

The Tao of Haplow

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Taoism (Daoism): philosophical system [...] advocating a simple honest life and non-interference with the course of natural events. (WordNet 2.0)

#

Haplow drew on his smokeless, artificial cigarette. Another nutcase, he thought. The case was special though. Professor Chokowski was a specialist in Quantum Chemistry. He was a quiet, respectable scientist who almost lived in his lab and talked to nobody. Yet, the whole scientific community talked about him. He was on the verge of solving the problem of energy production that had become a major issue since fossil fuels had run out. But because of the murder of his colleague and friend, the professor was now locked inside a high security prison, waiting for his death sentence to be enforced.

Haplow looked at the professor with contempt. The quiet man was trying to play with him. Haplow, however, depended on the professor's collaboration to find the motive for the crime. The Police didn't care anymore: The professor was sane and guilty. It had made a quick, cheap and fair trial. That was all that mattered to them; not to Haplow.

"Let me go back to my cell, I have nothing more to say at the moment," said the professor.

The lawyer sitting next to Chokowski stressed the point with a slight cough. Haplow took his time and then made a sign to the police officer standing at the door. The professor walked through the door without looking back. The lawyer followed.

Haplow felt his guts churn. The professor probably knew of Haplow's obsession with motives. The story of his previous case had been in all the local newspapers. Haplow hadn't believed the conclusions of his own police department and went on searching for evidence. He proved that a teenager hadn't committed suicide but was murdered, like many others in the area. He arrested the serial killer, and thanks to him, the streets were safer.

Yet his fame was a burden. People came to the police department and wanted him to solve their case. Most of them were turned down. Chokowski had persevered and visited the police department every day for more than two weeks, at exactly 1.15pm and asked to speak to Haplow. Every day, the officer in charge had turned him down. But soon the story had gone around the department that Haplow had an admirer. Haplow's colleagues had found yet another reason to make fun of him. In the end Haplow had given in and talked to the professor, who confessed everything. Where to find the ashes from the corpse, how and when he had done it, and even the proofs that would lead to a certain conviction. But no motive. The professor had systematically ignored the questions about the reasons why he had murdered Dr Johnston, his closest friend and colleague of fifteen years.

As the door to the interrogation room closed on the professor, Haplow fumbled in his pockets to find his pack of real cigarettes. One a day, not more. He needed it now. He lit a match. The first drags were the best. The contact of the cigarette against his lips, the faint crackling noise of the moisture trapped in the tobacco, and the immediate sense of relief. Haplow leaned back on the old wooden chair. It creaked. The complaint of old joints that had borne generations of tired cops. He remained in the silent interview room for a while, dissolving his worries of the day in each blow of smoke.

#

A week later, Haplow was in the Captain's office.

"Haplow, you need a holiday. What is this about?"

The Captain was pointing at a report on a banal affair of car theft. Nothing made sense. The ideas were shuffled into the report without coherence. Some sentences were not even finished.

"I've got a lot on my mind at the moment, Captain."

"Well take ten days, and come back with a fresh mind. Get out of my office now."

Haplow left while the Captain was still mumbling. He made a point of not listening. As he closed the door, his mind went back to the unique train of thoughts that was coherent in his head: the motive for the murder. Although he had promised himself, and Beth his wife, that he wouldn't try to solve the mystery, it had become an obsession. He left the police station and called Beth. He tried to explain to her that he couldn't sleep, that he couldn't concentrate at work. She didn't understand. The only person that should have cared for him thought he was a freak. So did the rest of the world. He opened his wallet with a sigh. Inside on the left was the old, faded picture of his mum. On the right, Beth. He had always admired the similarities in their faces. In the dark, when Beth smiled, he often had the fleeting impression that it was his mum smiling at him. But his mum was long gone. And his wife rejected him.

He had to go to the University, and visit Chokowski's lab again.

#

Haplow sat on the floor of the lab, against the large incinerator. He knew part of the crime had been committed here. Chokowski brought the corpse to the only incinerator in the building that was big enough to accommodate an adult. What were his motives? What drove the professor to murder?

