

# “Discernment”

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## 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.

## Sermon: “Discernment”

Do you remember “Let’s Make a Deal”?

The iconic game show that launched in 1963 is,  
I was recently surprised to learn,  
still going strong all these years later.

The era I best remember is when Monty Hall was the host.

As you may recall, the final segment of each episode, known as “The Big Deal,” involves an often wildly-costumed contestant choosing between three doors in the hopes of unlocking the one that reveals a new car, tons of cash, or some exotic dream vacation.

The contestant’s gamble sometimes pays off handsomely, and at other times, it results in the dreaded disappointment of a less-than-exciting consolation prize.

Life can sometimes feel like a game show with games of chance awaiting us at every turn.

Do you choose Door #1, Door #2, or Door #3?

Do you take the job, or move to the Yukon?

Do you accept the marriage proposal, or run off to join the circus instead?

Do you have a child, or do you have a third child?

Do you go back to school, or change careers, or decide it’s time to downsize?

Do you take the experimental treatment that may kill you, or do you take your chances without it, come what may?

In this life, not every decision is the same, of course.

Some are small and inconsequential.  
While others are absolutely overwhelming.

Some decisions are easily made,  
the path perfectly obvious,  
the outcome crystal clear.

We leap before we need even look.  
We sign on the dotted line, without a second thought.

For other decisions,  
the stakes are so high or the way forward so unclear,  
that we may be frozen in place  
by ambivalence, by uncertainty, by fear.

There are times in each and every life  
when we simply do not know what to do.

We come to a crossroads  
and really have no idea of which way to turn.

What we do in such moments can vary widely—  
across the broader population,  
and even across our own lifetime,  
as we, with the years, grow more or less tolerant of risk,  
or rely on wisdom gained along our life's way,  
or decide, once and for all,  
that we are absolutely not going to go down *that* path,  
the one we've already travelled far one-too-many times.

Among our typical options, there at the crossroads,  
might be to just barrel ahead boldly in one direction or another,  
or to turn around and go back the way we came.

Many years ago, Bob and I were in France.

We had enjoyed a road trip  
through Normandy over several days  
and were driving back into Paris late at night  
to return the rental car, and then head to our hotel.

I should add that we were running low on gas.

And that I was driving.

And though the GPS (and Bob) kept insisting  
that the best path back to the Louvre  
(where we would drop the car)

was in such and such a direction—  
apparently opposite the direction we were driving—  
I was just sure I knew better.

After all, I had across the years spent a lot of time in Paris,  
though, admittedly, none of it behind the wheel.  
And certainly not while driving at night.

But I was sure I had a sense of where I was going.  
Until it became clear just how very vague that sense was...

The only thing to do was turn around.  
And we did, and everything worked out,  
though, to this day, Bob shoots me a look  
if I suggest a detour that deviates from the wisdom  
of the all-knowing GPS we have named “The Oracle.”

We would have been better served  
at each of the many crossroads we passed through in Paris,  
one after another, as I kept driving,  
if I had, instead, exercised another option.

That option would have been to stop and wait.  
To take a pause. A time-out.

When faced with a crossroads,  
it’s something available to us more often than we may realize.

A moment to catch our breath,  
to gather our wits about us.

To give ourselves the gift of time and space  
that we might find a clue or seek out a sign.

Now, the danger in waiting, of course,  
is that what we sometimes call waiting  
is actually avoidance—  
which is almost never actually helpful in the end.

In putting off a hard decision,  
we, for better and often for worse.

make a decision by default,  
a decision that may not always be for the best.

Because what then follows happens to us,  
rather than flows from us.

But, if and when we are truly intentional about waiting,  
and come to understand it as a tool,  
we will usually be rewarded with clarity,  
with insight that points us in the direction  
we feel is ours to follow.

It's not always an easy thing to do.  
Especially when we're under pressure.

Some twenty-five centuries ago, Lao Tzu,  
the author of the sacred writings of Taoism  
asked in the *Tao Te Ching*:

Do you have the patience to wait  
Till your mud settles and the water is clear?  
Can you remain unmoving  
Till the right action arises by itself?

This is what I call discernment,  
which is, apparently, a word I like to use a lot,  
according to my nearest and dearest.

Discernment is not so much to make a decision,  
as to undertake a decision-making process—  
one that calls us to listen  
not only to the machinations of our own mind,  
but for that “still, small voice” that we may know by many names,  
be it Life, or the Universe, the Goddess, or our own conscience.

But, user beware:  
that voice may not always come in a form we expect,  
or herald the answer we're seeking.

In his book, *Learning to Fall*, the writer Philip Simmons  
tells of a long hike up to a mountaintop,

where he planned to sit meditating at the base of an ancient tree.

He had planned the trip for months.  
He hiked for hours just to reach the site.

At last, sitting atop the mountain,  
he waited for enlightenment to arrive.

He had come seeking transcendence and transformation,  
and he was determined to get plenty of both.

He was looking for change, on his own terms.

As he settled into his meditation, he says:

...my back against the ancient tree's trunk,  
my legs crossed, my spine erect, the sun warm on my face,  
a gentle breeze lifting the hair on my forearms,  
I closed my eyes, ready for my vision.

I waited. I waited some more.  
I quieted my thoughts, stilled my breath.

It began as an itch, a small one, low down on my back,  
something that with discipline I could ignore.

I bore down, counted my breath,  
focused on my crown chakra.

