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How to Find Meaning in Life

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Today is the third day of a brand new year. 2021 has finally arrived. And the beginning of a new year is traditionally a time for reflection on the year that has passed, reevaluation of one's life from this new perspective, and recommitment in the form of new year's resolutions.

This time of discernment, which supports our making thoughtful choices about how best to move forward with our lives, reminds me of Robert Frost's (1874 - 1963) most famous—and also most widely misunderstood—poem, "The Road Not Taken." This is a fairly old poem, first published more than a century ago, and I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes exploring how Frost might have intended this poem to be interpreted, and how that intended meaning might be of help to us here at the beginning of 2021.

One of the problems with how this poem has come to be read is that the final three lines are often quoted in isolation.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

These lines have often been understood as a recommendation to take the so-called "road less traveled," which interpretation can lead—at a turning point in life—to a lot of anxiety *before* the choice: What if I choose the wrong path?

And after the choice has been made, it can also lead to a lot of *self-criticism*: beating yourself up for not choosing the other, better path that allegedly would have “made all the difference.”

But here’s the interesting thing: all that sort of anxiety, self-criticism, and worry about choosing precisely the right path (as if a single “one correct path” — whether for oneself or for everyone—even exists) was what Frost wanted to *minimize* with his poem, rather than invoke. To say more, let me give you give you a few key pieces of context, drawing from Katherine Robinson’s [guide to this poem](#).

First, “The Road Not Taken” was originally published in 1916 as a preface to his collection of poetry titled *Mountain Interval*, which means it was written and published in the middle of World War I, which spanned from 1914 to 1918.

The poem was also probably written specifically about Frost’s experiences of walking in the woods with his friend and fellow poet Edward Thomas (1878 - 1917), who had published a poem the year before titled “[Roads](#).” I’ll give you just a few excerpts of this longer poem:

I love roads...

Roads go on
While we forget, and are
Forgotten like a star
That shoots and is gone....

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring
To me or take from me,
They keep me company
With their pattering,

Frost likely would have had Thomas' poem "Roads" in mind when he wrote "The Road Not Taken" for Thomas.

Even more specifically, Frost might have had in mind the many times that he and Thomas had taken long walks together, because at the end of each walk, Thomas would almost invariably lament that it would have been better had they taken different forks that day than the ones they chose, since perhaps that different route would have led to more interesting views, better animal sightings, etc. But as Frost once wrote in a letter to Thomas, the somewhat harsh truth was that, "**No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another**" (Robinson). Frost was taking the risk of dropping some truth-bombs on his friend.

That quote perhaps reveals one of Frost's motivations in writing his famous poem, but you don't have to know this background if you read the poem closely. Although there is a lot more to say about this poem, I'll limit myself for now to three clues that can aid in interpreting the poem. I'm also glad to stipulate that there are many possible interpretations of this (or any) poem, and that discerning "authorial intent" is always tricky on multiple levels, but there are also a few interesting points about this poem that are often missed.

The first clue is the **title**. Many people misremember the title as "The Road Less Travelled," which is the title of psychologist Scott Peck's excellent book inspired by the concluding lines of Frost's poem. But Frost chose the much more haunting title "The Road Not Taken," putting the focus on alternative, less-conventional alternative choices. The typical interpretation of this poem would make more sense if the title were "The Road Less Traveled" or "The Choices That Make All the Difference."

But some critics nowadays interpret the title "The Road Not Taken" as a direct gibe at his friend Edward Thomas's self-undermining habit that, "No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another." Frost might have been trying to hold up a mirror for his friend to notice that his "grass is always greener" attitude was making him miserable no matter what choices he made.

A second intriguing clue comes in the middle, with a number of references as to how both roads finally seemed to the protagonist to be **essentially the same**:

- At the beginning of the second stanza, we read that the other path was "just as fair."

- And although the protagonist of the poem tries to determine which path fewer people had chosen, there is an admission at the end of that second stanza that “passing there... had worn them really about the same.”
- Then the third stanza observes that the two paths “both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.”
- And despite all those similarities—and there being no apparent major differences between the two paths—the protagonist says with a sigh in 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.

Notice the word “**sigh**” in the first line of the quoted stanza, which is so often left out when the conclusion of this poem is quoted in isolation. That sigh may indicate that the final segment is said with *resignation*.

