

# Don't Find Yourself, Overcome Yourself

Selves are not found; they are created.

That's the perennially valid message of some ancient Chinese philosophers, according to the new book [\*The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life\*](#), by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, a journalist with a PhD in East Asian history who studied under Puett. ?

Puett, a Professor of Chinese History, summarized his message in an article on LinkedIn with the provocative title: "[The Importance of Breaking Free of ... Yourself.](#)"

It's provocative because it runs against modern culture's conventional wisdom, which teaches we must be "true to our self." It's our duty to discover something within us and to express it, hence the shopworn advice to young people: "find yourself" and "discover your passion."

But what if human growth and maturation has far less to do with unearthing, displaying, and indulging one's "true self" than in transcending oneself—i.e., becoming more than what one is? What if one's true self is not what one is at any given time, but an open-ended project of becoming more? What if real liberation comes not from shedding the shackles of convention and tradition, but from identifying the things inside us that impede growth?

Puett claims to have extracted that thesis from various ancient Chinese thinkers, including Confucius, Mencius, Zhuangzi. Why is this liberation necessary? Puett explains:

*"...we are messy creatures, full of contradictions and anxieties, petty jealousies, complicated feelings, ambitions,*

*hopes, longings, and fears. Not only that, they saw us each of us bumping up against other messy creatures all day long."*

This causes us to develop reactive "patterns" of behavior. These patterns are often negative; they box us in and perpetuate unhelpful cycles of interaction. They need to be overcome. This can be done in part through what Puett calls "rituals."

*"When you pass a friend on the street and smile and say hi as if you weren't just stressing over a bad exam grade you got, you're engaging in an as-if ritual. When you're tempted to roll your eyes over something your annoying cousin said, but instead respond as if what she said was insightful, you're engaging in an as-if ritual..."*

*...Confucius saw value in such rituals –?if we do them ritually, and not rote –precisely because they go against your authentic, true feelings and thus have the potential to allow you to become a different, and a better, person for a brief moment..."*

More broadly, if humans are seeking growth, they should pursue more than that which they love and enjoy. In fact, Puett says, they should seek out experiences and ideas that may not interest them at all. This will expand one's perspective and result in a life experience that is richer, more well-rounded, and fulfilling, he argues.

Such advice isn't just for those who like Eastern philosophy. It can be appreciated in purely Western terms. Wouldn't you agree?