

“Necessary Tensions: Tradition and Innovation: ‘Two roads diverged...’”

**“Commitment Sunday,” March 21, 2010
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Rev. Bruce Bode**

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful is the tradition by which we gather together on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history; blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Reading

On this “Commitment Sunday” when we make our financial pledges for the upcoming fiscal year with regard to this religious institution, I thought I’d speak about a tension in our life between tradition and innovation – between preserving, upholding and supporting institutional form, on the one hand, and updating, amending, and revising institutional form, on the other.

My perspective, of course, is that you need to keep a tension between tradition and innovation ... that meaning, value, and liveliness come from the two poles working together, from maintaining a polar tension, rather than polar splitting or polarization.

I will illustrate the maintaining of this tension with a couple of poems of Robert Frost.

One of Frost’s most playful poems is titled “Departmental.” It’s about ants, creatures who rigorously follow form.

This reading is from the same tape I played two Sundays ago, a reading given by Robert Frost on November 19, 1959, at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I formerly served as an Associate Minister.

Departmental (1936)

An ant on the tablecloth
Ran into a dormant moth
Of many times his size.
He showed not the least surprise.
His business wasn't with such.
He gave it scarcely a touch,
And was off on his duty run.
Yet if he encountered one
Of the hive's enquiry squad
Whose work is to find out God
And the nature of time and space,
He would put him onto the case.
Ants are a curious race;
One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead
Isn't given a moment's arrest –
Seems not even impressed.
But he no doubt reports to any
With whom he crosses antennae,
And they no doubt report
To the higher-up at court.
Then word goes forth in Formic:
"Death's come to Jerry McCormic,
Our selfless forager Jerry.
Will the special Janizary
Whose office it is to bury
The dead of the commissary
Go bring him home to his people.
Lay him in state on a sepal.
Wrap him for shroud in a petal.
Embalm him with ichor of nettle.
This is the word of your Queen."
And presently on the scene
Appears a solemn mortician;
And taking formal position,
With feelers calmly atwiddle,
Seizes the dead by the middle,
And heaving him high in air,
Carries him out of there.
No one stands round to stare.
It is nobody else's affair.

It couldn't be called ungentle.
But how thoroughly departmental.

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Introduction

This is the third sermon in a series on what I am calling “necessary tensions” in life, or “polar tensions” – tensions that belong to each other, like the negative and positive poles of a battery; you need both poles *and their relationship* to have any energy.

The polar tension I’m looking at this morning is the tension between tradition and innovation, between sticking with form and breaking with form, between taking a path that is already worn or taking an untrodden path.

One of Robert Frost’s most famous poems is typically understood as having to do with the question of whether to follow the traditional way or whether to strike out on your own. That poem is titled “The Road Not Taken,” and you may find it printed in your Order of Service today.

This famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” is often misnamed, being called, “The Road Less Traveled.” But that’s not the title of the poem; rather, it’s the title of a popular book first published in 1978 by Scott Peck, which plays off of the last two lines of the poem: “I took the one [road] less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference.”

As I say, this poem is typically understood as having to do with the question of whether or not you take the traditional and conventional path in life or whether you strike out on your own and take the “road less traveled.”

This poem is dear to many people because it supports and inspires them in their struggles to find and take their own path in life. It’s a poem that gives them the courage to try something new and to break from a path that hasn’t been fitting them or working for them. And, indeed, that is how I will be using this poem this morning. That is, I will be using it as a poem that raises the question of whether you take the traditional path or break from tradition.

But looking at the actual poem more closely and not just its last two lines, I find that this poem is not really about blazing your own unique path in life. Rather, as the title – “The Road *Not* Taken” – suggests, this poem has primarily to do with thoughts and feelings relating to those roads in life that we aren’t and haven’t been able to take, and not whether the roads taken were more or less traveled than the roads not taken.

The poem’s background

Frost himself said that when he wrote this poem he was thinking more of a close friend than of himself. That friend was an Englishman named Edward Thomas, a fellow writer that Frost met and became close friends with when he was in England for two and a half years from 1912 to 1915.

