

The Road Not Taken

*A Small Group Ministry covenant group topic
at the River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Candle Lighting and Opening Words: The Road Not Taken By Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Check in:

What you share may be about your physical or spiritual health, cares or concerns for loved ones, issues you are facing.

Focus:

“Frost’s poem turns this expectation on its head. Most readers consider “The Road Not Taken” to be a paean to triumphant self-assertion (“I took the one less traveled by”), but the literal meaning of the poem’s own lines seems completely at odds with this interpretation.

“The poem’s speaker tells us he “shall be telling,” at some point in the future, of how he took the road less traveled by, yet he has already admitted that the two paths “equally lay / In leaves” and “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” So the road he will later call less traveled is actually the road *equally* traveled. The two roads are interchangeable.

“According to this reading, then, the speaker will be claiming “ages and ages hence” that his decision made “all the difference” only because this is the kind of claim we make when we want to comfort or blame ourselves by assuming that our current position is the product of our own choices (as opposed to what was chosen for us or allotted to us by chance).” -- David Orr,

“The Most Misread Poem in America”, The Paris Review

Readings:

Is the one that got away real? Am I opening up the proverbial can of worms by delving into this topic while I am in a happy and healthy relationship? This cinematic hyperbole does little more than encourage poor, starry-eyed saps to assign more value to a relationship than it deserves. Those that get away will always be remembered as somewhat larger than life.

“Our memories of the past give meaning to our present and our future. If the feelings associated with a particular memory are enjoyable, then our brains are drawn back to visit that memory over and over again. Such is often the case with the one that got away.”--Jodi C. De Luca, a Colorado based Clinical Psychologist

“Though this cognitive bias can be positive, if helps to build self-esteem, when you inaccurately recall behavior as overwhelming positive, it can result in distorted recollections of the relationship. These biased memories tend to become more positive over time, as you likely don’t recall the end of the relationship and focus on the neutral and positive elements as time passes.” –Dr. Jess O’Reilly, Sexologist

What about a past decision on a career opportunity? “Having options is great! However, there's also a lot of pressure trying to decide which option is best. You have to decide what factors are most important to you in a new job; This operates on two levels – on a rational level and on an emotional, "gut" level. You'll only truly be happy with your decision if these are aligned. Does the department / organization have a distinct culture? How well do you think you'll fit in? How are conflicts resolved? How do people work together? How do people dress? What things constitute ‘doing a great job’?” -- By the “Mind Tools Content Team” Online.

What about a past opportunity to move to a new location? A move of more than 50 miles likely severs local social ties. “For many people, this could be an exciting time in your life or an overwhelming one. Regardless of your age or gender, or whether you’re single, in a relationship, or married, picking a new place to call home is an important decision for everyone. Here are some factors to keep in mind when choosing where to move: Cost of Living, Size of the City, Housing, Traffic, Schools, Health, Safety, Job Prospects, Entertainment and Social Scene.” -- InvitationHomes.com Online.

“Finding things that are lost, getting the win, fixing what was broken, the one who got away can be a very distracting spot in the direction our life is heading, because they can be all those things, In an ideal world, we’d learn and grow to move past these perceived errors.” –Kevon Owen, Clinical Psychologist.

Discussion:

Do you have a Road Not Taken with which you concern yourself?

Was there a career choice that you turned down that you still think about?

Was there an opportunity to move out of town that you turned down?

Do you have some sort of (maybe unknown) internal compass that steers you back to the same course?

Closing Words:

“You couldn't relive your life, skipping the awful parts, without losing what made it worthwhile. You have to accept it as a whole--like the world, or the person you loved.”
— Stewart O’Nan, The Odds: A Love Story