

Women Hold up Half the Sky

This, the first of several essays on this topic, explores the distinctions and the complimentarity of Yin and Yang energy and contemplates the rich meaning of this ancient Chinese proverb.

Barbara J. Spraker

April, 2008

Women Hold up Half the Sky

So claims an ancient Chinese proverb – “Women Hold up Half the Sky.” This amazing image doesn’t describe women sitting under the shade tree while men hold up the sky. It doesn’t suggest women are competing with men to hold up the sky. And it doesn’t suggest there are simply more men to hold up the sky. Not at all! What it evokes is a picture of women fully bringing their unique gifts to the task, bringing their ways of holding up the sky.

Image is the soul speaking to us – rich, subtle, nuanced, pictures worth a thousand words. The temptation is to let the image be, and speak itself to each person. *Women Hold up Half the Sky* – end of story.

At the same time we yearn to explore the deeper meaning of image, to share our interpretations, to discern collective, not just individual meaning. When we share different viewpoints, several paths emerge.

One is the path of wholeness and commitment to the greater good, the awareness of individual effort for collective benefit. After all, it is not the sky “above my house” I am holding; it is the atmosphere we share - all of us that inhabit this planet, this blanket that surrounds the planet as a whole, this context in which we all, male and female, exist.

Another path related to this greater good, requires us to “let go” of our ego and lay claim to our deeper personal power, rooted in our unique gifts, perspective and passions, as well as to our place in the universal wisdom stream. This path enables us to understand that while we are individuals doing our work, our role in holding up the sky is not about ego, it is about the common good. So we “let go” of comparison and competition and listen inside for that place where our unique contributions are called for. When we are centered in our personal power, we are connected – connected to our highest vision, to others with whom we share our task, and to the continuum of wisdom and insight that is our birthright.

A third path recognizes these different energies that combine in this collective effort. Women are not men in drag. Some of the energies are active, expansive, conscious of the self. Others are responsive, conservative, conscious of the environment. Such differences lighten the burden.

A fourth path is one that sees clearly that this task is dynamic, not static. Just as those holding up the sky have individual gifts and energies, so the sky is continually changing, storm clouds gather and disperse, winds arise and subside,

the sun warms the air and disappears and coolness returns. So those who are “holding the sky” are engaged not in holding tight to a pillar, but are engaged in a dynamic, interdependent, co-creative dance - in relationship with colleagues and with the sky itself in its continual changes.

And, it is not just women. The other half of the sky is held up by men. This doesn't come into the world as a new idea.

The ancient philosophy of Taoism provides a powerful and profound perspective for understanding the essence of these paths - of wholeness, of interdependence, and of the different energies required for “holding up the sky.”

All things connote the *Yin* and the *Yang*,” Taoism teaches. “And the *Yin* and the *Yang* keep acting upon each other / And thus things keep changing and unifying themselves.” (The Book of Tao, Chapter 42) The interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* create the continual, emergent process of transformation.

This *Yin* and *Yang* described in the Tao Te Ching are described by mythologist, Joseph Campbell as the sunny side of the stream and the shady side of the stream.

Yang is of the sunny side; *Yin*, the shady. On the sunny side there is light, there is warmth, and the heat of the sun is dry. In the shade, there is the cool, rather, of the earth, and the earth is moist. Dark, cold, and moist; light, hot, and dry: earth and sun in counter-action. These are associated, further, with the female and the male as the passive and active principles. There is no *moral* verdict here intended; neither principle is “better” than the other; neither “stronger” than the other. They are the two equally potent grounding principles on which all the world rests, and in their interaction they inform, constitute, and decompose all things.” (Campbell, 1972, p. 119)

In her research into cross-cultural mythology and symbols, Angeles Arrien reveals that this distinction of complementary energies is part of many cultural traditions.