He closed his eyes and immediately regressed back to when he was five. There must have been a reason why this man walked in the middle of the street, screamed his lungs out and started to unload his two sub-machine guns onto passers by. It was the end of a school day. Eleven kids and twenty adults got killed before the man shot himself in the head. Haplow felt he hated the man more for killing himself than for killing his mother. He had so many questions to ask. He wanted to understand why this man had permitted himself to supersede the decisions of Mother Nature. The only answer Haplow ever received was the memory of his mother grabbing him in her arms, and turning her back against the shooting. She hadn't had time to run. Little Haplow had just felt two impacts in her body, and heard a weak moan. Then silence, the hard concrete and the weight of his mother over him. His ear against her chest didn't hear anything, not even the comforting beat of her heart that had lead him to sleep so many times.

Haplow was back on the cold floor of the lab, his head in his hands, crying, as usual. He was crying now because he couldn't cry then. It was his ritual for the beginning of an investigation. During the next days, Haplow was seen roaming the University corridors, talking to himself, and chewing on his plastic cigarette. He barely went home at night and Beth didn't talk to him anymore.

#

His inquiry didn't progress. There was no jealousy between the two colleagues. They were best friends. They had a project together, and never took credit from the other. The secretaries and the staff had all confirmed that they co-signed everything they wrote. On a personal level, neither of them had family, they were entirely dedicated to the work they

were doing. More problematic though, Haplow couldn't discover how Johnston had been killed. The lab analysis on the ashes had concluded that Johnston had been poisoned with cyanide but Sacha, the lab technician, wasn't convinced.

"That doesn't make sense, you know."

Sacha was setting up a complicated arrangement of glass pipes and containers.

"This thing," Sacha said showing a thick tube with glass spikes pointing inside, "is a distillation column."

Haplow looked at him, frowning.

"In short," Sacha said in a low voice, looking around, "I'm going to make booze tonight. Got some berries fermented in the basement. Do you want to taste the previous batch? It's a bit strong, but gives a good kick!"

Haplow coughed and chewed nervously on his cigarette.

"No thanks."

Sacha shrugged. Haplow added apologetically:

"I need to keep straight if I want to understand what happened." After a pause. "Why doesn't it make sense? I mean, the cyanide?"

"I guess you know this, you're a murder cop. Cyanide smells like bitter almond." Haplow nodded in agreement. It was one of the first basic smells a cop had to recognize. Sacha went on. "And Johnston was a trained chemist. He knew it too. A mere whiff of bitter almond and he would have dropped whatever he was doing and run for the cyanide antidote. There is one in each lab." Sacha pointed at a medical kit in the corner.

"Chokowski could have prevented him."

Sacha just laughed. "Have you seen any picture of Johnston?" Haplow shifted. Because the murderer had been caught before any inquiry, he had never thought about finding a picture of the victim. Bad procedure. Sacha rummaged in a drawer. "There you go. The last staff picture. Look at the guy on the far right. Do you think Chokowski could have forced him to do anything?"

Haplow looked at the coffee stained picture. The man, about 45, was built like a lumberjack. He looked friendly and easygoing, but there was no way the frail Chokowski could have prevented him going wherever he wanted to.

"When they were in a funny mood, Johnston used to carry Chokowski on his shoulders and run around in the corridor. It was really wild!"

#

Haplow was stuck. After the ten days vacation, he came back to the office but didn't really work. He just sat there, in front of his computer, without doing anything. He couldn't put his mind on the other cases he had to solve. All he did was click the *refresh* button on his email program. He didn't even know why. He hoped that an email would popup and would lead him to the solution. He had to see Chokowski.

On the way out of the dark police station, the Captain grabbed Haplow's elbow.

"Haplow, what's up with you? I've been checking on you this morning. You didn't do anything." The tone of the Captain was more friendly than usual. "And your wife is worried about you. She called yesterday to know where you were."

Haplow didn't answer. He removed his elbow from the grip and walked towards the door. The Captain ran through the main hall to catch up.

"You're a good cop, Haplow. You're going through a rough patch. You need to see a shrink. Or I'll have to fire you."

At this Haplow felt his heart leap. It wasn't fear. It was expectation. He glared at the Captain, and walked out.

#

It was the first time Haplow visited death row. There was no reason for a cop to visit people who had already been convicted. The place was strangely silent. With the reform of the justice system, people who sat here had at most a few weeks to live. Haplow sat in the small visiting room. It was cosier than an interrogation room, more like a lounge, with a few old stained sofas and a coffee table. Obviously, this place was for families to say goodbye. He sat on the sofa facing the door and resumed the mechanical chewing of his plastic cigarette. A few minutes later, the professor entered the room. He was smiling as usual. He was wearing shiny orange overalls.

