



Purposeful Wanderings

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

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Why Life Is Difficult (and How To Change That)

“If you are irritated by every rub, how will you be polished?” – Rumi

I’m fascinated listening to people talk about how their lives are going. Their words seem to fall into two categories. The more common include difficult, stressful, overwhelming, frustrating, anxiety-filled. The far less common include joyful, peaceful, inspired, meaningful, balanced. (You might take note now of words you use to describe *your* life.)

As I listen, or when I have the opportunity to *ask*, I observe a recurring theme in those who see life as difficult: they hold beliefs – about themselves, about life – that *appear* to be true on the surface, yet would be shown false under even simple examination. What’s going on here is this: unlike the conscious mind, the *unconscious* cannot distinguish between true and false; it programs as *truth* whatever it hears repeatedly. Old lessons become ‘truth,’ causing us to behave *as if* they *were* so. What we call truth, then, is an artifact of the mind, yet one that holds us in a story from the past, thereby limiting our future. A few common beliefs (ask not if you *agree* with each, but if you *live as if* you did):

- knowing more and trying harder will make my life better (books, workshops, psychics, “making” life happen)
- life (job, others, situations, finances, even myself) “should be” a certain way (fair, easier, simple, “my way”)
- being vulnerable enough to try anything new will hurt me (feeling exposed, risking failure, allowing others to see)

Let’s look at these, for herein lies the problem. You’re neither stupid nor lazy, so it can’t be about knowledge or effort. You can’t control the outside world, so there really *are* no “shoulds.” Being vulnerable is an act of courage, not fear; learning *anything* takes you outside your comfort zone. A “new” truth: Life’s circumstances are neutral; life happens. Our problems are not jobs, relationships, people, money, or luck. Only *how we see and think* about them holds us back. And we have come to see and think through outdated, false beliefs, without questioning their existence or validity.

So, what you *don’t* need is to know more, try harder, change others, prove yourself, or make life conform. What you *do* need is to see life *as it is* (not how you think it should be), so you can *respond* from your creative genius (not from your defensiveness), thereby developing your own *felt experience* of truth (by releasing attachment to old lessons and other people’s thinking). You do this by building capacities, not skills. (Capacities are about your ways of *being*; skills are about your ways of *doing*.) Capacities you need in order to manifest your dreams include patience, awareness, discernment, resilience, openness, adaptability, self-trust, courage. The curious thing is that if you were to stop and look (the entire point of this article), you’d find you *already have* all of these. You’ve just allowed them to go into hiding, blocked by a bunch of old assumptions and beliefs that still masquerade as truth, just because you never looked. Shine your own inner light on *old* stories, and *new* stories begin to emerge overnight. This is how you change your life.

I suspect that you could read every one of my newsletters (or even every book in the self-help section), and nothing would change for you. This may even be your experience. Yet if you were to adopt even *one* of the practices suggested in those works, your experience of life would begin to shift immediately. So strong, however, is the pull of our cultural programming to accept old lessons as truth that you can’t even imagine the possibility in this suggestion. What now?

Exercise: Toward “lasting change.” We misidentify life’s circumstances as being the problem, when it’s really our inability to *accept* life’s circumstances *as they are*; which, if we did, would allow us to *respond* to those circumstances with clarity and perspective (the clarity and perspective of our own inner truth, not the dogma of others’ opinions). The “work,” then, is to learn to listen to, then come to trust, your own inner compass – your personal felt experience of life. This means you need to be a participant, not just an observer. As is often the case in my suggested practices, it’s about stopping, listening to (noticing) your own thoughts, discerning your truth from the world’s fiction, trusting that your personal truth will guide you, and from that, growing the resilience and adaptability to respond to life’s “stuff,” as it shows up. You don’t need to “have it all,” because you already *do* “have what it takes.” Exercise: create daily quiet time; a ritual. Just stop. Just listen. Just learn – from the inside out, not the other way around. Accept what you discover as “truth.” Base your choices on what you learn; listen to what happens as you do. Honor the feedback you receive.

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

Nature's Story: If you've visited different parts of the country or the world, you know the unique feel of nature's places – each somehow matched perfectly to its surroundings. Why? Conditions are vastly different in the rainforests of the Pacific Northwest than they are in deserts of Arizona. Nature's process is the same everywhere – start with what you have, not with what you *don't* have, then express the natural creativity of each organism. Yet results offer stark contrast from place to place – a result of differing conditions. Neither the stately cedar nor the lone saguaro cactus is upset that it doesn't grow somewhere else, or that it can't have less (or more) water. Each follows the elegant simplicity of nature's creative process, responding to feedback, and unfolding into order along the way. What if we humans were to “start with what we have, not what we don't have ... then allow our own creative genius to guide our way?”

My Story: How I adapted to the old lessons of my environment is boring; it's been experienced by so many others. Like many, I was brought up to be a perfectionist. Although this wasn't what I was specifically taught, it's nevertheless the message I learned and adopted. “Getting it right” was the ticket to love, to success, to happiness, to life. The most measurable place for a child to get it right is in school. For me, an “A” was the admission ticket to love and acceptance; a “B” evoked fear of punishment, and a “C” the end of the world as I knew it. I'm grateful for having the mind to do well, but by the time I'd finished college, “perfection” was so ingrained in my being that I couldn't get out of my own way. Society loves people who grew up like I did. We work harder. This “winning strategy” has limits, however; I found two big ones: relationships and employees. I'd failed both as spouse and as manager; those around me simply checked out.

I “inherited” my first personal coach in 1987, no doubt an attempt by my manager to cause me to see the world anew. I didn't like him; he got in the way of my getting things right. But he was a master. Even clueless as I was, his words were to have such a profound impact on my life that I remember them word-for-word, despite that they would take five years to germinate into action. “Brad, you may want to consider using your intellectual horsepower, not to get it right, but to *help others* get it right.” In one sentence, he appealed to the perfectionist inside me, nailed my false belief about myself and life, and offered me a path to a positive future – all in an environment of respect and grace. Although I'd always been awed by nature's underlying order, I'd ignored the underlying order in my own life; its possibility was waiting for me. Over the years, subtle changes in my thinking have spawned huge changes in the quality of my life.

Openings to New Possibility

Available for you:

- *The Road Not Taken Community*, a no-cost subscription that offers you connection, interaction, challenge, and learning. Articles, newsletters and blogs [here](#). I welcome conversation; dialogue is how we all learn together.
- “*In Nature's Image*,” 100 of my nature images, each with a simple message to help experience life's meaning.
- *The Road Not Taken* newsletters (13 years, 156 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: This (or any) newsletter could be the basis of a focused program of personal coaching. So if you read something that evokes the yearning inside you ... and have the courage and determination to 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 will allow you to live your truth, every day. Trade the way it *is* for the way it *could be*.

Book of the month – *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. This is such a tough book for me to recommend, as it leaves *me* vulnerable – about my own life's journey. But that's part of the process, I say, so here goes. Perhaps my greatest life lesson is embodied in this beautiful quote from *The Little Prince*: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” A fanciful, yet deeply insightful, journey into our ways of seeing and believing; a journey for children, yes, but a journey more for the child in each of us adults. ... And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons – 508-539-6985.