

Two Roads Diverged
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Reading – “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.

Sermon

The metaphor of the road or path or journey as representing how we move through our lives, our lives’ blend of choice and chance, is an old one. Today we revisit that metaphor through Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.”

How many of you have ever been lost in the woods? Well, I have too. And I think I may have sheepishly shared some of my getting lost stories before.

There was the time in Berkeley. Not exactly wilderness; indeed, from the open fields on one side of what looked to be a modest stand of woods I could see homes on the ridge beyond. But the trails in those woods were enough of a maze that I found myself twisting and turning, returning to the same place more than once, twice, three times... for what seemed like an hour yet may only have been ten or twenty minutes... until I finally happened upon a straight path up and out. (Only to discover painfully a day later that I had been running not only through woods, but through plenty of poison oak.)

And then there was the time in the White Mountains. Beginning in Jackson, New Hampshire on an intended woodsy loop, a beautiful autumn morning, I missed a turn somewhere, or took a turn I hadn’t meant to... and after what was hours this time, came out the other side... a stone’s throw from Maine.

In short, the road less traveled by is sometimes a road on which you get lost.

Of course, Robert Frost both was and wasn’t talking about a walk in the woods. His poems are always to be read for multiple layers of meaning.

And this one he called his one of his “tricky” poems. One commentator, William Pritchard, describes this as an instance in which Frost sounds noble on first reading, but is actually more mischievous than noble. (Thanks to Ding.)

To begin with, on one level the poem was simply meant as a gentle gibe in the direction of his friend, the English poet Edward Thomas. During the years Frost and his wife Elinor and their three children lived in England, Frost and Thomas would often go on long walks in the woods. Thomas, apparently sometimes to Frost’s exasperation, would frequently agonize over which path to take at a crossroads.

So, inspired (in a manner of speaking) by his friend, Frost wrote this poem, with its several ambiguities. For it is not by any means as straightforward as we might vaguely remember from a reading years ago. It is not just a simple heroic recommendation to take the road less traveled. Indeed, were it such, it would be a lesser poem. (That said, one can look at Frost’s life and find other possible biographical roots of this poem; we observe that at many turnings he did indeed take roads we might consider to be “less traveled” – dropping out of college, living in England with his young family, to give just two examples.)

In any case, with all this as background and introduction, let us travel the poem.

The first stanza (which is only the beginning of a long first of just four sentences in the poem):

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;

We can easily picture this divergence of one path or road into two. We can imagine as well, standing on the spot where they diverge and looking down one of the paths, looking as far as the next bend. Maybe most of us have had precisely this experience.

And we also know, don’t we, that desire to travel both roads “And be one traveler.” We know this of course not only when it comes to a walk in the woods. We know it when it comes to our lives. And we know the feelings evoked by choices we realize may well be irrevocable... and this leads us to the rest of the poem.

So, the next stanza and a half – to complete that first sentence:

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.

Interesting to me is that the poet takes the other path without looking down it as he had the first (at least we are not told that he did). So it seems like a contrarian whim rather than a considered choice. Now, at first he does try to justify his choice, telling us that this other road had “perhaps the better claim / Because it was grassy and wanted wear;” but as soon as those words are out... he takes them back: “Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same...”

So we see that his decision is not so much contrarian as simply arbitrary – a whim indeed. What are we to make of that? Is this how we make decisions at the crossroads of our lives? Even though we might justify our decisions to ourselves in lofty rhetoric or in conclusions reached through lists of pros and cons on yellow legal pads? (And what sense is there anyway to taking a path just because it is less worn, less traveled?)

Okay, then. On to the rest of the third stanza:

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Well, we know that thought too. “I can always come back,” we tell ourselves. Yet why the exclamation point? As if we protest too much, knowing already that we most likely will not or cannot come back...

As the next two lines confirm:

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

We all know this too – whether on a walk in the woods or on the paths of our lives. One thing does lead to another. You can only go to one college (well, some may transfer once or twice, but there is a limit; others may not go at all) and that choice leads to others – having to do with the friends you make, the courses you take, even the geographical setting. How many young people, thinking they would just like to be in California or the Midwest or the South for a few years... end up spending the rest of their lives hundreds or thousands of miles from their home town? Way does indeed lead to way.

And on it goes through our lives. Not that we can't and don't change directions along the way; but we really can't start over again altogether, we can never know how our lives would have been different had we chosen a different school or a different course of study or a different first job or a different first place to live away from the home of our upbringing. This is just the nature of life.

Which is the subject of the final stanza:

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.

An iconic passage in American poetry; but ironic as well as iconic. For if you hadn't read the first part of the poem, you could easily infer that the poet had indeed courageously taken the road “less traveled by.” But as we've heard, he earlier admitted to us that both paths actually were worn about the same! What is going on here?

