

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

# Life, Uncertainty, and Other Opportunities

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The world rarely unfolds in predictable and manageable ways. As 2010 dawns, I find my energies are high. My sabbatical has officially begun, I am not doing any work-related travel until February, and there is snow on the ground. The serene January I've been anticipating is finally here, filled with cross-country and downhill skiing, reading, writing, matinees and the initiation of my sabbatical project!

Life is good, until one of those unpredictable moments presents itself. Let me set the scene.

I was productively sitting at my computer, rapidly moving through the unanswered emails and feeling very accomplished. A nice mix of both work-related and personal correspondence completed. The phone rings; it is my husband, Jack. He had left early in the morning for his first ski race of the season, eager to show his teammates that, despite his age and his previous knee injury, he's still one of the fastest racers at the mountain! Upon hearing his voice, I eagerly ask, "Did you win?" His reply: "I had a great first run . . . (long pause) but I blew my knee out on the second run." My response was immediate, "I'm coming right up to get you." "No," he answers. "I'm already half way home." He explained that it was his left knee this time and thus driving was no problem. My instructions were to get the ice and the old crutches and be ready and waiting at the door to take him the remaining half hour to the emergency room.

In the few seconds it had taken Jack to aerial summersault half way down a giant slalom course, the idyllic January we both had imagined was gone – no racing for him, and for myself, no setting my daily agenda as I please. Less than 24 hours after Jack's accident, both of our schedules are filled with doctors' appointments, medical tests, physical therapy, and a long list of revised plans. Jack is no longer feeling independent; nor am I.

This is an interruption to my anticipated winter weeks, but I am struck by how lucky I am to be in a position where I can shift my attention away from my own work and play to caring for Jack. It's not uncommon for caretaking of this sort to present challenges and those challenges are not absent in this household. Jack is stoic, heroic, and determined to "do it himself." I channel my mother who treated me like royalty when I was ill or hurt; she was my lady-in-waiting. Like her, I am now consumed with fluffing pillows, carrying trays of food, dispensing medications,

assisting movement from bed to bath, carrying the desired objects-of-the-moment to and fro, and chauffeuring to various appointments. Since this is a repeat performance for us, we have been able to reflect on how we coordinate our caretaking and cared-for identities.

I find that this unusual (but unfortunately not completely unfamiliar) situation provides a unique opportunity to both practice and reflect on our relational being. Most of us take for granted our preoccupation with our own schedules and our own needs. And thus, it is in moments like this that we are invited to realize that our self-attention is only achieved in relation with others. Because we can depend on those with whom we work and live to engage in the well worked out rituals of our lives, we are free to unquestioningly pursue our own agendas. Yet, when complete independence and autonomy are just not possible, we are invited to remember how, even in our fully functioning and healthy states, we need each other to move through a day, a week, a year, a life. It would be quite easy for me to be inwardly seething, blaming Jack for putting himself in such danger, chaining me to home – taking me away from my work and other adventures. Instead, I find myself mostly happy each day for the ability to focus my attentions here, to sit quietly for hours in doctors' offices and hospital rooms. (I have now caught up on an entire year of popular magazines and that helps me feel a little bit more like a "normal" person – something that would never have happened under "ordinary" circumstances!) And for Jack, his surrender to dependency has shown him the interdependence that has always been present. Neither one of us is focusing on what the other does or does not do *for* each other, nor are we focused on our state of dependence or independence. Instead, we are reflecting on how we might best allow ordinary moments – those free of injury and illness – to stand as constant reminders of our relational existence. Whether our preferred performances are those of independence or dependence, we can not achieve either alone and it is refreshing to be reminded of the malleable aspect of our identities and relations.