"Haplow! I'm glad you decided to pay me a visit."

The professor sat down and started talking to Haplow as if he was an old friend. The only thing the professor complained about was the fact that he couldn't wear his suit.

"They don't even want me to wear it for the execution. How scandalous! I can't decently meet my Creator in an orange overall."

Haplow took his computer out of his pocket and made a quick search. According to his bio, Chokowski was a dedicated atheist.

"Creator? Have you converted here?"

"Oh no! It happened much before. As a matter of fact, about two weeks before Johnston died."

Haplow leaned towards Chokowski with a smile. The professor, as an inauguration of his newborn belief, had decided to kill his best friend. Interesting motive.

"Does it make sense to you that you become a murderer, as you embrace a new religion?"

"Actually it is the reason why Johnston died."

Haplow almost stood up from the sofa.

"Sorry Haplow, I can't tell you more. You need to find out by yourself. There..."

Haplow banged his fist on the table. He almost spat his cigarette out. "For heaven's sake, Chokowski, will you speak? I need to know. I need to know before you die."

The guard opened the door to check on them. Haplow sat back and shook his head in the direction of the guard. "Everything's alright. Thank you officer."

"As I tried to say, there is a pile of CDs in my office, with 'Quantum Chemistry for beginners' written on them. Look into the pile. There is only one CD without a serial number. It's for you. You may want to follow the course. Good day Haplow. If you have any question, I'll be around until Wednesday in two weeks. After that, I guess you'll have to resort to prayers."

The professor walked to the door and knocked to call the guard. Haplow sat in the sofa petrified by this mixture of arrogance and indifference to death. He saw the paper ashtray on the low table. He lit his daily cigarette.

Outside the prison, Haplow looked at the silhouette of the city against the horizon. A brown haze of pollution surrounded the tall buildings. He had two weeks to solve his problem, but the world had lost a key actor in solving theirs. The sun was rising on the left, casting long shadows across the bare soil.

#

Haplow reached the university soon after the students had started their day. Corridors in the upper floors of the chemistry building seemed empty, but he could feel the intense activity behind the doors. Haplow stopped in front of the professor's office door and sighed. He felt a deep knot in his stomach. He was fighting a lost battle. He would never get his mother back. Even Beth was only a pale imitation. But he needed a goal in life. Being a policeman, being a husband, even being a father weren't enough. What mattered was to be able to mine the murderer's mind for nuggets of violence, extract them, contemplate them and understand them. He walked in.

He found the CD in the right drawer of the professor's desk, checked the password of the professor's computer in his notes, and logged in. During the next days, he didn't move

from the office. He ignored the calls on his mobile phone. After a while, they stopped. Inside the office he was alone and at peace. The more he was working on quantum chemistry, the less he wanted to know about the rest of the world. By reading the colourful diagrams, he discovered more and more of the professor's personality. He easily detected the religious undertones of the course. The professor wasn't a real atheist. He was a lost soul in search for a Guide. Did he find It? Did It guide the professor's hand to murder Johnston?

After two weeks of sleeping on the floor and feeding on junk food from the vending machines downstairs, Haplow felt like he had been through all of quantum chemistry. A message appeared on the screen: "Well done, Haplow. You've past the first part of the course." It was the first personal reference, but Haplow wasn't surprised. He already knew this CD had been made especially for him. The professor was making a full confession through the multiple-choice questions of the different tests Haplow taken. The screen blinked. "What you need to learn now, is why you're here."

He didn't read further. The door of the office opened. Haplow's heart leaped. His mum was at the door. She talked with Beth's voice. She had a calm, determined expression.

"I wish I hadn't found you here."

Haplow didn't answer. He was still recovering from the shock. Even after all these years, the resemblance still surprised him. As much as he would have stopped everything for his mum, Beth wasn't worth the trouble. She disturbed him.

"You don't care about us, do you?"

Haplow didn't. He never really had. His family was just part of his day-dreaming, the hope he could reconstruct what he had lost when he was five. He just needed Beth to tell him. In the light of her comment, he saw her as the stranger she had always been. How could he have ever thought she looked like his mum? The simple thought that he might have to return to her home made him nauseous. He looked into her eyes silently.

"I have filed for divorce," she said.

He was free. She left without another word.

