



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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ROADS TAKEN AND NOT

A teenager peers across the cafeteria for the umpteenth time to catch a glimpse of the dark-eyed girl that just joined his Physics class. She's new to the school and probably doesn't have a date for the prom, but he's always been shy. He looks down again at his boring lunch, but then some new gear inside him drives him all the way across the room to interrupt her conversation and invite her to the dance. Shortly after, but only when he's almost to the Library, does he truly get that she said yes, and he thinks, "Maybe I'm not shy after all."

A nurse pops into the liquor store to pick up some wine after a long shift. As she approaches the check-out, she sees the man who left her two years ago, saying, of all crazy things, that she drinks too much. She starts to hide the bottle behind her back, but he finishes paying and leaves without seeing her. She suddenly finds herself at the counter, but now with a 40 ounce of J&B instead of wine. Her body feels as though it's falling through clouds and gaining speed, but her hands make the payment. She can't wait to get home.

A woman is on a flight to Europe after a visit home to Kamloops for her twentieth high school reunion. She strikes up a conversation with the college student sitting beside her. He is bucking the trend among his classmates and going to Paris for Spring Break instead of Florida. She tells him about how she waited tables for a year in Germany after college, and now writes policy for the World Health Organization in Geneva. She smiles, noticing a tiny light flick on in his eyes as he starts to consider a whole new world of possibility.

These stories mark points on the road of each character in them. The teenager takes a chance he'd normally avoid, and it just might change his character. The nurse refuses to face what is obvious to those around her; unlike her ex-boyfriend, she fails to make a healthy decision. The woman on the plane made an early choice that helped her make a difference in the world; her satisfaction prompts her to plant a seed in the mind of someone she identifies with. What will happen to the seed we don't know.

The title of this sermon is clearly inspired by the Robert Frost poem that so many of us associate with the topic of roads taken and decisions made. "The road less traveled" has become a famous phrase, although it's not a direct quote from the poem. It is a wonderful image of choice and individuality, and has been especially powerful for many of us Unitarian Universalists; quite a few of us who

sought out such a place, even some of us who were born into this congregation, see ourselves as consciously parting ways with the majority. Certainly that's part of my self-image; what began in my perception as being set apart from others *by* others later became a sense of pride that I did it my way. And I did do it my way, but I didn't do it all by myself!

To me, readers overemphasize the allure of the 'less traveled road', especially considering Frost also says that it is only *slightly* less worn than the other route. It's not a twisting, rocky path between two infinite precipices; it's just a road in the woods that's a little quicker, say, for most people. My problem with this is that it diminishes the value of taking the well-worn road, which many of us choose to do or must do; it is not for anyone to assume that this is a lesser choice. Also, I fear Frost overstates himself, claiming that his choice makes "*all* the difference." Surely, if the poem is about choice, than *whatever* we choose makes a difference, no choice making *all* the difference. Rare choices make a whole bunch of difference, but unless you choose to kill yourself, which would I admit make *all* the difference from then on – unless you're a Hindu or Buddhist or a believer in reincarnation, but I'm straying from my point. What makes the difference is *all* our decisions.

There's a personal awareness exercise that probably most of us have done and found useful at some point in our lives. We draw a straight line across a page and mark on it our big memorable moments: events that have happened, or decisions we've made. When I began to think about decisions, about 'roads: taken and not', I started to picture such an exercise in which we *also* map out some of the alternate paths our lives could have taken, if we had... well, fill in the blank. Chosen a different university? Accepted an unexpected invitation? Taken dance lessons? Those are all decisions I faced at some point in the past that I now realize have had life-long implications. Think for a moment about what choices there are on your own list which, looking back, you realize set a course for the rest of your life.

Just like the lines on the palms of our hands, a true life-line is never straight. Instead, a fully fleshed out life looks more like a winding and splitting path. Many of our maps would look pretty loopy: *omigoodness, I've made that old mistake again! What I wouldn't give to make a brand new mistake!* Our drawings would look more like the trail we make when we're lost in the woods, and, only on the third pass by an odd-shaped tree, realize that we're going in circles! And none of us have just one stream of life at any time. We have families, careers, favorite pastimes; we have the church. We have parallel goals, or conflicting ones; multiple demands drawing us on.

And, unlike the exercise, which intentionally focuses our eyes on progress we've made, an accurate map would make us think also about parts of ourselves that we left behind. Although in *theory*, it's helpful to see life as moving us inexorably forward towards some future fulfillment, life doesn't often *feel* that

way. Truer maps would reveal our regrets and unfulfilled hopes as dead end offshoots of the main path; directions we had hoped to go, but which just ended. Perhaps we injured a knee, or a heart. Or talked ourselves out of an option that seemed impractical. Or let a whim end a friendship. Such maps would uncover pain that we like to think is behind us or dreams that we thought we'd given up. The payoff of maps like these is that they point us toward what we might really need or want to do *now*.

Let's not forget that some of our maps seem at times to be infuriating mazes or wicked puzzles set out for us to solve. Carl Jung talks about the Shadow within each personality that may have its own version of our path. The Shadow is a part of us denied or suppressed and can be destructive, but isn't always. It can contain power and energy not available through our conscious will. Our Shadow road can threaten to divert us entirely, but it also might lead us to buried treasure hidden inside.

A deeply honest map would show the dotted lines of what I'll call nightmare roads; these are routes we somehow escaped but may not be fully safe from. An example comes from addiction theory, which holds that the addictive process continues to trace a vestigial path even once recovery is underway. Those who relapse can go frighteningly quickly from one little slip to the old pattern that was the problem before and, the scary part, even further down to where they would have been if they'd not been in recovery at all. A force like addiction can trace a nightmare road beside our life-line, but knowing this underscores the presence of the dormant disease, the need to fully commit to recovery and the importance of gratitude for what blesses and saves us. Other such traumas can linger on like a dark temptation: *today, I feel like just staying in and shutting all my blinds for a whole day like I used to when I was depressed. It seems so attractive right now, but... no, that really stopped working long ago, and I've got those notes to write for the workshop. Better get up!*

This subject of roads and life-lines brings us to the fate-freedom dichotomy that our reading from Rumi talks about. The mainstream thinking in Unitarian Universalism holds that we are simply free: many, but not all of us have rejected the idea that a supernatural power exerts influence on us or our lives, whether we label such power Fate in the Classical Greek sense, or use the religious concept of God. In one way, this idea is truly freeing, handing us the reins of our own wagons to direct towards any point on the horizon that we feel is right. But, in another sense, we are also *fated* to be free; this is a phrase from James Luther Adams, the Unitarian theologian that I referred to just last week. He, like the Existentialists, talks of how human beings are unavoidably free; even when we don't want to, we *must* take responsibility for what we do. A decision avoided is a decision *made*. An act denied is no less a part of our history.

Do you remember Flip Wilson? He had the funniest show on television back in the 60s or 70s; his most famous character was Geraldine, who'd come

home to find her husband unhappy that she had spent *more* money shopping. Geraldine's famous line was, "The devil made me buy this dress!" In our Unitarian Universalist world we don't have a devil to blame for anything we do unwisely, impulsively or even with malice, and I'm glad we don't – sort of.

I say 'sort of' because in my mind and heart and soul, it's unsatisfying to think that every moment of life is a product of conscious choice, or unconscious choice, for that matter. Some people boil down the idea of fate to genetic and environmental determination or the workings of the unconscious mind. It's not that I don't see an awesome power in these realities, or find fascinating the mysteries beyond number in the natural world that we have yet to solve; I just don't find complete *nourishment* from these ideas. I suppose there's a calculable probability for the time when a friend from seminary was lost in the Chicago subway system at rush hour, and just happened upon the one person from our school that was coming home from his job way out in the suburbs through that exact station at that very moment. She thought of it as chance or luck, while I want to see grace at work in such coincidences: the gentle, persistent suggestions of grace that bend our attention ever so little at the exact moment to turn at the perfect angle towards what guides us to our truest home.

I hope that it makes it easier for those here who outright reject anything that isn't part of the natural world that I say "I *want* to see grace at work" in this world. I *like* a worldview that includes grace, but I don't know if grace exists or if it is only a comforting interpretation of events. Certainly, most of the time what I call grace comes into people's lives through being helped by another person, even if that person doesn't know that she's helping. And I see grace as different from luck; can I put it this way? When we experience luck we might feel happy or relieved, while a moment of grace might make us feel *understood* or *accompanied* in some subtle way.

I want to tell you another story like those that I opened with today, but this time it's a true one. While I was serving in Dallas, there was a 16 year old youth who gave me permission to say a bit about his story when I needed to. The Religious Education leaders there, as well as his fellow youth, saw over the years that this young man led by quiet example. For instance, he decided to grow his hair to the waist, and I'm told it was gorgeous, thick hair most women would die for; then he had it cut off and donated to Locks of Love, the organization that makes wigs for people with cancer. His sister joined him in doing this, as did a number of the youth in that church, some growing and donating their hair over and over again. While I was there, this young man was struggling with a rare neurological condition for almost the whole year; he was admitted several times, lost school time and was separated from friends. He's a brainy guy, and saw the irony that it was his brain that threatened him. In the homily that he sent for a friend to read on his behalf on Youth Sunday, he wrote,

“It is with great clarity that I am developing an essential understanding that life isn’t always fair, it is how we work with what we are given that teaches us how to live. Clearly, without the heart, the brain has nothing to rely on... . The plans that we make in life aren’t always the direction we continue on. Sometimes life shows us that we have a bigger plan, a greater journey and we become significantly stronger within this new path.”

He was sixteen. Years. Old.

The roads we are on are part of “a bigger plan, a greater journey,” Whoever or whatever is the mapmaker; whether the route resembles a path in the woods or a trail through the jungle, an arrow straight highway, a confusing maze or an ancient map to buried treasure. Even if we make our own maps, often we find later on that there was a wisdom in an earlier choice that we had no idea of at that time.

I will leave you with a final image. When we watch on film a race, like the marathon, we are shown camera positions from different points of view: from a moving camera riding alongside the runner, or from a high camera watching as everyone turns a corner, or even an aerial camera looking down on the whole route. Yet when we run our own race, we are stuck in the view to which our tired, sweating bodies constrain us. Every so often, we must stop and imagine it all from an alternate view, especially trying to see the whole route: where we are, where we’ve been and what is the lay of the land. We can judge whether we’re still interested in the race, or whether that path off to the left looks more alluring. And, from up there, we get a clearer view of what might be drawing us forward and granting us our second wind.

Let us remember to take such moments, to gaze down upon the whole road. To get oriented, and re-oriented, and re-oriented again. The road is not a straight line for long, and it’s not the only one.