In Oriental cultures, the Emperor archetype represents dynamic, initiatory power known as *Yang* energy. Jungian psychology refers to this symbol as a representation of the *animus* or masculine energy. In Greek mythology, this symbol is Zeus, the father or the patriarch. (Arrien, 1997, p. 37)

The Empress archetype is the principle of love with wisdom. “The Greeks referred to this symbol as Demeter, the Earth Mother. . . . In Jungian psychology, she is the *anima*, the feminine nature.” She is the “Goddess principle, or what the Orientals would refer to as the power of *Yin* energy.” (Arrien, 1997, p. 33)

Fritjof Capra, physicist and systems theorist, elaborates on these distinctions and draws out profound implications. He interprets *Yin* energy as “responsive, consolidating, cooperative activity, and *Yang* energy as aggressive, expanding, competitive activity.” (Capra, 1982, p, 38) Further, Capra sees *Yin* and *Yang*

energy as related to two modes of consciousness, two different kinds of knowing. “The rational and the intuitive are complementary modes of functioning of the human mind. Rational thinking is linear, focused and analytic. It belongs to the realm of the intellect, whose function it is to discriminate, measure and categorize. Thus rational knowledge tends to be fragmented. Intuitive knowledge, on the other hand, is based on a direct, nonintellectual experience of reality arising in an expanded state of awareness. It tends to be synthesizing, holistic, and nonlinear.” (Capra, *ibid.*) He identifies these associations with *Yin* and *Yang*:

<i>Yin</i>	<i>Yang</i>
feminine	masculine
contractive	expansive
conservative	demanding
responsive	aggressive
cooperative	competitive
intuitive	rational
synthesizing	analytic

Thus Capra draws us into a deeper reflection on the distinctions between *Yin* and *Yang* energy. His perspective is that for the past three centuries, our culture has consistently favored the *Yang* over the *Yin* energies, and that our economic, social and political structures reflect and reinforce this imbalance.

Those of us living on this planet today who have roots in western historical traditions, have grown up within this economic, social, political culture. This suggests that beliefs such as:

- rational thinking is of greater value than intuition,
- competition is superior to cooperation,
- science is to be trusted more than religion,
- initiative is superior to responsiveness -

are embedded in our own basic assumptions. (Capra, p. 39) And, it nudges us to expanded awareness that our culture is way out of balance!

These different perspectives are not abstract concepts. They play out in our daily lives at work, at home, and in the community. Susan illustrates the distinctions in her story of terminating employees. General manager of an Asian manufacturing corporation, Susan noted that she and her male counterparts used the same corporate guidelines for terminating employees when reductions in staff were necessary.

“There’s a big difference, though,” she said, “in how we interpret and carry out those guidelines. I see my male colleagues explain the situation to the employees affected. They describe the exit process and collect the employees’ keys. The task is accomplished and they move on to their next project. I just don’t handle it the same way. I spend more time with the individuals. I invite them to talk about the impact on the rest of their life. I listen for their primary concerns and offer any help I can provide, which may simply be listening with empathy.”

Recent research by scholars in two quite different disciplines provides insight into specific ways in which *Yin* and *Yang* energy manifests and suggests possible ways Yin energy uniquely “holds up the sky” in ways that benefit all.

In her research into developing personal identity and maturity in moral judgment, Carol Gilligan focused on women. Her findings led to her development of a theory of morality based on notions of responsibility and care, a sense of relationship, a sense of connection. This contrasted dramatically with the results of Lawrence Kohlberg’s research, conducted with young men, which found that moral maturity centered on objectivity and the value of abstract laws and universal principles for resolving ethical conflicts. Women, Gilligan found, consistently expressed a wish not to hurt others and the hope that in morality could be found a way of solving conflicts so that no one would be hurt. (Gilligan, 1993, p. 65) Women give much attention to context and dialogue and pursue mutual understanding and resolution rather than depending on abstract principles.

Gilligan concluded that, for men, the definition of self comes through a process of separating self from the world and others, and for women, the self is delineated through connection to others, the world and the situation in question. (Gilligan, p. 37.)

How this expands our understanding of dealing with ethical issues! Yes, we need laws and principles for resolving ethical conflict. But that is only one avenue. Many conflicts are more effectively resolved through dialogue, through mutual understanding, through consideration of the context.

Turning to another discipline for perspectives on the distinctions between *Yin* and *Yang* energy, we find scientific studies that reveal that the impact of stress on the human body is experienced quite differently by men and by women.

