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Sunday Sermon: The Road Not Taken

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In his poem, Robert Frost shares with us what can make decision making so difficult. That is, the unknown. When facing a decision, the options before us may all look okay...each path before this traveler had its own appeal; he chooses one, but we are left to wonder how his choice works out for him. And, just like that traveler, when we are faced with a decision, we weigh each option; taking one, maybe still being curious about the other. But we take a step down our chosen path. And as Depak Chopra tells us- “When we make a choice, we change the future”.

In exploring options we discover that although we can choose our choices, we cannot always choose the consequences of those choices. Therein lies the mystery. And the necessity of anticipating consequences and being fully present when options are presented to us, so we can make thoughtful choices.

We are continually facing new crossroads in our lives. Joseph Rain reminds us that although “There are many paths, there us but one destination”. While some of us are better suited to following maps, others may look for new ways to get where they are going. And although the maps and guides left behind by others are full of useful information, they cannot take the journey for us.

In each circumstance in which you are required to make a decision, ask yourself, what is the road less traveled here? And does the fact that it seems less traveled, draw me to it or cause me to look for a perhaps more predictable, well worn pathway? Do you ever wish that you could take that less traveled road, daring a choice as it might be sometimes, and maybe have the opportunity to experience the joys and excitement that the same well worn pathway may not offer? Look for those opportunities to veer off the main road and encounter some things that you may have never given yourself the opportunity to experience.

What comes to mind when you hear Frost’s poem? Can you recall a significant road in your past that you didn’t take? And did it turn out to be a good thing that you didn’t take the other road? Or do you maybe have regrets that you didn’t take that road?

And have you ever come to the same crossroad over and over again in your life? Maybe there is a reason you keep coming back to that point. Its been said that we are doomed to repeat something until we get it right. There are times that we may be able to change our choices.

Our lives unfold in ways that no one can predict. In our life we have no GPS that tells us which direction to take. We are on our own to use our best judgment about which option will be the most effective for us. Have you ever thought about a missed opportunity that you thought you couldn't revisit? We may have the option, sometimes, as the annoying voice on the GPS reminds us, to recalculate and take a different path. As Benjamin Gay tells us "No amount of travel on the wrong road will bring you to the right destination". Give yourself the opportunity to reevaluate choices you have made that either don't seem to be working out as you had hoped, or that leave you feeling pangs of regret.

Sometimes the options before us don't scream "I'm the best choice" or "Definitely don't take this path." More often we choose between options that seem to carry the same weight, just like the traveler Frost writes about. Both choices may seem equally worthy or equally undesirable. Be aware of your motivation for making a particular choice. Sometimes we are lured in a particular direction because we like the idea of it and, just the idea of it. Actually living with the choice may not be what we really want. Thinking it through and looking at the reality of a particular choice and not just its initial appeal, has helped me make more wise thoughtful choices in my life.

When faced with making a choice- listen to your intuition, your inner compass that points you in the direction that is in your best interest. But we have to be quiet to hear what it's telling us. It is the gentle, soft message that we will only hear in stillness. Depak Chopra reminds us "To make the right choices in life, you have to get in touch with your soul. To do this, you need to experience solitude,...because in the silence you hear the truth and know the solutions".

My experience has shown me that there were times in my life that my intuition tried to let me know that the choice I was about to make wasn't the best one. And when I didn't listen, and I do remember those internal conversations, the choices didn't work out so well for me.

I've learned to trust and be more attentive to that inner voice and sometimes just follow where it seems to be directing me - even if I'm unsure of the choice. I am here to tell you that my intuition has sensed things I wasn't totally aware of and, when I listened, it has guided me in the best direction, when I might not have made the same choice initially.

We are faced with multiple choices every day. And thankfully, some of our daily choices are routine and we do them without having to think about them. Our habits. Habits allow us to navigate through the numerous, somewhat tedious decisions we make every day, with minimal effort. Some things we don't have to think about, we just do them as if we are on automatic pilot.

But what if you switched up some of those habitual choices? Even the little, seemingly insignificant things you do. Research shows that when we make even little changes in our most habitual patterns, we become more alert, more attentive, and more aware in the moment.

We all probably have habits we want to change, Ones that just aren't working for us, or annoy and frustrate us. But what if the road less traveled for you regarding a particular habit is to work on changing or stopping it. Some habits don't take long to change, but reinforcement and repetition is needed for that change to happen. Often, stopping a less desirable habit is simply a matter of establishing a new, more effective habit.

A fork in the road that many of us faced was in confronting our belief systems. Look at our own spiritual paths. In the past did we maintain a specific belief because that is what our family believed? Or did we decide, at some point, a different path offered us more of what we were seeking? Was it a gradual increasing awareness or was there a defining moment that told you that you wouldn't be traveling down that path much longer?

When you approached the path that is UU, what led you in this direction? What was appealing about this path that your former path didn't offer. How soon after starting down this path did you just know that you had made the right choice? There are a fortunate few among us who have been lifelong UUs. Others of us have taken perhaps various pathways to find what makes the most sense to us as we seek inspiration and guidance on our spiritual path.

We sit here in this house of worship, free to worship what we choose, because our UU forefathers came to a point in their faith when they chose to take the road less traveled. They shunned a path, well traveled by others at the time, that reflected a more judgmental, punitive God, in favor of a path that reflected their conviction that all human beings are worthy of divine love and that salvation was not just for a chosen few. It was a brave and committed choice to take that new road. And we are all grateful for the tenacity and conviction that led them down that new path. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, a fellow UU, said, “Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail”. And fellow UU Henry David Thoreau encourages us to “Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with reverence”.

All the major spiritual traditions serve the purpose of offering us a roadmap to guide us on our individual journeys to enlightenment. But, as UUs we don't choose a spiritual road that directs us where to go and what dictates to follow once we take this path. We are a group of individuals who are willing to take the path that offers more opportunity for our own exploration and decision making in matters of faith. We learn that peace of mind is both the path and the goal of the spiritual journey.

As individuals and as a congregation we have countless ways to make choices based on the values we share. As a congregation we are facing one of our most impactful decisions as we embark on selecting a new settled minister. The search committee will consider the options presented to us and explore how each one might be the right fit for our congregation. And as with all decisions - all without just knowing how the choices will unfold.

We have opportunities on a daily basis to live our UU values. Become aware of even the smallest of those opportunities to live the words of our affirmation -

-return to no person evil for evil

-strengthen the fainthearted

-help the suffering

-honor all beings

We may have times and circumstances when it may be more difficult to choose these pathways. But how do we remember to keep these guideposts in our awareness so that they help us to make the everyday choices that reflect that we are actually living our values? By being mindful of those moments of grace- those opportunities to do even seemingly insignificant acts that reflect the benevolence and kindness we feel toward each other. It can be something as momentary and simple as a smile you extend to someone. From there the opportunities are endless- from those we naturally encounter in our everyday lives to one's we create by looking for ways to give to others and to be of service to the world at large. Nicholas Kristof and Cheryl Wu Dunn in their seminal book "A Path Appears" about transforming lives and creating opportunity, quote Lu Xun, a Chinese essayist who wrote that "Hope is like a path in the countryside. Originally there is nothing- but as people walk this way again and again, a path appears."

And Buddha taught that "If you are facing in the right direction all you need to do is keep walking. It is your road...and yours alone. Others may walk with you, but no one can walk it for you. No matter what path you choose, really walk it".

Go out into the world knowing that when options present themselves to you, it is an opportunity to make choices that reflect your values, where you really want to go and how you want to go there.

I leave you with a send off from Roy Rogers:

SOME TRAILS ARE HAPPY ONES

SOME TRAILS ARE BLUE

IT'S THE WAY YOU RIDE THE TRAIL THAT COUNTS

HAPPY TRAILS TO YOU

TIL WE MEET AGAIN