The itch had become a tickle,  
and moved higher on my back, disturbing my focus.

I held on, projecting a cone of white light  
from my crown to the heavens, seeking contact.

[Then] the tickle rose between my shoulder blades,  
becoming a torment, [until] I could bear it no longer:  
I writhed and scratched,  
trying to hang on to my perfect moment.

What was this thing?

Was *this* the stirring of the kundalini energy,  
rising up through my chakras, heralding my enlightenment?

No. It was an ant.

An ant had crawled up inside my shirt,  
on business known only to itself.

It was stubborn and elusive,  
and after more violent contortions, my meditation spoiled,  
I removed my shirt, shook out the ant,  
and spent the rest of the afternoon rambling over the rocks  
before hiking down to the road.

I had come for a miracle. What I got was an ant.

Simmons' perfect moment of clarity never came.

Instead, what he got was a bug bite  
and the insight that maybe the answer he was seeking  
was actually the ant itself.

He says:

More than in those ancient trees,  
more than in the mountains,  
more than in the vast space stretching out before me,  
the true nature of [the sacred] was revealed to me  
in the humble climbing of an ant, after an intriguing smell, perhaps, or the  
pleasing salty taste of skin.

It was the ant that returned me to the world,  
that called me to another way of worship,  
the way of all things ordinary and small,  
the way of all that is imperfect,  
the way of stubbornness and error,  
the way of all that is transitory and comes to grief.

The ant was my messenger,  
calling me back to a world that in truth I had never left.

Simmons, there on the mountain top,  
sitting at his own crossroads,  
found an answer very different  
from the one he had been expecting.

Discernment can be like that.

It may confirm we're on the right or wrong path.  
Or it may upend our understanding of the path altogether.

I think what we are seeking in those moments, though,  
is a clarity that ultimately aligns  
with what we at the deepest level know to be true—  
even if it defies our expectations.

Which is to say that real discernment requires humility.  
That it follows a path paved with questions and doubts.

But also a path of openness to possibilities not yet considered,  
and to visions not yet fully dreamt.

The late Forrest Church, who for many years  
served as minister of All Souls Unitarian in Manhattan,  
believed the world to be made up of three types of people.<sup>1</sup>

There are the absolutists, who are, always and everywhere,  
100% sure that they are right,  
regardless of the topic, the question, or concern.

Then there are what Forrest called the 40%ers.

“These are folks who have few firm beliefs  
and who are so afraid to take a stand, they do nothing.  
Forrest describe[d] them as the kind of people  
who are so fearful of spilling their water  
that they will let it evaporate from the cup.”

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes taken from “Where the Awesome Meets the Familiar,” a sermon by the Rev. Barbara Wells, Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church, 3 November 2002 and based on a talk given by Church at the Public Ministry Conference in NYC, May 2002.

And then there are the 60%ers.  
These people have “a 60% belief in the truth as they find it.”

They are not stuck like the 40%ers,  
and they don’t grandstand like the 100%ers.

“These are the people who act,  
knowing that they may be wrong.

These are the people who accept  
that they don’t know it all.”

They are willing to doubt.  
And to act with humility.

As Forrest put it:

intrinsically we recognize  
that we are all [capable of] good and bad.  
Yet, we have to discriminate and make hard choices,  
knowing as we do that we might be wrong.  
But we take the risk nonetheless.

60%ers are those who can say with conviction, “I don’t know.”

And then go on make the best decision they possibly can,  
under the circumstances, and with what information they do have.

I do think there’s something to what Forrest describes here.

And, yet, I don’t believe that people fall into neat and consistent categories of being  
40%ers, 60%ers, or 100%ers.

More likely, every one of us falls into  
each of these categories from time to time.

Some decisions, some questions, bring out our confidence,  
or over-confidence, while others fill us with doubt and dread.

Which, I believe, makes a strong case for discernment.  
For aiming to be a 60%er—

taking in the available evidence or information,  
listening for the still, small voice,  
and then deciding on a way forward.

The truth is, even for the 100%ers,  
outcomes are rarely guaranteed.

So much of life is about choosing a direction  
and then moving with faith toward the beckoning horizon.

I would point out that this is a theological claim.  
A theological stance.  
Grounded in the notion that we are, at all times,  
collaborating in the creation of the world,  
with each moment we are granted.

Earlier, I shared the much-beloved  
but often misunderstood poem of Robert Frost,  
“The Road Less Traveled.”

Often the poem is taken as an ode to the intrepid individual  
who had the courage to take the road that was  
“grassy and wanted wear.”

But with a careful reading,  
it becomes clear that Frost went back and forth,  
saying that the paths were “really about the same”  
and that they “equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.”

In the end, he simply had to choose a path.  
As being “one traveler” he knew he “could not travel both.”

His poem is, for me, a poetic depiction  
of what it means to be in discernment.

In this life, to make a decision is to move in a direction.

To set a course, even as it is sure to involve  
twists and turns, and unexpected detours.

To commit to a direction means

leaving behind other possible paths,  
knowing, as Frost did, “how way leads on to way,”  
and that it’s doubtful we can ever truly return  
to the earlier fork in the road,  
and to all of the options it presented.

Such is the way the decisions we make  
branch out across the years of our lives.

What, in the end, “makes all the difference” is the deciding.  
The discernment that leads to a chosen direction,  
followed by the commitment to that path  
to see just where it might lead.

So, blessings this day on your journey,  
wherever it may take you.

Blessed Be.