A third and final clue comes at the end with the poem’s **final word** *difference*. Interestingly, “made all the difference” doesn’t specify better or worse. Especially when you notice that sigh at the beginning of the final stanza, it could even be that choosing “the road less traveled” made all the difference in missing out on what all the people got to see on the road more traveled by (Robinson).

Now, let me hasten to add that if these aspects of Frost’s poem did not occur to you previously, you are not alone. The first time I heard about it was when I was watching *Dead Poet’s Society* in college, during the scene when Robin Williams’ character quotes Robert Frost. One of my roommates (who was an English major) said, “**You know that Frost meant that line ironically.**” I wasn’t sure what he was even talking about at first, but when I started doing a little research, I quickly discovered that he was exactly right.

That being said, there’s a venerable tradition of missing the point that goes back to Frost reading the poem to a group of college students prior to its publication, when he realized that the poem had been “taken pretty seriously ... despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling.” Indeed, literary critic David Orr has

called this poem “**close to being reader-proof**” given the decades of readers who have misunderstood it (Robinson).

The most poignant misreading, however, was by Edward Thomas, the walking partner and fellow poet for whom Robert Frost had written the poem. As was Thomas's wont (given his indecisiveness) he had been struggling with whether to enlist as a soldier in World War I. Receiving Frost's poem in the mail was the final piece—among a constellation of factors—that made up his mind to enlist in a regiment of the British Army Reserve. Tragically “He was killed on the first day of the battle of Arras, Easter 1917; he had survived little more than two months in France” (Hollis). He was only thirty-nine years old.

That real-life ending to “The Road Not Traveled” is a reminder that the takeaway from this poem is certainly not that our choices don't matter. Yes, our choices can sometimes make all the difference. Sometimes we're in a toxic environment, and the grass really might be greener somewhere else. At other times, there is an issue we need to work out; otherwise, we'll just keep replicating the same dynamics wherever we go. As Frost said to his friend: “*No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another.*”

So even though there are a thousand inspirational posters that deceptively quote the concluding lines of this poem, I hope that exploring reminds us of its original intention: poking fun at our laughable attempts to create tolerable narratives around remembered events, and a gently chiding invitation to stop always telling the story of our choices with a sigh.

Again, don't get me wrong: there is value in learning from our past, including our mistakes or missteps. But the spirit of “The Road Not Traveled” has encouraged us to *turn down the volume* on our regrets. As Lily Tomlin once said, “Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.” And that includes forgiving ourselves.

And here we find ourselves: three days into the beginning of a new year. We can't change 2020 and all that came before. But which roads will we choose in this new year? What if we were to experiment with *turning down the volume* on the anxiety to make precisely the right choice (as if there were any such thing as “the one right choice!”) and *turn up the volume* on self-compassion, on being kinder to ourselves?

For those of you interested in going deeper, let me highlight two books in particular that could be fruitful reading here at the beginning of 2021 — in the spirit of “Choose Your Own Adventure.” If you prefer fiction, I recommend Matt Haig’s recent novel The Midnight Library, which I learned about from my wife Magin, who read it first and passed it along to me. If you prefer nonfiction, I recommend Finnish philosopher Frank Martela’s accessible and beautifully designed book A Wonderful Life: Insights on Finding a Meaningful Existence. I’ll share a little about each in turn.

Since Haig’s novel has only been out a little more than three months, I don’t want to spoil this book for those who may be interested in reading it, so I will only share the opening epigraph to give you a taste of what the book is about:

Between life and death there is a library.... And within that library the shelves go on for ever. Every book provide a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be if you had made other choices.... Would you have done anything different, if you have the chance to undo your regrets?

Now, I would love to go in depth about this book, but suffice it to say that it can be read as a fascinating fictionalized exploration of “The Road Not Taken.” What if we experimented with learning to tell the story of ourselves with less of a sigh? (Do you know that Brene Brown quote, where she sometimes starts by saying, “**The story I’m telling myself about (blank) is....**” That invites you to notice that there are multiple possible perspectives and frameworks from which to tell all the stories about yourself and others. And things might change if you learned to tell your stories differently.)