Edward Thomas wrote some very fine reviews of Frost's earliest books. But Edward Thomas, even though a fine writer, was not happy. He couldn't seem to find his way in life and was often depressed.

Frost said he wrote this poem thinking of Edward Thomas, because, "One quirk of Thomas was that he often regretted the particular path he had taken." (Jay Parini, Robert Frost: A Life, p. 153) Frost is reported to have said to Edward Thomas, "No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another." (Parini, p. 153)

So this image of a friend dissatisfied with the road he is on, or stuck at a crossroads and uncertain about which branch to take, seems to be the immediate inspiration for this poem.

However, according to biographer Jay Parini, Frost had also been contemplating this image of a crossroads *before* his encounter with Edward Thomas. In the winter of 1912, when Frost was first in England, he wrote to Susan Hayes Ward, the managing editor of a national literary journal in the United States, saying:

Two lonely cross-roads that themselves cross each other I have walked several times this winter [- this was twenty miles north of London where Frost and his family were living -] without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners. The practically unbroken condition of both for several days after a snow or a blow proves that neither is much traveled. (Parini, p. 153)

So this also is some of what may be in the background when in the fall of 1914 at the age of forty years old and just beginning to be a published poet, Robert Frost put pen to paper and wrote one of America's most well-known and most beloved poems: *[Note: underlined words are emphasized in the reading.]*

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.

(Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," Mountain Interval)

No less traveled road

But, of course, if the traveler had taken the first road, that, too, would have made all the difference. And, as we learn from this poem, there was hardly anything to choose between the two roads. *Perhaps* the road taken was a little less worn, a little more grassy than the first ... but not really, for the poem says that the second road, the road taken, was "just as fair" as the first road, and that "the passing there had worn them really about the same." And if you didn't get that message the first time, the poet says again, "And *both* that morning *equally* lay in leaves no step had trodden black."

In other words, there's nothing really to choose between these two roads. As a matter of fact, the poem may be suggesting that when you come to a crossroads in your life and you have to make a choice, there is really no such thing as "a less traveled road." Whatever road you take will not have been traveled by *you*, whether it's been traveled by others a million times or none at all. Whatever road you take will bend into the undergrowth, and you won't be able to see exactly where it will take you no matter how hard you try to look into the distance. And whatever road you take will be a risk, a gamble, a rolling of the dice, with no guarantee of a given result or of your happiness – again no matter whether it's been traveled by others a million times or none at all.

And so perhaps this poem is suggesting that there is no such thing as a less traveled road *for you*.

The "lone striker"

But the poem may also be suggesting – and this leads us back to the theme of tradition versus innovation – that we like to put ourselves in the posture of one who strikes out on his or her own – "the lone striker," as Frost puts it in another poem, the individual adventurer. We like to think of ourselves as being unique in this way. We are not just part of the crowd. We are not just following the broad way. We are special. We are one-of-a-kind. We are non-conformists, individualists, mavericks, iconoclasts.

In other words, we are the ones who like to *think of ourselves* as having taken the road less traveled. This is the kind of posture in life we tend to take on. This is what we are prone to tell both others and ourselves ... we are taking the less traveled road.

And this, says biographer Jay Parini, is really the thrust of the poem. It goes like this:

The traveler on the road of life comes to a fork in that road, looks down each path of the fork as far as is possible to look, but cannot determine which is the more

desirable path ... and, actually, would like to take both paths, and is sorry not to be able to do so, but needs to choose one path if there is to be a life, and so does choose, and begins walking, walking, walking...

...and in imagination walks all the way to near the end of a life, where, perhaps, sitting with grandchildren on bended knee, imagines saying to them, with a sigh:

“Oh, yes, my dear grandchildren, I remember in my youth coming to a fork in the road of my life, and I had to choose which road to go down. Now, I could have taken the more well-worn path, the traditional path, the conventional path, the path of least resistance, the path that most others would take.

“But did I? Oh, no, not *me*. I did it my way. I struck out on my own. I broke with tradition. I took the uncharted course. I took the road less traveled by. And that has made all the difference. And that is why I am who I am today.”

That’s the story. That’s the story given out to the grandchildren and others, including one’s self.