The screen had been flashing all that time. "For the next step, you need a code from the professor. GET IT BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Haplow checked his watch. The professor was going to be executed in an hour or so. Haplow ran out of the office to the car park and rushed into his car. He refused to notice Beth sitting in her car, crying. As he drove, he rang death row to delay the execution. But they wouldn't listen to him.

"You're not on duty, the guard answered. I've even heard you're fired." After a pause. "If you manage to get here in time, we'll let you talk to him, but that's all."

He made it. Through the little window of the cell door, he saw the professor sitting on his bed, reading a book. They had given Haplow five minutes from outside the cell. As the professor saw Haplow, his face brightened. His muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

"Haplow, I'm so happy to see you. I thought you wouldn't make it."

Haplow opened the small latch used for the meal tray and talked through it.

"What's the code professor? What does it do?"

The professor came closer to the latch. They could only look in each other's eyes.

"Are you ready now? Do you want to risk everything, Haplow? You'll get knowledge but you may lose everything."

The professor's voice was calm and determined. Haplow answered quickly, he only had a few minutes left.

"I don't have anything left. I don't have a job, and my wife just left me."

"What about your life, Haplow? Are you ready to give up your life for the sake of knowledge?"

Haplow didn't say anything. His life had been taken from him a long time ago, at the entrance of the schoolyard.

"Are you, Haplow?"

Haplow could hear the guards coming to take the professor to the execution chamber.

"Give me the code or tell me!" He was almost shouting. "I need to know."

"I can't tell you. But here is the code. It opens the room B101 in the basement." Haplow put his face against the door and the professor whispered the code in his ear.

The guards pushed Haplow to the side. "Come on Haplow. Get out now. The professor would like to enjoy his last walk. And next time, take a shower before you come in. You stink."

"Why professor? Why don't you just tell me?"

As the professor was taken away by the guards, he stopped and turned back. He looked happy. "It's all part of the experiment, Haplow. You need to find out by yourself."

#

Haplow almost fell down the stairs to the basement of the chemistry building. He ran along the dark corridor, looking left and right for the room B101. The place smelled of chemicals. The ceiling was lower than in the rest of the building. The neon lighting was cold. It was oppressing. Room B101 was at the end of the corridor, locked by a vault door. A numerical pad was blinking next to it. Haplow tried the code a first time, nothing happened. His hands were shaking and sweaty. His fingers slipped on the keys. He tried a second time. Still nothing. He held his breath to reduce the shaking, wiped his hands on his overcoat and tried to type the code again. He heard a click, and then a series of mechanical parts moving inside the room. A final hiss and the door opened noiselessly.

The small room was square and entirely padded as in a mental hospital. The ceiling was even lower than in the corridor and Haplow had to bend slightly. He walked in without caution. The room contained the professor's confession and testament. It had been written for him. He needed to read it. A screen covered the wall opposite the door. It reflected the only source of light, a video-projector installed on Haplow's left, against the wall, next to the door. A cable linked the projector to a small device that looked like a CD player. There was a CD half inserted in it. Walking on the padding was difficult, so Haplow removed his shoes. The padding felt soft and velvety.

Haplow had to walk around the projector to insert the CD fully into the reader. As soon as he pressed the CD inside, the door closed automatically. He heard the same mechanical sound and the hiss, this time muffled by the padding. Haplow fought his instinct to jump to the door and bang. It was useless. He had been willingly entrapped. He knew—he hoped—that in this giant coffin lay the answers to all his questions. Next to him, the projector had lit and Haplow heard the voice of the professor, loud but without any echo.

"I've found God."

Haplow turned towards the screen. The professor was sitting behind his desk, smiling as if waiting for his revelation to sink into Haplow's brain. Haplow's back started to hurt from being bent. He sat down against the wall. After what seemed like an eternity, the professor simply added:

"Let me explain."

Diagrams unfolded on the screen. And they made sense to Haplow. Two weeks of training and he was able to understand the basic ideas expressed by the charts. In the middle of the chaos of quantum mechanics, among the uncertain trajectories of atoms, electrons and other microscopic particles, was the ultimate determinism, the sign of a supreme entity controlling everything, a genial conductor that made all things happen. It was simple, almost obvious, like all great discoveries. Tears blurred Haplow's vision.

"Why didn't we see it before?"

