

Things Have to Change

On the Softening of our World: 81 Sayings

Is it possible that there have been millennia in which to look, cogitate, and make a record, and that we have allowed these millennia to pass by like the lunch-break at school when you eat your sandwich and an apple? Yes, it's possible.¹

When I read this extract from a diary-like text by Rainer Maria Rilke, I could not have agreed more. In view of the devastating crises and deplorable conditions prevailing in many parts of the world, who has not experienced such moments of resignation and felt tempted to turn their back on the world in order to float weightlessly through the vast spaces of the galaxy and finally land on the planet of their dreams?

However, whether we like it or not, this is not an option just now and we need to continue to attend to our earthly reality:

Imagine a country on planet earth where things have been continually going from bad to worse. The situation has become so critical that you are about to leave the country. Where is this country? How old are you? Are you female, male or other? What about your physical health? You can take only a few things with you: what is important to you? What will you put into your bag?

What indeed is it that is *essential* for you?

These questions often served as a stimulus in my drama-based seminars. By asking the students to imagine a concrete situation and character, I prepared them for engaging with a poem that Bertolt Brecht wrote 1938 while in exile in Denmark: *Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-te-ching on Lao-tsu's Road into Exile*.²

In the first two stanzas he creates the following scenario:

once he was seventy and getting brittle
quiet retirement seemed the teacher's due.
in his country goodness had been weakening a little
and the wickedness was gaining ground anew.
so he buckled on his shoe.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke (2016): *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 13-14

² A bilingual (German-English) version is available at: <http://www.tao-te-king.org/Brecht!.htm>

and he packed up what he would be needing:
not much, but enough to travel light.
items like the book that he was always reading
and the pipe he used to smoke at night.
bread as much as he thought right.

The 13 stanzas of Brecht's poem focus on a Chinese intellectual who can no longer bear the steady increase of wickedness in his country. He decides to part with everything that is familiar to him, and goes into exile.

When the intellectual reaches the border, a customs officer who is also suffering because of the deplorable state that his country is in ("worn tunic. got no shoes.") offers the sage accommodation and food, on condition that he doesn't take his knowledge with him, but records it and leaves it behind.

In the eleventh stanza we learn that this is exactly what happens:

stiffly from his ox the sage dismounted.
seven days he wrote there with his friend.
and the man brought them their meals (and all the smugglers were astounded
at what seemed this sudden lenient trend).
and then came the end.

After seven days the customs officer is presented with the results of an extraordinary intellectual effort in the form of *81 'Sayings'*.

In this poem a learned man holds precious knowledge. However, it is thanks to the insistent questioning of the customs officer that this knowledge can be shared, thus turning it into *useful knowledge* that helps to prevent a further increase of wickedness in the country. What exactly the wisdom, packed into the *81 'Sayings'*, is about, we do not find out. However, in the fifth stanza we get a sense of what the core of this wisdom is. When the customs officer asks if the sage managed to figure something out, the reply is:

how quite soft water, by attrition
over the years will grind strong rocks away.
in other words, that hardness must lose the day.

The Project Idea:

It occurred to me that in our currently shaken and hardened world Brecht's poem could serve as a good stimulus for tapping into our imaginations and for a creative exchange about what

might be understood by the "soft water" that can grind the "strong rocks" away, so that they won't continue to block the way towards social progress.

This project is not about a wise man as in Brecht's poem, neither is it about a wise woman. It is not about a certain gender or individual, but rather about our *collective wisdom*: in the form of 81 'Sayings' that reflect our vision of a softened world, a world that is more human and less antagonistic.

At this early stage what is to be understood by a '*Saying*' is still very open – appeal, thesis-antithesis, recommendation, aphorism, verse, short poem, metaphor, everyday observation – as is the matter of its basic tone (for example, provocative, ironic, appealing, serious, comical?).