Well, first we have the “sigh.” We know that “sigh” too. And the sigh informs the final lines. What kind of difference did taking that road (or imagining that he had taken that road, or choosing to tell others that he had taken the road less traveled by) make? For good or for ill? Or is it no more than a kind of cosmic sigh, connecting us back to that first impossible desire to travel two roads and be one traveler? Is it a sigh of regret or a sigh of gratitude? Or maybe somehow both?

As for me, to offer just one example, I am sometimes *curious*, as to how my life might have unfolded if I had persisted in getting a visa to move to Taiwan for a year just after college and teach English. Instead, I let it go and stayed home, worked in a hospital, eventually moved to Boston... well, lived the rest of *this* life.

Perhaps it would have been a good and interesting life that evolved from taking that other path. But I know for a fact that the path I *did choose* has been a good and interesting one. Here I am after all – with good work and a family I love beyond words.

And was the path I *did* take the road “less traveled by” or more traveled by? Well, it occurs to me that when it comes to life (and not just paths in the woods), the path we walk is only *our* path, no one else’s path, and so in one way is always less traveled – it is traveled only by us! Maybe that is part of Frost’s mischievous irony too, an irony which might release us from too many “might have beens.”

Another level of reflection, which may or may not have anything to do with Frost’s intentions. And this is okay – at a certain point we can leave the poet and the poem mostly behind.

In any case, as I’ve been pondering the poem over the past few weeks, it has occurred to me that the world’s religious traditions don’t actually offer much guidance when it comes to making the mundane (even though to us really important) decisions of our lives: career, relationships, where to live, and so on.

Now maybe that’s just because the traditions are really old, and evolved during a time when people didn’t have much choice about such things. You did more or less what your parents did, you lived your life where you had been born, and that was that.

Or... maybe it’s because important though the mundane decisions are to us – and they are important, they do matter – even so, they may not be the *most* important decisions we make.

For at the heart of the great traditions: whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian... were and are questions not about career and relationship, but having to do with a deeper journey, with what we could call the journey of the soul.

The traditions ask questions about a different kind of divergence of roads in the wood, questions – each in their own religious language – that resolve to one question: How will we live?

According to the Tao, the deep way of nature; or according to the world of power and position, fame and fortune?

According to the soul’s knowledge of high and compassionate ethical principles and ideals; or according to the rule of me and mine and expedient measures of ends justifying means?

According to the belief that we are each separate and by nature only selfish beings; or according to the realization that we are part of an interdependent web of life and love?

And we would do well to remember that way leads to way on this spiritual and ethical journey too. We develop habits of the heart each time we answer with our choices and with our lives these kinds of ethical questions, spiritual questions, soul questions.

In the end, then, may we not despair as we face choices at the various crossroads of our lives – whether choices about the more mundane parts of our lives or the more spiritual dimensions of our lives. For though we *cannot* be one traveler on two or more roads at the same time, we can choose to be *wholeheartedly* one traveler on the *one* road we choose or on which we find ourselves... and then on the next, and the next; not allowing ourselves to become mired for long in sighing regrets over roads taken or not taken; rather embracing the roads and choices *still before us*.

Knowing this, then, whatever choice we face at one or another divergence or crossroads – it may be at least as important to look deeply within ourselves as it is to look as far down the path as we can see; to pay as much attention to our heart’s leading, to the leading of our passions and gifts and our conscience, than to where we imagine a particular choice might lead.

That, it seems to me, is what may indeed make all the difference.

Jungian counselor Helen Luke once told the story of a woman who had a dream in which she was on a streetcar heading toward a crossroads. Suddenly the power shut down. The woman despaired of reaching the crossroads. Then the streetcar jumped the tracks, reached the crossroads, and the woman got off and headed in a new direction.

Helen Luke tells us that the woman reported that from that time forward “her life was completely changed” – she went her own way: “Whenever she tried to go on established ‘rails,’ nothing would work out until again she found her own individual way.”

May we each, then, find and embrace our own unique way on the journeys of our lives, of our souls. And if we get lost from time to time, may we find our way again, perhaps even come to realize that being lost may have been a valuable part of our journey too. It led us, after all, to where we *are* and to where we might yet be. A later Frost poem, “Directive,” includes the intriguing phrase “...if you’re lost enough to find yourself / By now...” And commentator John Elder, reflecting on this, writes “Where you think you’re going is your destination, but your destiny is where you find yourself.”

So may it be.

Benediction

And now we resume our walking our separate roads...
Yet may we know that our paths intertwine...
That even when it seems we walk alone, we are not alone...
 We hold one another in our hearts,
 and the Spirit of Life embraces us all
 wherever we go.

So may it be.