The discovery that women respond to stress differently than men was made in a classic “aha” moment shared by two women scientists who were talking one day in a lab at UCLA.

“There was this joke that when the women who worked in the lab were stressed, they came in, cleaned the lab, had coffee, and bonded”, says Dr. Laura Klein. “When the men were stressed they holed up somewhere on their own. I commented one day to fellow researcher Shelley Taylor that nearly 90% of the stress research is on males. I showed her the data from my lab, and the two of us knew instantly that we were onto something.” (Professional Women’s Network)

<http://www.pwn.org/content.asp?ID=1564&I=2548>

The subsequent study conducted by Taylor, Klein and colleagues (Taylor, et al., 2000) argues that while fight or flight may be an effective adaptive response for males, females’ responses are marked more by a pattern they call tend and befriend. “Tending involves nurturant activities designed to protect the self and

offspring that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process.” (p. 411) They found that research on human males and females shows that under conditions of stress, the desire to affiliate with others is substantially more marked among females than among males. “In fact, it is one of the most robust gender differences in adult human behavior, other than those directly tied to pregnancy and lactation, and it is the primary gender difference in adult human behavioral responses to stress.” (p. 418)

Authors of the study conclude that the “tend and befriend” response of women to stress is not only very real, but also very healthy. “The present analysis is suggestive of health implications for females. If a downregulated stress response in females produces relaxation and affiliation, this may help to explain the 7 ½ nonspecific years that women live longer than men.” (p. 424) Authors of the report also note that their analysis “suggests important implications for social support processes.” (ibid.)

Once again, examining the distinctions between Yin and Yang energy, and **honoring** the unique characteristics of Yin energy, offers huge potential in terms of improving individual and collective health and well being. Suppose Yin energy was represented proportionately in situations of conflict, in confrontations, in emergency situations. Already in medical care, the value of support systems is seen as critical to the recovery of patients.

Differences between *Yin* and *Yang* energy are described in countless ways by women in stories of their every day experience.

“I know there are principles, and even a whole industry, focused on how to do effective fundraising,” said Sarah, “but when a friend needed support for a project she was working on, I invited three other couples for dinner and made soup. At the end of the evening we had raised \$2000.”

While I think of attorneys as “by the book” professionals, when I contracted with them to create a training project, I never considered a formal “needs assessment” survey, explained Barb. Instead we had two roundtable (literally) brown bag lunches and I listened while they talked about what they really needed and what was most important to develop through the training.”

What happens when half of those holding the sky are excluded? As Capra reminds us “it is easy to see that our society has consistently favored the *Yang* over the *Yin*.”

For the past several hundred years Western science and its manifestation in industrial society has spawned a world view of prediction and control, envisioned as division of labor, hierarchical communication and power, discrete disciplines,

projects and tasks. And for centuries prior to this, monarchies, empires and feudal systems manifested *Yang* energy, an energy that is assertive, externalized, hierarchical, oriented to power over others and which routinely uses force to achieve desired results.

The cumulative results of this *Yang* energy, trying to dance without its partner, have currently riveted our attention. While the benefits of scientific discovery, industrial production and technological innovation are manifold, the consequent costs are literally killing us. The air we breathe and the water we drink are polluted. The strategy of war for solving conflict simply escalates the conflict, increases fear, and devastates families, cities and nations.

Yang energy is inadequate simply because it is incomplete. It is half of a whole.. As the driving force for hundreds of years, it is embedded in a mechanistic worldview that is incapable of creating a holistic, sustainable world. Reductionistic analysis and linear, step-by-step thinking dominate. Problems are broken into parts that can be more easily addressed. *Yang* energy incorporates a belief in “objectivity,” an assumption that “I” am outside the system, able to observe what is happening rationally, with clear perception, and make judgments untainted by personal bias or emotion.

- I can use quantifiable methods to support my objective approach.
- I can pursue technological innovations as discrete products and processes, separate from potential use or impact.
- I can develop productivity improvements with the only criteria that they increase our bottom line results.
- I can promote research and new product development without concern about potential impact unless specific constraints apply. These constraints come from “outside.”