And yet, if the traveler is honest, says the poet, the traveler knows in his heart of hearts that this is not quite the way it was ... for really, at the time of the choosing, there was nothing to distinguish between the two roads. One was *not* less traveled than the other; *both* were untraveled...

...and I, the life-traveler, would like to have taken both roads ... and I, the life-traveler, would like to have seen where both roads could take me ... and I was sorry I could not take both roads ... and I was sorry I could not see where both roads would lead...

...but, if I was to live at all, I simply had to choose. I had to go one way or the other. I couldn’t go both ways, though I would have liked to. I simply had to choose, don’t you see. And so I chose ... the best I could ... at the time ... with all my doubts ... with all my insecurities and anxieties and inner conflicts ... and with all sorts of things pressing upon me ... and with not as much information as I would have liked ... I had to go forward with insufficient knowledge ... I had to choose...

...and I chose more on instinct and imagination than anything else. I simply imagined that one road looked grassier and was less well-worn than the other. I simply chose. And *that* is *really* what has made all the difference – the choosing.

And so I was not actually being more brave or more heroic or more adventuresome or more non-traditional or more non-conformist or more of a maverick or more of an iconoclast than others. That is simply the story I tell now in looking back. It has its entertainment value; but really and truly, if and when I’m honest with myself, it’s simply a self-justification for choosing the road I did...

...for, again, don’t you see, I had to choose something? I couldn’t go both ways. And so I made up a little story for others and myself. I made up a life-story ... a common enough life-story, as it turns out ... rather conventional in its own way ... not really even very original at all ... I said that this road that I was choosing was a road that was less traveled by.

So this, it seems to me, following the path of interpretation laid down by Jay Parini, is the essential meaning of the poem in its context. There’s a contradiction built right into the poem itself – one of the things Frost does best in his poems – the contradiction of the poet

saying he is taking the less traveled road while at the same confessing that, in actuality, both roads were equally untraveled and unworn.

Finding your way

And so the point is not about traditional or non-traditional, but about finding something that works for you, and making something work for you.

And finding and making something work for you is not about severing yourself from tradition or isolating yourself from community – though sometimes it may feel that way, particularly in adolescence – but, rather, finding and making your way has to do with discovering and developing your own gifts in the context of all the possibilities that life and your culture offers.

And, then, having discovered and developed your gifts, it has to do with giving back to the community that nourished you, with revivifying the traditions, and with supporting and refreshing the inherited forms, and passing them on for future use.

Inventing your own way

Imagine what it would be like to have to try to invent ever step of your way out of whole cloth. I couldn't even be speaking to you this morning or you understanding me ... because I am using the convention of the English language to communicate.

We are so utterly dependent on all that has gone before, so utterly reliant on all that we have inherited. We are nothing without the community and the traditions that we have received from the past.

And yet, life does not stand still. And the inherited forms are in continual need of replenishment and new life.

Thus, the inherited forms are meant to be honored but not idolized, worked with and not simply worshipped. In this way, we take our place in the ongoing and forward-pushing drive of life.

Frost: a “rugged traditionalist”

Robert Frost has the reputation of being a “rugged individualist.” But Jay Parini, one of his biographers, corrects that and calls Frost, instead, a “rugged traditionalist.”

I like that term – and think it's more accurate. As I mentioned last week, Frost liked traditional form and rhyme in his poetry. He felt for himself that the free verse style of modern poetry was like playing tennis with the net down. He needed and wanted structure and form. And yet, as we heard in his earlier reading of “Departmental,” it shouldn't be the rhyme that's running the poem, it has to be an idea; it has to be a life-energy.

And in the poem that we have looked at this morning, “The Road Not Taken,” there are, after all, two roads, two paths that diverge in a yellow wood, two paths leading toward the future. Frost didn’t say, “Ah, I see before me two roads, and even though neither is well traveled, I will have to find a completely different path.”

No, he went down a path that had been traveled before. He took an inherited form and contributed his life-energy to it.

Thus, he was a “rugged traditionalist,” maintaining a balance and holding a tension between tradition, on the one hand, and innovation, on the other.

Closing Words

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other’s arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on March 21, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the third in a sermon series on “Necessary Tensions in Life.” The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)