



Purposeful Wanderings

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

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Living Like You Matter: You DO

“We all continually move on the edges of eternity, and are sometimes granted vistas through the fabric of illusion.” — Ansel Adams, *Autobiography*

At the end of this month, I will have lived on this planet for 72 years. While there are many who would think of me as old, I am not among them. But one of the things that having lived for many years has taught me is that with age comes a [natural?] shift in perspective – in the way I see myself, others, the world and life.

I feel as if I see more clearly than I used to. I feel as if I see more! Maybe I just don't miss as much. I see my life from a broader perspective, a vantage point that lets me *notice* myself living my life. (I can tell you the view as an observer is quite different than it is as a participant.) Why am I seeing this as if it were new? Maybe it's realizing I have a finite slice of time left, while having no idea how long that is. Although I didn't always see this way, I now also realize I've always had the *choice* to do so; my awareness of that fact seems the only difference. I acknowledge that my view here is accentuated by knowing that, no matter *how* much time I have, it will never be enough for everything I care about, “the music still in me, waiting to play,” as Wayne Dyer says. I feel as if I'm always on the “edge” of something big.

As an observer, I've also developed a deep knowing that I can steer the course of my life in any direction I like. Yet it has also evoked in me something even more significant – a deep sense of gratitude – for the gift of this life I've been given, and for all the potential it holds. I love life ... and I love *my* life.

I'm curious what's going on here. Is my shift in perspective a result of age alone? of the accretion of life experiences? of some *aha* moment (that I must have missed)? Why does it seem that I used the first half of my life denying my own unique potential (in order to be like others), only to use the second half of my life trying to re-claim it (in order to be who I am)? What mattered so much then that I could sell my own truth? I know my truth now; and it serves me well.

I recall my younger son (now 45) saying I was teaching him a valuable lesson. (I had to ask him what that might be.) “Oh, you know, the one about how life gets easier when you no longer give a shit.” Well, I don't recall ever saying that, say nothing of “teaching” it. What I'd like to *think* he meant was that when you trust your own inner truth more than you believe in the messages of the external world, then you feel free. That one I *did* “teach.”

And as if in perfect timing for this writing, yesterday my other son sent me two photographs he had taken, asking for my assessment and “vote” as to which one I preferred. In our resultant conversation, he told me it was important for him to post the one on Instagram that would gain better recognition by that community. My response: If you want to *listen* for somebody else's recognitions, that's fine; but when it's time to *take action*, you'd better do that from your own. (As it happens, we agreed on the “better” photo.)

The point of these conversations – with my sons, and the one I'm having with myself: You can't shine someone *else's* light. Their light you can only *reflect*. If you want to *shine* light, it has to be *your own*. Besides, when the chips are down, or when *you* are, none of those “others” will be there to support you. The only place you can turn is inward. It would be nice if you found a loving someone home at the time.

I know I'm not alone in my perspective, so when I recently found Parker Palmer's beautiful little book, *On the Brink of Everything*, I felt instantly *at home*, all over again. Although it appears as a book on aging, it's about gaining the wisdom we often ascribe to being older, by living an “examined life,” sooner. In a most eloquent phrase, which truly applies to every single day of our lives, he says, “*As time lengthens like a shadow behind me, and as the time ahead dwindles, my overriding feeling is gratitude for the gift of life.*” What if we could see this way at 60, 50, or 35? How might it make a difference in “how we travel the arc between our own sunrise and sundown,” as he suggests? Given that how we live our lives is a choice, he asks whether we'll choose denial, defiance or collaboration. Powerful.

What matters ... to *you*? And how will you choose to live that?

Exercise: Where do you find meaning? For many of life's situations, issues, challenges or dilemmas, I find it an insightful exercise to look at the situation through many different lenses. The simplest, and therefore most common it seems, is the lens of the "drama of this moment." At this level, issues seem to take on a largess inappropriate for their true meaning. The least common, by contrast, might be the Native American view: How will my choices about this issue affect the next seven generations? I suspect the most "practical" level might be somewhere in between. Try it on for yourself. For the next few weeks, as you encounter life's daily little (and OK, big) challenges, *stop* for a moment – to examine the situation from several different perspectives. Obviously *time* can be one such viewpoint. Another might be to see things from the perspective of each *person* involved, in addition to you. Yet another, see things from the level of consciousness with which you perceive the situation (am I caught in the drama or looking at the potential, for example). Make a mental, or written if you can, note as to what you learn. See if you come to realize that the larger your perspective (in time, scope, consciousness or others), the more peace and objectivity you experience.

One of Parker Palmer's comments, in *On the Brink of Everything*, is that we have a "cultural obsession with being effective, as measured by short term results." In assessing your own life's situations, see how your "assessment" might change if you were impacted only by the long-term, if effectiveness were *only* about how things affected your whole life, not just this moment. I just love this story he offers, so pertinent to our times: "When I'm asked for the 'elevator speech' that sums up my work, I respond, 'I always take the stairs, so I don't have one. If you'd like to walk with me a while, I'd love to talk. I don't know of a life worth living or work worth doing that can be reduced to a sound bite.'" Humorous, poignant, insightful. The source of meaning. Where is the source of *your* meaning?

Life lessons from nature: As rivers go, the Charles doesn't count for much. Flowing from Hopkinton to Boston, it's only 80 miles long – 26 as the crow flies, (or as the runner runs, for it is the same 26 miles as the course of the Boston Marathon). It's only a few hundred feet across at its widest point, much of that man-made as a result of dams.

Despite its rather ordinary features as a river, the Charles has a story to tell. It began life draining the surrounding land as the glaciers departed. Flowing in comparative silence for a few thousand years, it has more recently witnessed the emergence of distinguished schools now lining its banks: Harvard, MIT, Boston University, Brandeis. It watched quietly as a bunch of pissed-off colonists dumped a load of tea into Boston Harbor, quickly washing it out to sea in its outflow. (If colonists had really wanted something to be pissed at, it might have been that the king of England named the river after himself!) The Charles River heard Paul Revere's horse gallop by to warn other colonists when the Brits took offense to the tea incident. Its banks supported Thoreau's footsteps as he wandered and pondered. In more recent times, it has suffered the indignity of being "human-engineered" to suit more modern-day colonists – resulting in both industrial pollution and subsequent revitalization. Today, it flows in rather placid surroundings, and is entertained each summer by the Boston Pops Orchestra, by competitive sailing and rowing events, by college students "studying" on its sunny banks, and each winter by fireworks on New Year's Eve.



As individuals, most of us are a lot like the Charles. Standing in our own presence, we appear quite ordinary, maybe even "lesser" in some way. We wander through life, thinking we're on a big journey, yet our meanderings don't take us all that far (the Charles has visited only 22 towns). Yet, also like the Charles, we have a story to tell underneath the exterior. Although we may not make it into any book of "who's who" either, we'll nevertheless be remembered by the story we live, not by how we see ourselves in the mirror. What's your story?

Do you have the courage to live it, to tell it proudly, to stand strong in its presence for a lifetime?

Book of the month: *On the Brink of Everything*, by Parker Palmer. I found myself in tears, and smiling, both at the same time, in this exploration of life's meaning and potential. Said to be about growing older, it's really for all ages, as it's about the wisdom and perspective we often associate with aging, yet, wisdom which, if "discovered" sooner, could allow us to live happier, more meaningful, less stressful lives. "Once I understand that I am not the sun, I can get out of the sun's way and stop casting a shadow. I can step aside to let the true sun shine on everyone and everything." ... And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.