It is also true that much of life is outside of our control, and there is no way of knowing in advance all the consequences of our choices. We can only choose our choice, then live it to the best of our ability.

And if you might prefer to explore these themes from a nonfiction angle, you might appreciate Martela’s recent book. There are lots of fun and interesting aspects of his writing, but for now I’ll limit myself to one point that strongly resonates with the points we’ve been exploring from Robert Frost’s poem. In the same way the protagonist of Frost’s “The Road Not Traveled” keeps getting stuck in indecision about

how to choose between two paths that are not really very different from one another, some folks can really get stuck in trying to figure out the one true “Meaning of Life.”

For instance, here’s a quote from philosopher Søren Kierkegaard along those lines from his 1843 book *Repetition*, a quote that is both hilarious and profound:

“How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it and why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks ...? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager—I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?” (6-7)

Have you ever felt like that?

You didn’t ask to find yourself going through the world, forced to choose which path to take. You didn’t ask to be in a world in which the past year was hijacked by a global pandemic. Yet here we are, and it’s very much unclear that there is any manager—or that even if there is, that filing a complaint would make any difference!

So what are we to do? One playful suggestion from Martela that can be quite helpful is to experiment with letting go of a need to find one true “meaning of life,” and instead seek “meaning *in* life” (91). It’s a small change, a single preposition, but it can make a big difference. What are the people, places, and practices that most consistently make your life feel meaningful? That make you feel grateful, more fully alive, more energized, more connected to yourself, others, and the world?

Any general, universal “meaning of life” would necessarily come from the outside, which in any case is well above any of our pay grades. And as astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has said, ‘The Universe is under no obligation to make sense to you.’ A much more down-to-earth and accessible approach is to notice the ways that we can *make* meaning *in* our lives—and in the world. That kind of meaning can look like so many different things, depending on our passions and proclivities. Perhaps you find meaning in your work, in volunteering, hobbies, family, or friends. Perhaps It’s all about choosing the people, places, and practices that most consistently make your life feel meaningful—that make you feel grateful, more fully alive, more energized, more connected to yourself, to others, to the world.

The surreal British comedy troupe Monty Python got this point pretty spot on in their film *The Meaning of Life*. Since that film arrived nearly forty years ago, I don't feel bad about spoiling one scene. Toward the end of the film, some of you may recall the moment when one of the actors receives a golden envelope, the contents of which purportedly finally reveal the meaning of life.

Upon reading the card, the actor declares it "nothing very special," then reads aloud the meaning of life phrased in Monty Python's simple (but also often profound) manner: "Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations." That sounds a lot like the meaning of life is: *making your own meaning in life* through the people, places, and practices that you choose (80).

Now if we were together in person instead of merely on Zoom, today's new year's celebration would be the point at which I would invite us to participate in an annual UU ritual called Fire Communion. And although we can't yet safely be together in person, that shouldn't stop you from later lighting something on fire in the privacy of your own home.

So later today or sometime this week, I invite you consider whether there might be a person, place, or habit that has been particular hindrance to your well-being in 2020? To the extent possible for you at this time, **is there something that you feel called to let go of or say no to in this new year?** (What has been life-negating for you in 2020—a hindrance to your well-being—regularly leaving you feeling drained of energy, alienated, or resentful?)

And while writing down the name of that person, place, or thing on a slip of paper and lighting it on fire does not necessarily mean that the process of "letting go" is complete, I invite you to experience that ritual as one step in the process of saying no to a part of your life that has been life-negating for you.

Likewise, I invite you to light a candle—again, safely! keeping watch over any open flame in your house—**set an intention for a person, place, or habit that you want to affirm, do or say yes to in the new year.** (What has regularly left you feeling energized, connected, grateful, and more fully alive?)

It doesn't have to be anything huge. Indeed, small changes can sometimes make a big difference. And as inspiration, in the wake of this very hard year—and amidst a pandemic in which we are only nearing the beginning of the end—I'll share one final slide with you titled "Gentle Goals for a New Year."

In a few moments our hymn of response "The Fire of Commitment" will play. As you listen, I invite you to consider discerning what you feel led to say "yes" or "no" to in this new year. As we prepare to listen, take a few deep breaths. Whatever our resolutions are or aren't, may we also include an intention to be more gentle and compassionate with ourselves and one another in this new year.