



Purposeful Wanderings

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

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The Trouble with Trying

“The definition of *story* is a yearning meeting an obstacle.” – Robert Olen Butler

Trying seems to be the American way. If we don’t get what we want, we try harder. If we don’t finish our work soon enough, we try harder. If the boss is watching, we try to look busy or try to work harder. If there’s something we don’t know how to do, we try anyway. We’re a society of “taking action,” and what better way to do that than to try harder?

We became this way by being *taught* to be this way. By and large, we’re taught that we need to be in control of our lives, and that *doing* is the way to be in control, which in turn is a sign of productivity, which of course is a measure of success. This is so ingrained in most of us and is so unconscious that we carry it with us always – to vacations, to what little down-time we have, to what we teach our children. As a result, many people (including children) just can’t sit quietly at all. It’s almost as if we hold an unconscious belief that life has to be difficult, so we “try hard,” as if to *make* life difficult, thereby proving ourselves right. Despite the implications here, I suspect this is more often true than not.

Here’s a new perspective on the topic of trying. *Trying is a sign you’re off track.* How can this be? It runs counter to all you’ve been taught and much of what you’ve worked so hard to achieve. In order to explore a new perspective such as this, you may have to suspend old beliefs for a while, beliefs about control, trying, success, life’s inherent difficulty ... and “pretend” there’s another way. This may be worthwhile doing, because if there really *is* another way, a way where life is not such a struggle, you’d probably love to go there.

Why is *trying* a sign you’re off track? Consider how you feel when you encounter an obstacle. Obstacles often show up spontaneously; so if you believe you need to control life, it’s easy to view obstacles as purposeful, perhaps personal, blocks to your goal. This interpretation tends to create anxiety, making a goal appear more difficult. And if (even only unconsciously), you’d rather prove life difficult by wrestling every obstacle to the ground, it could feel natural to respond this way. I did this for years way back when, until I finally discovered it was both exhausting and ineffective. But here’s the new perspective. “Trying” is an *unconscious reaction* to your anxiety, not a *conscious choice* for dealing with obstacles. Trying is a process that uses the same thinking that got you *into* trouble (stuck, struggling, lost, etc.) to get you *out of* trouble. It doesn’t work. As my first coach once told me, “that’s like washing off paint with paint.” In this context, trying might work if you were lazy, but that’s not the problem you face; you’re too busy to be lazy!

At times like these, trying harder is the opposite of what you need. What gets you past obstacles is new perspectives. Those come not from trying, but from stopping ... stepping back, noticing more, seeing things in a new way. From this place, not only do obstacles melt into the bigger picture, but you’re afforded the opportunity to listen to the *feedback* the situation offers – a natural flow of information within every living system that tells the system how things are going, and what to do next. This is how nature works. It’s also how nature is remarkably productive, how she *sustains* productivity forever even in the face of adversity, and how she does all this without goals or agenda. That’s a success strategy! It could work for you, too, if you could allow it. In fact, it would work just fine if you didn’t block it, by *trying* so damned hard. Trying *interrupts* this natural feedback flow, and therefore your ability to shift your perspective. If you hold tightly to your need to control, you miss this potential altogether.

Exercise: Toward ending “life as struggle.” Trying is an unconscious reaction to the anxiety you feel when things don’t go your way. Many paths can change this. (1) If you didn’t need to control, you could accept *what is*, and not feel anxiety triggers. (2) If you were more *aware* of anxiety triggers, you could make new choices, instead of reacting by trying harder. (3) If your conscious awareness were devoted to seeing obstacles as *teachers*, and to listening to the natural feedback in every living system (including your own), the anxiety/reaction/trying loop would fall apart. So, as you encounter obstacles this month, no matter the size or context, see if you can stop, notice the obstacle, then step back, even for a moment. Ask a new question: What can this situation teach me about what’s possible? A practice of noticing will gradually shift your perspective. As you learn to *listen* to life instead of *fight* with life, you’ll see that you can *allow* it to work out, which takes far less energy and is far more effective than trying to *make* it work out.

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

I recently led a meditative nature walk at the Atlantic White Cedar Swamp in Wellfleet, here on Cape Cod. It's probably my favorite spot on the cape, and even among special places in nature, it's unique in many ways. Set in a natural bowl, likely a kettle hole formed by a late-melting block of ice from the last glaciation, it's a world unto its own. Only a few hundred yards from the ocean, you have the sense you must be in remote territory many miles from anything. A simple boardwalk winds its way through the swamp, making it a delightful place for quiet contemplation.

There's a mood to this place, an energy that gets inside you, if you're open to quiet reflection and listening. So, as a way to connect with this beauty more purposefully, I set the context for the meditative walk as "anoesis." *Anoesis* is defined as "a state of mind consisting of pure sensation or emotion without cognitive content." Ok, a bit obtuse, perhaps; but even the *idea* of a state of mind without cognitive thought is pretty difficult for most of us to imagine, say nothing of enter, given how much of our days is spent "in our heads," either consciously or unconsciously. As in any meditation, you encounter distractions, either from the outside environment or from the incessant chatter of your mind. When these distractions show up, you notice them quietly, let them pass, and bring yourself back to the present. The idea of "resting in a place of pure sensation" simply adds many potential new sources of distraction. I suggested the following: one way to step into *anoesis* could be to pretend you've never been in nature before, and that the entire context of your experience is brand new. This approach reconnects you to your natural state of wonder and curiosity, the state you experienced as young children, where everything was ok just as it was.

The experience here was peaceful, and we did surprisingly well with this state of awareness. I, too, admitting as I do to living in my head much of the time, found the walk both enlightening and life-affirming. In so many ways, the swamp "teaches us" about nature, about life in nature, about *our own* lives in nature, and about who we really are – all "for free," if we can only slow down and simply be in her presence, with no agenda.

Next time you're enjoying quiet time in nature (and if you don't regularly do this, then do it!), you might frame *your* experience around "pure sensation, without cognitive content." Just notice how it goes. Notice what you learn. Notice the powerful yet silent compassion of nature's lessons. Ask yourself what draws you, naturally. Envision the possibility of following the path to which you are drawn, allowing it to teach you about your deepest truth. (No *trying* needed.)

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 – Living Beautifully: with Uncertainty and Change*, by Pema Chodron.** Life is confusing and uncertain, often paradoxical. Nothing can change that. Yet you can change how you live in that world, the world that "is." Pema Chodron shows how to live with passion, confidence and sanity in a world that is chaotic, uncertain and often insane. Traditional Buddhist philosophy, adapted to modern life and times, this book is approachable, insightful and useful. Like all of her writing, this, too, offers deep wisdom for all of us who struggle – all of us. ... And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons – 508-539-6985.