Coming full circle, Western physicists are now describing a world that looks much like the one described thousands of years ago by the ancient Taoists. During the last century, experiments in the atomic and subatomic world brought scientists to the unexpected reality that the atoms, so long considered the solid building blocks of matter, consisted, in fact, of space within which tiny particles – the electrons – moved around the nucleus. (Capra, 1983, p. 78). Out of the dramatic discoveries of quantum physicists during the early decades of the 20th century, a new worldview emerged characterized as holistic, organic, ecological, systemic. Physicists shifted from describing matter as composed of basic building blocks, to describing it as a complex and dynamic web of interrelationships (p. 81).

These interrelationships carry us back to the idea of cooperation between Yin and Yang energy.

Carriers of *Yin* energy, we have big work to do. As *Yin* energy becomes more and more active in this dance of holding up the sky, adding the emphasis on relationship and interconnectedness, on nurture and development, on intuitive

ways of knowing, the dance will become richer and more powerful. We may quite possibly become smart enough to truly create a world that works for all, that continually recreates and regenerates itself for the greater good.

If women are to bring their gifts to “holding up the sky,” we must not neglect the dynamic nature of our work; we are engaged in a co-creative dance. These *Yin* and *Yang* energies represent two poles of continual interaction, the **process** of continual transformation. In his last book, Alan Watts, American philosopher, in collaboration with Ai Chung-liang Huang, describe *Yin* and *Yang* as principles and explain the key to the relationship between *Yin* and *Yang* as mutual arising or inseparability. (Watts, 1875, p. 22) *Yin* and *Yang* are like the “different, but inseparable, sides of a coin, the poles of a magnet, or pulse and interval in any vibration.” (p. 23) Watts acknowledges that it is difficult for the Western mind to easily understand that the void is creative or that being comes from nonbeing. “. . . [T]he art of life,” they remind us, “is not seen as holding to Yang and banishing Yin, but as keeping the two in balance, because there cannot be one without the other.” (p. 21) Transformation and change are continual and flow from the interaction of Yin and Yang.

While archeology reveals actual, and extended, periods of time when such a dynamic, interactive, interdependent way of life existed (Eisler, 1988. Min Jiayin, ed., 1995) this view has been largely buried for many hundreds of years. Never completely destroyed, it has, nevertheless been barely, and fleetingly, visible over centuries of time.

As Fritjof Capra wisely reminds us, “In human biology masculine and feminine characteristics are not neatly separated but occur, in varying proportions, in both sexes. Similarly, the Chinese ancients believed that all people, whether men or women, go through *Yin* and *Yang* phases. The personality of each man and each woman is not a static entity but a dynamic phenomenon resulting from the interplay between feminine and masculine elements. (Capra, p. 36) In fact, in the classic *Yin/Yang* symbol, the essence of each element is included in the other, or as Carl Jung described it, every woman has her animus and every man his anima qualities. We must support our own wholeness as we support the wholeness of our world.

After all these words, let us return to the image.

Women Hold up Half the Sky

Let it speak to you as you contemplate its meaning for you.

References

- Arrien, A. (1997). *The Tarot Handbook: Practical applications of ancient visual symbols*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Berkowitz, G. (2007 Networker Archive). UCLA study on friendship among women. Professional Women's Network. Retrieved November 18, 2007 from the "World Wide Web: <http://www.pwn.org/content.asp?ID=1564&1=2548>
- Campbell, J. (1973). *Myths to live by*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Capra, F. (1983). *The turning point: Science, society, and the rising culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books
- Eisler, R. (1988). *The chalice & the blade: Our history, our future*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Min Jiayin, ed. (1995). *The chalice and the blade in Chinese culture: Gender relations and social models*. Beijing: China Social Science Publishing House.
- Taylor, S. E., Klein, L.C., Lewis, B. P., Gruenewald, T. L., Gurung, R.A.R., & Updegraff, J. A. (2000). Female responses to stress: Tend and befriend, not fight or flight. Psychological Review, 107 (3) , 411 – 429.
- Watts, A. and Al Chung-liang Huang. (1975). *Tao, the watercourse way*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- The book of Tao and The*. (G. Zhengkun, Trans.) Peking University (2006)