

Lessons from the Road Not Taken
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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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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.*

This month's worship theme is thresholds - in our case, the places we find ourselves when we are caught between what has passed and what is becoming in our lives, then and soon-to-be. Threshold moments can feel a bit like hanging in mid-air, having let go of one reality and now waiting for the new reality to appear.

Robert Frost's poem recalls a threshold decision he once made, and a reflection on the impact of that choice that "has made all the difference." While all of us, I believe, can relate to the experience of finding ourselves at a crossroads where we must choose and move forward, my experience with UUs leads me to believe that we often have a special affinity with opting for "the road less traveled by."

For example, most of us have "come out" of other religious faiths and traditions. If we'd stayed the trodden path, we would still be in our main-line Protestant churches, or attending

Catholic mass, going to synagogue on Saturday or maybe going to brunch with friends on Sunday morning.

Think back, for a moment, about the times you identify in your life as being "threshold moments" - times when you were faced with a choice, one perhaps fairly typical versus one into the unknown or untried.

These choice moments certainly can embrace both the dramatic and the mundane. After all, each day we make hundreds of choices about how we will spend our time, invest our energy, and focus our attention. It is usually the dramatic choices that stay with us in our memories over time. I mean, do you know what choice you made for breakfast on the day you turned sixteen? Probably not, but I bet you remember if you got your driver's license that day, or had a big party with all your friends, or got to have your favorite cake to celebrate.

Often, it isn't until we have lived years beyond a choice that we recognize what a threshold it was. During one six-month period during my 25th year, I became engaged to a man from Winnipeg (I was in the States at that time), applied to move to Canada, moved into a new apartment, changed my job, ended my engagement, and grieved my father's death, and, not surprisingly, perhaps, started therapy!

That tumultuous year marked a turning point in my life that contributed to becoming the woman I am today. Of course, like most of you, I've had more than one threshold that I've crossed during my lifetime. They may be small or large, explosive or quiet, experienced with others or a private realignment, but all thresholds lead us to make choices that ultimately impact our lives.

Just like individuals, communities, countries, groups, and congregations experience thresholds, as well. This congregation has literally crossed a new threshold in the last month, entering a new sanctuary and church home in a new neighbourhood and incorporating a new minister in the coming months. It would be logical to see this time as one of opportunity for growth and change, exploring possibilities not available at another time or in another location.

To the extent we can, individually and collectively, open ourselves to the possibilities of the new or innovative, to choose the "road less traveled", we create space for growth, for options, for creativity, for surprise. One of the challenges in times of transition can be loosening our tight grip on the past - to the way we've done things, how we've organized things and people, thought about ourselves and our institutions, to our attachments, to our expectations framed in terms of the past, to the stories we tell ourselves about who we are what we have become.

We live our lives and remember our days in the stories we create and tell ourselves and others over the years. What is it we chose to share - stories of obstacles successfully overcome? Of blessings and miracles that came our way? Of the ways in which we have been hurt or victimized again and again? Of our mistakes and regrets, problems and challenges?

It can be freeing to remember that what we tell ourselves, especially about our past experiences, is a story, only a story, because what happened then is not happening now. Imagine if I had opted to cling to the story of my 25th year, my losses and hurts, regrets and

pain. If I had honed that story like a fine work of art that I wanted to share with everyone and share my sorrow.

I would have closed myself off from the wonderful future opportunities before me, missed the call of new friends, new places, new work, new love. In the words of Marc Chernoff, a life coach who writes a blog with his wife, Angel, called Hack Life, "you can have a heartbreaking story from the past without letting it dominate your present."

You don't have to let your past inhibit you from living fully in this moment, to keep you a victim of old hurts. We can live through and learn from our stories, forgive ourselves and others, and enjoy the peace and freedom that results of not victimizing ourselves any more.

These are lessons for us as individuals and us as part of a congregation. Every church has its ups and downs, its proud moments and uncomfortable secrets. Each of these remembered can evoke strong emotions, like shame or regret, but those emotions don't have to determine the options or choices we allow ourselves in the now. Seem impossible?

It's not really, when you realize there's fundamentally nothing from the past you need to cling to, because it is not what is happening now. There may be memories you choose to hold on to, of course - happy times, favorite experiences, fond friendships, successes or triumphs. Perhaps we cling to our hurts as a way of protecting ourselves, to keep feeding our suffering, or because we have never learned any strategies to move beyond the past.

More wisdom from Marc Chernoff - "But the past is no longer here. Things around us are changing, fluid, and impermanent. Your stories of the past are just that - stories. If there is something difficult that you are desperately trying to hold on to with anger, shame, pain, or regret, how is that affecting you in the present?" You are likely missing out on a sense of freedom and peace that is awaiting your decision to invite it into your life. In service to a happier, more peaceful existence, it's time to let it go and create the opportunity for freedom, gratitude, and forgiveness to enter your life.

Choosing to hold on to our past stories with resentment, anger, and pain is a way of centering our sense of victimhood. This kind of self-centered thinking only fuels our misery. We lose sight of the fact that everyone has their stories of their lives, experiences, reactions, and reality.

How can we start to move out of these kinds of thinking patterns? Chernoff says that practicing compassion for others, embracing our past and learning to breathe through our emotional reactions, and expressing gratitude are three of the most effective strategies.

Compassion for others and ourselves:

When we relinquish thinking of ourselves as the center of the world's suffering, we then see and acknowledge the breadth of human experiences around us. The others that suffer, who have been forgotten, disappointed, wronged, or hurt. We remember that we fundamentally at one with others, that we all have needs, wants, dreams, and hopes. Reconnecting with our own humanity, and the humanity of our fellow creatures, connects us to our compassion for ourselves and others.

Embracing our past and breathing through our emotional reactions:

Whatever has happened, whatever our story about our past experiences, it is never too late to discern ways we can find compassion for ourselves. When emotions arise, we can quit running away from them and focus on breathing our way through experiencing and then releasing them. When we breathe in grief, we can breathe out peace. We breathe in anger and breathe out forgiveness. If we breathe in regret, we can breathe out gratitude.

Expressing gratitude:

No matter how dark the moment, there is always something for which can be grateful. When we shift our focus from past hurts to current blessings, we can be thankful in the moment for the good parts of life we are experiencing right now. Life is good and it feels good to appreciate and remember that fact, even when all around us seems like chaos.

We all face thresholds in our lives - singly and in association with others - where, like Frost, we have options for choice. These moments of choice are filled with possibility. Whether for yourself or your community, I hope you choose the option(s) that support you in creating the world you want to live in, the love that you want to embrace and share, and the peace of a life lived from gratitude, grace, and generosity.

As thresholds appear, may we follow the example of Howard Thurman, "In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading Presence of God, my heart whispers: keep before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in fair weather or in foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may not forget that to which my life is committed. Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve."