

**Roads Taken and Not Taken**  
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**Readings**

“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.

from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 1

The way you can go  
isn't the real way.  
The name you can say  
isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth  
begin in the unnamed:  
name's the mother  
of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanted soul  
sees what's hidden,  
and the ever-wanting soul  
sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,  
but different in name,  
whose identity is mystery.  
Mystery of all mysteries!  
The door to the hidden.

## Sermon

I have no idea if anyone has ever paired these two readings before, Frost's "The Road Not Taken" side by side with the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* – each with its own mysteries, the second which could be read almost as a commentary on the first... separated by only two dozen centuries or so. In any case, the theme roads taken, roads not taken, and the nature of roads and paths and ways... seems like an appropriate sort of reflection after the year we've been through.

Anyway... first a word about Robert Frost's poem. It carries a message that is straightforward... but only if not read with care, only *seeming* to lead to what can be read as the triumphal assertion by the narrator at the end of the poem that long ago he took the road less traveled and that made all the difference. It is, as we know, an assertion that appears on graduation cards and in untold numbers of commencement speeches and exhortations.

But... so many buts! I'll just mention two.

To begin with, note that though the poet suggests that one of the two diverging roads had...

...the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear...

... he then goes on to say that they were "worn really about the same." So did it make any difference whatsoever which road he took?

Well, somehow he does get away with saying at the end of the poem that he had taken "the one less traveled by." But how does he get away with that? Is he fooling himself or fooling us... or both?

Ah, but now notice this: In those final lines he is not reflecting on a choice made in the past; he is imagining what he might say "Somewhere ages and ages hence..." as he at that future time reflects on his choice at the crossroads what will then have been a long time ago.

The poet, in other words, is suggesting (more than suggesting once you pay attention to what the poem actually says) the ways in which we sometimes re-write (whether intentionally, consciously or not) our own personal history. Maybe because we want our lives and our decisions to have been for good reasons, and to have made good sense. But can we ever know for sure? Does the poem have an opinion, so to speak, on the matter?

Well, poetry critic David Orr has written an entire book about this poem, a beautiful book, exploring this question of just what we are left with in this poem filled with mysterious contradictions. Part of what I get from his book and from Frost's poem is that if nothing else, we are left with the complexity and mystery of our human decision-making: How much choice do we really have in our lives? And do the ways we retrospectively understand the choices we've made represent what actually happens at the various crossroads of our lives? Questions more than answers.

More on some of those questions in a moment. But first, what about that first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* – the first lines in particular. As we heard Ursula LeGuin translate those lines:

The way you can go  
isn't the real way.

Well! That seems to undercut entirely the exercise of trying to figure out what road to take at a crossroads. For whichever way you go, the text apparently says, is not the real way anyway.  
What then?! Where then? How then?

A couple of thoughts to begin to connect the two readings.

And though I have to say at the outset that I doubt that Robert Frost was thinking along these lines, this doesn't prevent me from this reflection:

So: How about if we understand those two roads at the beginning of the poem in two different ways? First would be the usual way, what the poem is most obviously about. That is, we find ourselves with a choice about a life path: Shall I go to this college or that college? Shall I pursue this career path or that one? Shall I stay where I am or move to the next town or across the country? And so on. We've all had such choices along the way. And when it comes to such choices about a life path or direction, in the end maybe the poem is saying that at least sometimes both alternatives actually might be okay – or could be once we commit to the path.

As I've shared with you before, one of the best pieces of life advice I ever received was in the midst of a career counselling session a long time ago. Sometimes, the psychologist said, a life choice is like a paddler at the head of the rapids who knows that there is more than one way that she could navigate the rapids successfully; and that the secret is to choose one of those ways... and make it "the right way" in the midst of plenty of circumstances of water and rock and wind over which you have no control.

It's not that there aren't really bad choices we could make; but that often we are confronted with more than one good way – whether at the head of the rapids or like the poet or like us in our lives – and once we've chosen which of those ways, we can make it right, leaving regrets behind. All this in the midst of plenty of life circumstances over which we have no control. And maybe *this* is what makes all the difference, not which road you chose, but the spirit with which you then go down that road.

Okay, but where does that mysterious line from the *Tao Te Ching* come in? Well, this leads to the second way we could understand Frost's two roads: If applied to "The Road Not Taken" the line from the *Tao Te Ching* comes in if we re-interpret those two roads not as two potential life paths, but as on the one hand an ordinary life path of family and work as one of those paths, and on the other hand and *at the same time* the other path as the sort of path on which you can't "go" in any usual sense, as Ursula LeGuin's translation has it – "The way you can go isn't the real way." (Other translations say something like "The *Tao* that can be named is not the eternal *Tao*.")

In other words, a path or road or way that is not a path or road or way in any ordinary sense, but apparently is at least as important if not more important than ordinary roads or paths or ways.

Frost near the outset of his poem wrote:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler...

But here's the thing: If we re-vision one of the roads as the ordinary one of deciding what to do and where to live and so on, and the other road as the sort of quest to align with the way, the *Tao* at the heart of life that no name can satisfactorily name, a way that is not a way in an ordinary, mundane sense... then we *can* take both roads at the same time.

Let me perhaps simplify (I hope!) all this and maybe get towards a conclusion by talking about my own life for a moment.

About half a life-time ago I had some significant decisions to make when it came to career (hence that career counselling session that the Unitarian Universalist Association made possible). To continue today's metaphor, at that moment of my life, there seemed to be roads diverging in a wood: Should I leave my work at Cambridge Forum and seek a settlement as a parish minister? Or not? And once that decision was made, which available churches should I consider – this one or that one or that other one? Well, you know how all that turned out, because fortunately (for me anyway) you were at that same time in the midst of making your own decisions as a congregation. So here we are all these years later!

Thirty-four years ago, we both, you and I, made choices as to which road to take, and once we made those choices and started down the road together, we made it as best we could a right road to have chosen. This was even though we each quite likely could have made other choices into right choices, right roads – like the paddler at the head of the rapids.

*And...* at the same time, I've been traveling (and perhaps many, if not most, of you have been traveling too, since this journey is at the heart of the spiritual enterprise)... traveling this other road that is not a road, this mysterious road on which you can't "go" in any ordinary sense, the way that can't be literally named satisfactorily or accurately. This road that has to do with coming to understand, even experience, who we truly are as human beings, which is more than, other than, separate beings making individual decisions purely seeking our own individual benefit.

And to be traveling *that* road – which might indeed be the road "less traveled by" – at the same time as we travel the roads of career and family and so on *does* make all the difference. It certainly has for me.

As I hope it has and does for each of you, traveling your roads of work and family and daily life even as you also travel the road of the spirit, the road we all share – here at Old Ship, here on this earth we share.

So that supporting and helping each other we might become – in spite of our shortcomings, failings, doubts, and worries – the best darn decent human beings we can be... since with the array of challenges we face, that's what the world needs now more than ever. It is good work

So may it be. Blessed be.