The camera came back to the professor's office. He was now leaning against his desk. "And thanks to you, I am trying to communicate with It. I'm trying to ask a single question. Do we tell the world? Do YOU, Haplow, tell the world?"

As if the professor knew of Haplow's dubious frown, he continued.

"You're in a real life Schrödinger cat experiment, Haplow. Do you remember this thought experiment about uncertainty in quantum mechanics? You put a cat in a black box, closed, completely isolated from the rest of the world so that nobody knows what's happening inside the box. With the cat in the box there is a bottle containing a deadly poison that would kill the cat as soon as it is broken. What makes the experiment interesting is that the disintegration of a single radioactive atom triggers the system that can break the bottle. As you know from the course, radioactivity has very well known statistical properties but no human being can predict when a given atom will disintegrate. Because nobody can see inside the box, the state of the cat is undetermined. It's neither alive nor dead. Only the process of opening the box will determine the state of the cat."

Haplow's heart sank. He looked around. Where was the poison? He couldn't see much, just a little protrusion on the lower left corner of the screen. He crawled to it but like the rest of the room, it was padded and impossible to tear apart. The giant figure of the professor went on.

"But Haplow, you should rejoice. Your destiny is going to be decided first hand by the Almighty. I am convinced that It is aware of us, and can control every single event that happens in the universe. Your state may be undetermined for the common living being, subject to the same uncertainties as the whole universe. But the Almighty *is* the universe, It controls what happens. So if It triggers the release of the poison, you die and It doesn't want you to tell the World. On the other hand, if you are found before the poison is released, you become the first apostle of a religion that isn't a religion, because it's based on scientific facts."

Haplow shouted at the screen: "You can't do that, I don't want to be an apostle." The recording of the professor didn't stop.

"I wanted Johnston to be the first apostle, but he chickened out. He killed himself! Can you believe this? At the verge of the most important discovery of humanity, he decided to leave. And he tried to ruin the experiment. He poisoned himself in this very chamber, to attract the police. How could they have understood? Do you see now Haplow? I had to make it clear that I murdered him. It was the only way to prevent a thorough inquiry and to keep the experiment going!"

The professor paused. Haplow couldn't think, his head felt empty. "I bet right now, you're asking why you have been chosen. I don't know. Ask the Almighty if you can. All I know is that I read in the local paper about your obsession for finding the motive for a murder. I never read the paper. Only that time. It was a sign. You became the keystone of my experiment. I could be executed, and you could become the one who knows."

The professor paused again, and walked to sit behind his desk. Haplow crawled back next to the projector. The murder wasn't a murder and his obsession for the truth had led him to be the unwilling guinea pig in an experiment to talk to God. Haplow laughed. He laughed at himself. From the start, it had looked like a trap and yet he had continued. The professor didn't trap him in this. Haplow had asked for it. All the way, he had hoped the professor would do what he had never dared. To end a life that had been entirely directed by regrets. What if his mother hadn't died? What if the killer had explained himself?

And now, instead of the certainty of death, he was trapped in a situation designed to be uncertain. Haplow felt his head spin. Instead of fear, it was the feeling of leaping great distances, of falling from a plane. He let uncertainty come into his life and it gushed in, like water in a sinking ship.

The small protrusion in the wall opened like a flower, revealing a bottle of whisky and a massive crystal glass.

"You could kill yourself with this glass to bring determinism back," the professor said from his desk. "Why not enjoy the taste of a good whisky instead? You will die in your own due time. Or maybe you're dead already. Just remember that for anybody outside, your state is still undetermined. And until someone comes and opens the door, you can't do

anything about it. Make the remaining instants of your life enjoyable."

Haplow looked into the professor's eyes on the screen, and started to cry. He cried until his tears washed away the stress of a lifetime. He didn't cry for his long gone mother. He cried for his life lost in an attempt to deny his own mortality. By searching for the causes of murders, he had wanted to forget that *he* could die. And instead of making life easier to bear, the search had made it bitter.

When he looked back at the screen, a gentle glow had replaced the professor's image. Haplow crawled towards the cupboard and poured himself a large glass of whisky. His hand was shaking. The peaty smell of the spirit reached his nose. The shaking receded. He sat against the wall. Instead of a coffin, he now saw the whole room as a gigantic sofa. He swirled the whisky in the glass, watching the reflections of the dim light through the golden liquid. He took a sip. The whisky tasted good.

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