There is no limit to your imagination. However, it seems important to me that it is a *short* text (or combination of text and image) that conveys what we understand by "soft water" and what the "hard rocks" are that need to be removed, and what exactly could be put in their place. In principle, the 'Sayings' can reference different areas. They should be complemented by a short commentary (max. 1 page) to ensure that the reader sees the connection between the 'Saying' and the chosen area or topic (for example, Politics, Art, Health, Economy, Religion, Ethics, Migration ... etc).

As most of the contributors work in the area of education, the short commentaries should, if possible, shine a light on how education, including non-formal education, can make a special contribution to the 'Softening of our World'. The project takes as its basis the idea that the more educated a society is, the more open, democratic and caring it is.

Here is an example:

There should be no person in the country whose private income is higher than that of the person who carries the political responsibility for the whole country.

Note: This 'Saying' focuses the general attention on absurd discrepancies and could be complemented by an explanation as follows: the salary of some of the soccer players in the German Premier League is approximately 50 times higher than that of Angela Merkel and 300 times higher than that of the average industrial wage. Fans and sports clubs, with the support of the general population, could be the soft water that over time manages to put an end to the merciless commercialisation of sport and the excessive greed for profit.

Here is another example to make the point that desirable / aspirational scenarios are also an option:

The appropriate place for dictators and macho politicians is in a ship of fools. As soon as the ship sets sail, each of them will try, at any cost, to do what they are best at: seize control of the steering wheel. Who could sink any deeper?

The first example focuses on the aspect of *fair distribution*, the second on the aspect of *political suppression*. I look forward to seeing the range of aspects that is likely to emerge in the course of this project.

This project about the "Softening of the World" can hopefully contribute to a broader discussion about our world post Covid19. The sooner we initiate discussions in educational, political, social and cultural contexts the more we all stand to benefit.

Further notes regarding the project:

- For the time being a smaller circle of colleagues is involved in the pilot phase of the bilingual (German-English) project. It is envisaged that it will be expanded at a later stage; suggestions re: potential contributors are welcome.
- The 'Sayings' are not about party-political perspectives, but should be understood as an intellectual intervention in the post-Covid debate, taking the form of creative-critical thinking that supersedes party boundaries. They should be thought-provoking and go beyond mere slogans. Each contributor's name will appear, together with their 'Saying'/commentary (and in some cases perhaps also photo/drawing), in the publication that is envisaged.
- So far, the response to the project proposal has been very positive and more than 50 colleagues from different countries are already on board. The following questions were raised:
- **When is the deadline for contributions? What happens if more than 81 'Sayings' are submitted?**

Please send your contribution by July 30th 2020 to m.schewe@ucc.ie. A selection committee (tbc) will recommend which of the contributions should be included in the publication.

- **Must it be my own 'Saying' or can it be a quotation, for example, from the work of a well-known author, philosopher etc.?**

It would be ideal if each contributor engaged critically with an aspect of our shared national/international reality and supplied a 'Saying' and preferably also a commentary (max. 100 words). However, in principle, a quotation may also be considered/adapted. It would be helpful if, in addition to the quotation, an enlightening commentary (max. 200 words) assisted readers to see the concern that it references in a new light.

- **Who is the target audience?**

It is envisaged that the eventual publication will have a wide distribution. How exactly this can be best achieved is under review. The 'Sayings' should be presented in a visually attractive (artistic) form, including photographs and drawings that focus on the 'leitmotiv' *Soft Water - Hard Rock*.

Given the intellectual orientation of the publication, it will probably be of particular interest to those working in the educational sector.

Ideally, this will be a project which resonates, and serves as a kind of model: people in different contexts (especially currently, for example, in the Health sector) could create similar networks, aimed at giving visibility to their collective wisdom about the ways in which their sector might take on a more human and caring shape.

Will you come on board? If so please send a brief reply and you will then receive further information.

With all good wishes for the weeks and months to come, and trusting that we will soon meet in person again.

Manfred Schewe
m.schewe@ucc.ie

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Professor Emeritus Manfred Schewe
Department of German & Department of Theatre
National University of Ireland – *University College Cork*
CORK
Ireland
Staff page: <http://research.ucc.ie/profiles/A016/mschewe>

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