

**THE ROAD NOT TAKEN; NEW MEMBER SUNDAY**

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

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**OPENING WORDS**      *It Is Our Journey Together*      ~ Debra Haffner

We are on a journey.  
We didn't plan it.  
We didn't have time for the bread to rise.  
We may find ourselves in the wilderness, hungry, thirsty,  
Doubting that we should have ever come.  
But look around:  
We are not alone.  
It is our journey together:  
A journey to our better selves,  
A journey to a better world,  
A journey to a more promised land.

**STORY FOR ALL**      *from The Phantom Tollbooth*      ~ Norton Juster

*(Ben Wolfe read portions of this book, in which Milo, while on an unusual adventure, is faced with signs with confusing instructions.)*

**READING**      *The Road Not Taken*      ~ 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.

**MESSAGE**      *The Road Not Taken*      ~ Rev. Julie

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by.<sup>1</sup> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I – I think I'll just keep the first for another day. That is, if I'm ever back at this same spot.

I can so easily picture this, can't you? This moment when we stand, literally, at some crossroads, or fork in the road. We hesitate...if even just a moment...to consider which to take. Sometimes we are unsure which path will take us to where we want to go. Sometimes we know exactly where the two paths go, but haven't yet decided whether we prefer (as at the Trent nature area), the yellow path or the blue one, the longer or the shorter, the one with the hill, or the one that takes us across the creek.

At times we are completely lost, and we're hoping for some clarity of direction, some familiar sign. Or we stand tempted, struggling with our better angels...will we take the path of carefree enjoyment, or the one that leads us directly home and back to the tasks that await us?

I suspect that many of you have experienced these moments of decision...knowing that you cannot take both trails...that you have to choose. It's really no wonder that this metaphor for life is so prevalent. So keep this picture of two paths laid out before you...two paths with something to be said for either...keep this picture in your mind as we move out of the metaphorical and into the arena of life's real decisions.

Why focus on the road NOT taken, rather than on the road taken? Well, it's a choice like any other, but I chose it because the road TAKEN is the one we know, and the road NOT taken is the one that often lurks in our wonderings, one that we can persevere upon, one that haunts our present thoughts.

A few specific words have been swirling in me as I've wondered what to say about the road not taken. Intention. Risk. Judgement. Perspective. Gratitude. Regret.

Judgement. Let's begin there. When we have to make a choice between two or more paths, there is some necessary judging to be done...to determine which is the best possible choice for us given what we know in that moment. You/I/we JUDGE which path to take. But I don't believe that there is some ultimate authority that will judge, or has the right to judge, one choice to be good and honourable, and the other to be bad or negligent or inferior. Sure, we might choose to do something unlawful or hateful. But what I'm saying is that our ability and right to choose is never bad. While we might make a choice that in hindsight looks stupid, it is the choice that was wrong, NOT the chooser. So I don't want anyone thinking that I'm talking here as if I know what the right path is, and that your worth is in any way dependent on choosing 'right'. I believe that everyone makes the best possible choice they can make given what they know or understand at the time.

So, that brings me to INTENTION. In any moment of decision, our intention can play a huge role. If we pay attention. If we know what it is that we intend. While it is common to make unintended decisions, and to rush into things headlong without thought, when faced with choices of consequence, taking the time to name the intentions of our hearts can be extremely

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost

helpful. Knowing what we ‘intend’ for our lives can make our choices easier, clearer, and maybe better.

The current tagline on my email signature is a quote from Soren Kierkegaard which reads, “To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. To not dare is to lose oneself,” and of course, this refers to RISK. When a decision feels onerous, risk is almost always a factor. The presence of risk and the resulting fear means that one of our options, and perhaps the one that best aligns our best intentions, will take us into uncharted waters. We might feel out of our depth, and fear that we’ll fail if we take the path ‘less traveled by.’ Maybe it will cause a big change in our financial security, or it involves a move to an unknown place. It might even feel dangerous. The road not taken may be just too great a risk for us to embark upon.

Perhaps what I want most to focus on today is REGRET. For me, regret is the strongest feeling about the road not taken...wondering if I’d be happier or somehow better off if I WOULD HAVE taken a different path. Remember, as Frost tells us, when we choose one path, we have to acknowledge that we lose the choice to take the other, at least not in the same way or at the same time. So it’s natural that we regret...what we’ve done, and even what we don’t do.

As humans this is just a part of life. Making choices. Deciding which paths to travel as we make our way through life and through the world. Leaving some paths untraveled.

There’s a thoughtful Ted Talk by Kathryn Schultz<sup>2</sup> called “Don’t Regret Regret.” Schultz happens to be the author of the book that our Non-Fiction Bookclub is reading in April. (The book is “Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error”.) I must admit that I ‘regret’ that I haven’t yet had a chance to read the book, because it probably contains a lot of wisdom I could have shared with you today. (So see, it could have been otherwise. I could have decided to prioritize reading the book, but that might have meant giving up the Ring of Peace at the mosque on Friday, or the Creative Worship webinar on Friday night. Choices have to be made.)

Anyway, Schultz’s Ted Talk begins with her telling the tale of getting a tattoo, and the resulting regret. She says that after getting tattooed, she immediately went into emotional meltdown, wishing she hadn’t done it. She cried, she ranted. "How could I have done that? What was I thinking? Make it go away."

Have you ever felt that way? You got a ‘tattoo’...literally or metaphorically...and you can now never NOT have gotten the tattoo. Sure, there are tattoo-removal procedures, there is therapy for trauma survivors, there might be recompense for damages done, there could be apology and forgiveness...but...we cannot ever NOT have gotten that ‘tattoo’...whatever it was. So we are prone to regret.

The internet is resplendent with lists of what people most regret. High on those lists are decisions we’ve made about education, about our careers, and romance, and parenting...about our sense of self, and how we spend our time. Especially when coming near the end of life, we regret that we worked too much, spent too little time with our families, lost touch with old

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_don\\_t\\_regret\\_regret?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_don_t_regret_regret?language=en)

friends, didn't laugh enough, and worried too much about what others thought of us. We regret that we didn't make amends, or that we didn't listen to our own good council, or that we didn't stand up for what was right. I'm sure each of you could make a list right now of the things you most regret.

For example, I regret not staying at the university where I began my undergraduate degree. I regret not sticking with my theatre career. I regret not working harder on my marriage. I regret living so far away from family and old friends. I could go on, but what is also true, is that I most certainly wouldn't be here right now if I'd make any of those other choices. So, should I regret what I've done?

Schultz tells us is that the inability to experience regret is one of the characteristics of sociopaths...of someone who has little regard for the consequences of their actions on relationships. While its true that some of us might stew too long and too often in regret, it's a good thing that we can feel regret.

You see, Schultz says that regret is predicated on two things. It requires agency – the ability or privilege to even make a choice in the first place. If we didn't have the agency to make a choice, then we have nothing to regret, because it would not be something that we could control. And second, to regret requires some imagination. When we feel regret, we imagine going back and making a different choice, and we imagine how things would be playing out differently in the present had we made that choice.

To live without regret, therefore, would be to live without the possibility of making choices, and without the imagination to consider those choices. Schultz's conclusion is that regret offers us a unique and important look at what we learn from making the choices that we've made. Either because of the choice we made, or the choice we didn't make, regret offers us perspective...a window onto our values, our ability to set intention, and onto the choices we CAN make now. Don't regret regret.

Embrace regret. It is a teacher. Just like how the pain of loss shows us how much we have loved, regret reminds us that we are a canvass of tattoos, each one a scar, or an imprint, or an alteration caused by the choices we've made in life. Regret teaches us that each choice of import will change us. Regret shows us the advantage of making choices with intention and a willingness to risk and to follow our hearts. Regret indicates that life is precious and we want to spend it in meaningful ways. And perhaps, seeing it that way, we can put regret in its place as a necessary by-product of choice, rather than a debilitating rumination. And then perhaps to be grateful for the choices made. Grateful for where we are now.

Jane Kenyon's poem, *Otherwise*<sup>3</sup>, is a beautiful testament to both choice and blessing. I offer it to you in closing:

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/otherwise>

cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.  
At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

For today, in this moment, I make the choice to be here, fully present with you. On this day, three friends have made the momentous choice to join us in membership. On this morning, faced with the choice to go this way or that, you came this way, which brought us together in community. It could have been otherwise.

Amen.

**READING**    *Two Monks and a Woman*    ~ a Zen Lesson

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and carried on his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out "As monks, we are not permitted a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river, why are you still carrying her?"

\* **CLOSING WORDS** *To Soulfully Survive the World's Mayhem* (adapted) ~Heather Rion Starr

[Whatever the choices before us, whatever the paths we choose...]

May whatever gatherings or activities we engage in this ~~Sunday~~ afternoon [and in the coming week]

[May they] help restore us —

our connections to one another;

our sense of hope, beauty, and fun in this world;

our deep knowing that we have to take care of ourselves and each other

with love and joy if we are to soulfully survive the world's mayhem.

Go and survive and thrive and love. Go in peace. Amen.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**