



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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## Choosing Happiness

“We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers.” – Carl Sagan

One of today’s “big ideas” is that *your happiness is a choice*. In its superficial simplicity, the idea elicits quick retort from the proverbial naysayers, whose story line runs something like this: “Yeah, right; how can I choose to be happy when my life, and most of the people in it, keep me stressed out all the time?” Yet, as is often the case, deeper reflection opens up new possibility.

Let’s first look at what might constitute *happiness*. Happiness is a concept, not a “thing,” so its meaning is decidedly personal. I submit that you can neither *be* happy nor validly complain it’s impossible until you’ve explored just what *happiness* means to you personally. When I recall my own contemplation years ago, I remember naming three attributes of life that would constitute happiness – *for me*. First, regular solitude in nature. Second, a living environment of simplicity and peace. Third, living and working from the energy of my own unique truth (February 2014 newsletter.) Time in nature was easy – I chose to do it each day. Simplicity of lifestyle took some work, but I designed my physical environment so it reflected the things that mattered most to me – no more and no less. This included possessions, friends, and the general rhythm of my day. I’m not into denying myself; so no ‘monk’ tendencies here; yet I realized how much more was *in* my life than I needed, wanted or found joyful. In redesigning my local world, I *reduced* cost, stress, and complexity, and *increased* peace, freedom and resilience. Lastly, by choosing work that represents a perfect reflection of my own inner essence (or truth), I’m being and doing what I love, so I have more energy, connect more meaningfully with others, and feel I’m making a difference in the world. Life is happy indeed – *for me*.

So, did I *choose* happiness? Here’s why I say *yes*. We all need a “reference system” in our lives, a way of knowing how we’re doing (happy, fulfilled, satisfied, successful, etc.). By shifting my reference system from one that depended on *external circumstances* (behavior and opinions of others, trappings of a consumer world, or even the weather), to one that depended solely on *my choices and inner essence*, I became “in charge” of my happiness. Because I had named what happiness looked like for me, then chosen to live that way, happiness was a natural outcome.

Despite society’s general state of **unhappiness**, we keep looking for it “out there.” But it doesn’t *live* there; it lives inside each of us – in *how we see and think* – about ourselves, others, life, work and the world. I saw a cartoon this week that showed a person at an intersection, puzzling over three choices for the roads ahead. The roads were labeled Fear, Disappointment, and Failure. The second frame of the cartoon showed the same character, smiling. The roads were labeled Learning, Learning and Learning. Same roads, and probably the same experiences ahead, (for we don’t always choose what happens for us). Distinguishing the two was that the “reference system” for *seeing* the choices shifted from the external world of “other” to the internal world of “self.” Life’s roads don’t come with labels. We choose them by how we see. To quote a local favorite Cape Cod bumper sticker, “I’m not on *your* vacation.”

**Exercise: *Creating happiness*:** If you’re not living *your* life, whose life are you living? No one else can do this for you. (Mostly, that’s because they’re too busy complaining about why *they’re* unhappy!) Here’s a three-part exercise that will help you honor your own sense of happiness. I suggest staying with each part until you reach a level of clarity that empowers you to believe in yourself – however long that may be. (Clarity is more far important than timing.) **Part 1:** *What makes you happy?* In quiet space without distraction, envision a world you *love*, with you in its center, doing and being what matters most to you. It’s an exercise, so dream big; yet be specific, so you gain clarity. **Part 2:** *What choices will get you there?* Boldly name choices you could make to *create* the world you imagine in part 1. Pay no mind to whether those choices would come easily or with difficulty. Again, it’s an exercise; you don’t have to do anything. Get clear; build energy inside you for *how life could be* – for you. **Part 3:** *Try something out.* Drawing on any aspect of your vision above, design one small action that can give you a personal felt experience of happiness – as you have defined it. Then do it. Absorb what it *feels* like to be this person. You might take notes on your vision, choices and experiences. Allow the *feeling*, not your *thoughts*, to guide your next steps. With each step, just listen.

## **A River Runs Through It** [Life lessons offered by nature]

I saw a video this week about the impact of reintroducing wolves to the Yellowstone ecosystem almost 15 years ago. The original intent of this reintroduction was to restore ecological balance to the area by bringing back a species lost due to hunting – hunting that generally arose from misinformation about wolves and their “inconvenience” in the *human* ecosystem. Wolves “bothered us,” so we blew them away.

Without its primary natural predator, the deer population had had 70 years to thrive. They’d “taken over” much of the ecosystem, destroying grasslands, river banks, and in turn, destroying the habitat of many other species as well. On the surface, the reintroduction of wolves was successful; wolves hunted deer, and the population balance was soon restored. A perhaps-unanticipated consequence, however, was the chain of cascading changes that followed. Wolves changed the *behavior* of the deer, too. In avoiding valleys and riverbanks where they might be easy prey for wolves, deer allowed vegetation to return to these areas. Trees grew along rivers. Riverbanks stabilized. Birds returned to the trees. Beaver returned to the more stable streams. Their dams opened habitat for yet other species. An entire ecosystem was changed.

We observe the cascading positive impact here and marvel at nature’s resilience and sustainability. If we could have observed so astutely early on, we might have anticipated the cascading *negative* impact of our previous choices. But it seems we’re as incapable of seeing those kinds of impacts as we are seeing the impact of negative thought patterns in our own lives – and the cascading negative impact these thought patterns commonly create.

There’s a relationship between our own happiness and our connection with the planet. That relationship, however, is apparently lost on most of us. When we take personal responsibility for our own lives, (and choosing happiness is a part of that responsibility), we soften the judgment we hold for others, for life, and for our world. As we do that, we become far more aware of the impact of our choices ... mainly because they are now *our* choices, and not something tossed into our lives by some unknown malevolent force. We then begin to see that nature can do quite well without us, but we cannot live without a healthy natural world to support us. Then we “save the planet,” but without trying, and without the arrogance with which we approach such efforts today. As George Carlin once said, in his usual humorous-but-irreverent way, “how can we save the planet when we don’t even know how to take care of ourselves?”

### **Openings to New Possibility**

#### ***Available for you:***

- *The Road Not Taken Community*, a no-cost subscription that offers you connection, interaction, challenge, and learning. See articles, newsletters and blogs; you’ll find “new stuff” [here](#) regularly. I welcome comments and conversation; this kind of dialogue is an example of how we may all learn together.
- “In Nature’s Image,” a blog series [here](#). Each offers a simple idea for adding meaning to your life, accompanied by one of my images from nature. If you’d like to receive them by email, use the green icon (“receive blog via RSS feed”) on any page of my website or [here](#). If we’re connected on [Facebook](#), you’ll also find each post there.
- My e-book, *A Field Guide to Life: How to Live With Authenticity and Freedom*. Reclaim the power of your deepest longing. You can [purchase](#) the ebook, or read it at no cost as a series of [blog articles](#) on my website.
- *The Road Not Taken* newsletters (12 years, 144 issues of *Purposeful Wanderings*) available [here](#) as a pdf file.
- Photo images from my travels available [here](#) on fun products – note cards, coffee mugs – great gift ideas.

***An invitation to possibility:*** If you have the courage and determination to step apart from the crowd and *challenge conventional thinking* ... so you can live instead with *authenticity and freedom*, contact me for a conversation that can energize your dream. I will help you reach a level of *clarity and perspective* – about yourself, others, your life, your work and the world – that allows you to live your truth, every day. Trade the *way it is* for the *way it could be*.

***Book of the month*** – *The Untethered Soul*, by Michael Singer. Consciousness, and therefore what’s possible, is limited only by our thinking. Singer shows you how to work with your thoughts and feelings so you can escape life-limiting constraints and develop a sense of inner calm. Thinking is only a small part of consciousness, so why allow thinking to limit you? Powerful insights and ideas. ... And if you’re on Cape Cod, you’ll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons – 508-539-6985.