And then came the uncomfortable part of the exercise. I realized that harmony and flow have not been the dominant characteristics of my life during the past few years. Quite the opposite. I have often been trying to force situations toward what I believed was the right outcome. I have sometimes approached disagreements by concentrating on why the other person's approach was wrong rather than asking whether there might be a way for us to move toward something useful together. I have treated resistance as something that needed to be overcome. And when life did not cooperate, my response was often to push harder.

There are circumstances in which persistence is absolutely necessary. There are values worth defending and boundaries worth maintaining. Harmony does not mean submission, passivity, or abandoning one's principles. But there is a difference between **standing firmly in our values** and **trying to force reality to conform to our preferred solution**. I am beginning to think I have sometimes confused the two.

What Do Our Ideals Have to Do With Everyday Life?

Psychology has several ways of approaching this question.

- One is the idea of **self-concordance**: the extent to which our goals arise from values and interests that actually feel like our own rather than from pressure, expectation, fear, status, or the need to prove something.
- Another is **authenticity**: living in ways that are reasonably consistent with our understanding of ourselves.

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- And another is **psychological flexibility**: remaining in contact with difficult thoughts, emotions, and circumstances while still choosing behavior that reflects what matters to us.

These concepts overlap without being identical. But together they suggest something important. Wellbeing may depend not only on **what is happening to us**, but on whether the way we are responding still feels consistent with the person we want to be. That distinction has become increasingly meaningful to me. A difficult situation may be unavoidable. Becoming someone I do not particularly enjoy being while dealing with it is not necessarily unavoidable.

Sometimes the problem is not simply:

My life is stressful.

It may also be:

The way I have been living in response to stress has taken me farther away from my preferred way of living.

And perhaps that is why resolving the external problem does not always immediately restore wellbeing.

If we practice being vigilant, defensive, controlling, hurried, argumentative, or fearful for so long then the stance becomes habitual. The situation may finally change. But we are still standing with our fists clenched.

Plato and the Ordered Life

This is one reason Plato returned to my mind. One of the great themes of *The Republic* is that justice is not merely a condition of society. Plato also considers the ordering of the individual person. A good life requires some form of inner order. Different desires, emotions, impulses, and capacities exist within us. Flourishing is not simply allowing whichever one is loudest at the moment to take command. There must be some relationship among them. Some balance. Some organizing principle. Some harmony.

We do not have to accept Plato's entire philosophical system to recognize the psychological insight. Most of us know what internal disorder feels like. One part of us wants peace while another keeps rehearsing the argument. One part wants rest while another insists that vigilance is necessary. One part knows that a situation is beyond our control while another keeps searching for the exact action that will finally control it. One part values kindness while another desperately wants to win, regardless of the struggle.

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Perhaps harmony begins when we notice that internal conversation and ask which voice we want directing our lives.

Aristotle and the Life We Practice

Aristotle adds another important piece. His idea of *eudaimonia*, often translated as flourishing, is much richer than simply feeling happy. The good life is something we **do**. Character develops through repeated action. We become courageous partly by practicing courage, generous by practicing generosity, thoughtful by practicing thoughtful action.

That means our highest ideals cannot remain beautiful words written in a journal after a retreat. Harmony has to reach Tuesday afternoon. So does kindness. So does curiosity. So does authenticity. So does diplomacy.

The question becomes less:

Do I value harmony?

and more:

- ✓ **What does harmony look like when someone sends me an irritating email?**
- ✓ **What does curiosity look like when I am absolutely certain that I understand another person's motivation?**
- ✓ **What does diplomacy look like when I believe I am right?**
- ✓ **What does authenticity look like when being authentic may disappoint someone?**
- ✓ **What does integrity look like when compromise would be easier?**

Those are much more demanding questions.

William James and the Power of Habit

William James would probably remind us that whatever response we repeatedly practice becomes easier to repeat. We create grooves.

- If I respond to uncertainty by immediately trying to solve every possible future problem, that mental movement becomes familiar.
- If I respond to disagreement by preparing a defense, that too becomes familiar.
- If I repeatedly scan for danger, eventually scanning for danger feels like ordinary awareness.

But habits work in the other direction as well.

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- ✓ I can practice pausing.
- ✓ I can practice asking a question before making an argument.
- ✓ I can practice allowing another person to finish explaining an idea I initially dislike.
- ✓ I can practice distinguishing what requires action from what simply makes me uncomfortable.
- ✓ I can practice saying: ***Perhaps there is another way to understand this.***

Eventually that response may become more available too. Perhaps returning to ourselves is less like finding a lost object and more like clearing and rebuilding a path that has become overgrown for lack of use.

Franklin and Making Ideals Practical

Benjamin Franklin famously approached character with almost comical practicality. He identified virtues he wanted to cultivate and then monitored his behavior. I don't think we need to turn personal growth into a daily accounting of moral failures. For perfectionistic people in particular, that could quickly become another instrument of self-criticism. But Franklin understood something valuable:

-- An ideal that never reaches behavior remains an aspiration rather than a way of life.

A modern version might be gentler. At the end of the day we might ask:

- ✓ When did I feel most like myself today?
- ✓ When did I feel least like myself?
- ✓ When did I experience harmony?
- ✓ When did I begin forcing?
- ✓ What was I afraid would happen if I stopped pushing?
- ✓ Was there a moment when curiosity might have served me better than certainty?
- ✓ Did I protect an important value today?
- ✓ Did I defend something that did not actually require defending?
- ✓ What would one small return to alignment look like tomorrow?

Not a scorecard. A compass.

