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Finally, Just One of the Gang

Lin, our teacher, showed us the 1997 video with 10,000 white clad Chinese, perfectly aligned in rows in Teneman Square. It was shot from above to encompass the vast landscape of people, but the effect was like photos of Arlington Cemetery, with its rows of white crosses, aligned into infinity somewhere off the screen. Then the people began to move; all 10,000 in unison, smoothly flowing through the government prescribed Tai Chi routine. It was only our second Tai Chi lesson at PEM, and the class was riveted to the screen.

This was a cultural phenomenon; unlike anything I can compare it to in our country. True, we often have 10,000 people gathered at once for an athletic event, but they are usually yelling, eating hot dogs and drinking beer. According to Lin, the Chinese government mandated that its people learn this set of twenty moves and practice them daily for health. It even had special music composed for the routine and it's unlike anything you would ever hear in one of our stadiums. It's intended for relaxation, rather than rivalry. There was no one yelling and there wasn't a beer in sight.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a devotee of free enterprise and individualism, but there was something fascinating about this. I considered how I would feel, having those sort of health decisions made for me by the government, and I must admit, there is something comforting about the idea of participating in a mass health movement (not to be confused with Mass. Health, which is virtually useless.) The Chinese Tai Chi regimen requires the cooperation of society and willingness to follow and do what is best for society.

Although here we are a renegade bunch (just read the papers, where someone or other is always running amok), I know we are loosely capable of societal cooperation. Just look at the traffic laws. We mostly participate for the common good, and usually stop for red lights, drive on the right side of the road, and sometimes even brake for pedestrians. There is a trust involved and in order to drive without totally freaking out, we have the expectation that other drivers are also cooperative members of society. See? We can cooperate out of a fear of becoming a quadriplegic or worse, or even just getting caught and fined. Still, we are capable of getting along. The state has mandated its rules and we have accepted them, but it also makes me wonder if you can get a ticket in China, for failing to do your Tai Chi.

Imagine if our government prescribed exercise as well. It was enough of an outrage when it banned smoking in restaurants! In this country, where obesity is a national health crisis and raising insurance rates for all, we have a McDonalds handy every mile and far too many fluorescent orange *Cheeto* bags on the grocery shelf. Anyway, the point is that we accept traffic laws for the good of society, but health? Forget about it. Keeping ourselves healthy for good of society? Are you kidding me?

We're much too individualistic to even entertain such an idea. "My sickness is *my* sickness, thank you very much." Truth is, we all affect each other by contagion, bad temper, or rising of health insurance rates. If we can't stay healthy for ourselves, maybe the idea of keep ourselves healthy for those around is, isn't such a bad idea.

I've never been a joiner or a group person. It doesn't take me long to figure out the politics and quit, but I admit that I liked being in the class, part of something larger than myself, where my behavior was predetermined. For an hour at least, I didn't have to think about who I was. I know. I'm part of the human race and a member of society, just doing my part.