The Wisdom of Not Forcing

Long before modern psychology began discussing flexibility, acceptance, or values-based living, **wisdom traditions wrestled with much the same human problem**. Daoism offers the concept of *wu wei*, often translated imperfectly as "non-action." It does not mean doing nothing. It points more toward **non-forcing**.

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Effective action can sometimes emerge through sensitivity to circumstances rather than constant exertion against them. That comes remarkably close to what I meant when the words *harmony and flow* arose during the retreat. Ease that is not necessarily easy. It is more like action without constant struggle. Participation rather than control.

The Stoics approached the same territory differently. They emphasized distinguishing what lies within our influence from what does not.

- ✓ My conduct may belong to me.
- ✓ My preparation may belong to me.
- ✓ My integrity may belong to me.
- ✓ My willingness to speak or remain silent may belong to me.

- x Another person's reaction does not.
- x The final outcome may not.
- x History does not.

Much suffering seems to arise when we take responsibility for things over which we have influence and quietly add several things over which we have none.

Spiritual traditions add still another dimension.

Buddhist teachings remind us of nonattachment: wholehearted engagement does not require clinging to one particular outcome. Christian traditions speak of surrender, trust, grace, and seeking wisdom rather than relying entirely upon one's own will. Unity and other traditions emphasize a divine presence within life rather than a universe that must continually be wrestled into submission. These traditions are not interchangeable, and their theological assumptions differ greatly. But there is a recurring practical insight:

We can care deeply without believing that everything depends entirely upon our ability to force the result.

That may be one of the hardest lessons to learn.

Harmony Does Not Mean Agreement

There is an important danger in the word harmony. It can sound like avoiding conflict. That is not what I mean. The people I admire are not people without convictions. Quite the opposite. They seem able to remain themselves while allowing other people to remain themselves too.

- Harmony can include disagreement.
- It can include boundaries.
- It can include saying no.

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- It can include leaving.
- It can include principled opposition.

What changes is the quality of the engagement.

- ✓ I can disagree without making opposition my identity.
- ✓ I can advocate without needing to dominate.
- ✓ I can negotiate without abandoning my values.
- ✓ I can listen without surrendering judgment.
- ✓ I can change my mind without blaming myself for having previously thought differently.
- ✓ I can allow another person to reach the same destination by a road I would not have chosen.

Perhaps harmony is not everyone singing the same note. That would not be harmony at all. Harmony requires different notes that can coexist.

Finding the Way Back

The hardest question for me is not whether harmony and flow sound desirable. It is how to return to them after several years in which vigilance, conflict, and struggle have become much more familiar. I suspect the answer is not dramatic. I probably cannot decide one morning:

Today I will once again live in harmony and flow.

But I can begin noticing when I leave them. I can learn the sensations of forcing.

- Urgency.
- Tightness.
- Repetitive thinking.
- The conviction that only one acceptable outcome exists.
- The need to explain myself one more time.
- The belief that if another person does not understand me correctly, I must keep talking until they do.
- The inability to leave an unresolved issue unresolved for an afternoon.

These can become signals. Not signals that I am doing something wrong. Signals that I may be moving away from the way I most want to live.

Then perhaps I can ask:

Who do I want to be in this moment?

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Not:

How do I make this person agree with me?

Not:

How do I guarantee the outcome?

Not:

How do I eliminate uncertainty?

But:

- ✓ *What would curiosity look like here?*
- ✓ *What would integrity look like?*
- ✓ *What would kindness look like?*
- ✓ *What would diplomacy look like?*
- ✓ *What would harmony look like without abandoning myself?*
- ✓ *And what would flow look like if I stopped trying to push the river?*

Our Ideals Can Change

There is another reason I found the retreat exercise valuable. The qualities we most admire may change across a lifetime. What I wanted from myself at twenty was not necessarily what I needed at forty. The person I hoped to become at forty may not be exactly the person I hope to be now. That is not inconsistency. It is development. Perhaps our ideals deserve periodic reconsideration.

- ✓ Whom do I admire now?
- ✓ Why?
- ✓ What qualities am I responding to?
- ✓ What does that tell me about what I currently value?

And perhaps the most revealing question:

- ✓ **If these really are my values, would anyone be able to tell by watching how I live an ordinary day?**

That question is uncomfortable. But useful.

Considering Life

We spend enormous amounts of energy thinking about what should happen next in our lives.

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- ✓ We make plans.
- ✓ We solve problems.
- ✓ We protect ourselves.
- ✓ We try to improve circumstances.

All of that has its place. But occasionally it may be worthwhile to ask a different kind of question.

Not:

- ✓ Is my life going the way I want?

But:

- ✓ Am I going through my life in the way I want?

For me, at this point in my life, the answer seems to involve harmony and flow.

- ✓ Thoughtfulness.
- ✓ Curiosity.
- ✓ Authenticity.
- ✓ Kindness.
- ✓ Diplomacy.
- ✓ Integrity.
- ✓ Openness.
- ✓ Values without rigidity.
- ✓ Movement without constant stuggle.

I am not there all the time. In fact, lately I have rarely approached this territory that I admire so much. Perhaps no one is always true to their ideals. But I am beginning to think the goal is not to create a life in which nothing pushes against me. It is to become more intentional about the way I meet what does. And perhaps finding my way back does not require discovering some lost version of myself.

It may simply require remembering what I value, noticing when my daily life has moved away from it, and practicing—one encounter at a time—the person I still want to become.

Maybe harmony is not something we finally achieve when the world becomes cooperative. Maybe it is something we learn to carry into an uncooperative world.

Perhaps flow begins when we stop asking life to move exactly as we planned and become curious about how we might move with the life that is actually here.

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