



# Purposeful Wanderings

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

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## Problems are Invitations, not Threats

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people and assign them tasks, but rather teach them to long for the immensity of the sea.” – Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

It seems we’re consumed with the idea of getting things done, “making life happen.” (I was ... for years.) Underlying this view is the common (yet unconscious) societal belief system: if we know more, try harder, stay busy, don’t rock the boat and go along with what others think, we can somehow control life, make good money and be happy. It doesn’t work. If it did, methinks we’d be a happier lot. Unconsciously consumed, however, we rarely stop, either to notice or to ask, why this is so. Worse, we’re far less motivated by getting things done than by what happens to us if we don’t.

What we *do* notice (and quite skillfully complain about) is all the “if only” ideas we *perceive* to be the cause of our struggle: if only I had more time; if only I had fewer things to do; if only “they” would cooperate; if only “they” knew what they were doing; if only I could catch a break; if only I could have a day with nothing going on. Exhausted, we blame life, others, the world, even our skill or effort. Here again, however, we miss the fact that we *don’t control* life, others or world, and it has nothing to do with skill or effort. If we *were* to stop and look, which of course is now obvious we don’t, we’d see that ***the problem we have with life is that we have misidentified the problem we have with life.***

Huh? If we could *stop* long enough ... to *be* with ourselves long enough ... to examine beliefs we *think* are valid, we’d uncover the true obstacles we face. And by obstacles, I’m not talking about how you often run out of coffee, how your car has trouble starting on cold mornings, or how you trip over the same pile of junk in the garage each day – but about challenges that deny you the freedom, peace, well-being and inspiration you long for. A few [too common] examples:

- chronic *busyness* – workaholism, media, social media, projects/errands/chores, tradition, obligation
- living in the *past* – a life of chronic guilt/anger/resentment over what’s already happened, often long ago
- living in the *future* – a life of chronic anxiety/stress over what may (or may not) happen, often years from now
- continually trusting/caving to the thinking and demands of *others* – despite knowing it continually leads nowhere

These problems hold us hostage, by denying us the experience of *ourselves* at an authentic level (we’re living someone else’s story) and by denying us the experience of the ***present moment*** (we use *this* moment only to fret about the *last* moment or to worry about the *next* one). Do you see yourself somewhere in this painting?

So, what if you *did* stop to look – at what’s going on *inside* you? With some self-reflection, you’d discover first-hand that your problems have nothing to do with the outside world, but with the [adopted] belief system that now guides your thinking (you *believe* you can get it all done, you *believe* you’re held back by the past). You’d discover that your beliefs are made up only of thoughts. And you’d discover that no thought can hold any power over you beyond what you yourself give it! It’s scary, because the conclusion you’d have to draw is that the struggle you experience is one you ***created*** ... unconsciously, of course. When you’ve dug yourself into a hole, a good next step is to stop digging.

The simple act of non-judgmental awareness of the *present* moment is a phenomenally powerful tool for creating an inspiring *next* moment. (That statement does not fit with your old belief system, so your first temptation might be to ignore it. Not too fast.) Now that you’ve identified the true problem, you can learn to stop listening to these outdated thoughts (put the shovel down). As your *awareness* grows, old thoughts and beliefs fall away, naturally. Life’s external challenges will always be there. You simply learn to stop engaging with them ... by becoming *aware* of the thinking that drives them. The point here is that of all the lessons lodged in our minds as truth, the one that could help us most is not among them ... and that’s the one that tells us the power of our consciousness to create a life we love is greater than *any* amount of “will power” will ever be.

Invitation: Living authentically invites quiet self-reflection – to discover what your own unique authentic truth really is. Meaningful lives, relationships, careers invite deep inquiry. Your old beliefs – about control, impatience, a quest for certainty – take you down a lot of roads in life, but the road to your potential and well-being is not one of them.

**Exercise: *Shifting the underlying thought framework of your life:*** If you're a regular reader here, you know that underneath the monthly stories and topics of my newsletters, there's a consistent theme. (You may even believe I say the same thing each month.) For clarity, that theme is this: when you stop looking to others, life, work or the world to make your life better, and instead begin to look to your own [perhaps now unconscious] ways of seeing and thinking about those things, you'll find the phenomenal source of renewable, sustainable energy *you are* inside. And as you do, you begin to honor and trust *your own* [unique] thinking to guide your life. When you try that out, you'll find it more reliable than any "advice" (discontented yammering) you'll ever hear from the outside world. And you'll find that old beliefs and thinking start to fall away, all on their own.

A first step might be to begin to catalog some of your unconscious beliefs. You can find them most easily by looking at what blocks you. So whenever you find yourself feeling stuck, instead of reverting to the old "fighting your way through," stop for a minute and write down the "thought" that underlies your behavior. To do this, look not at what you *think* is true (your old thinking will simply reject and refute anything new), but for what your actions show that you truly *do*. If you'd like a framework to help get you started, here are a few common contributing beliefs:

- knowing more and trying harder will make my life better (books, workshops, psychics, forcing life to happen)
- life (jobs, others, situations, finances, even myself) "should be" a certain way (fair, easier, simple, "my way"); so it's therefore up to me to force things into conformance
- being vulnerable enough to learn anything new will hurt me (I'd feel exposed, risk failure, allow others to see me); so I'll avoid mistakes and risks

A second step might be to ask yourself whose *voice* you hear when you identify a given belief (parent, teacher, friend, manager, etc.). You might reflect on *how* you "adopted" this thinking of others as your own.

A third step might be to ask yourself, *given* what you know about yourself and your life today, what beliefs will best guide your life toward your own well-being. Beliefs are thoughts; you get to choose if you want to think them or not.

And if you got this far (especially without your old beliefs telling you this is all nonsense), and you're still struggling to discover, give me a call or send an email; I'll help you find your next step.

**Life lessons from nature:** Like any good river, the Mississippi just wants to be a river. After all, in nature, things know only their innate, creative essence. Rivers drain the land, always taking the least-energy path to the sea. Every river on earth does this; it's what it means to be a river. Rivers "know" a least-energy path needn't be the shortest, for they meander in ways that, to us, may appear rather random. The Mississippi is unique, however, not because of its size, or even because of its intention to be a good river. It's unique because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers thinks it should be something else. For over 100 years, these folks have committed time, energy and money (lots of money) to "telling the Mississippi where to go." Because we've built cities, farms and sources of livelihood all along the river for over 200 years, we have a stake in preserving our investments; so we've entrusted the Corps of Engineers with making sure the river cooperates. Rivers, unlike humans, however, can't be taught bad lessons very easily. The Mississippi is no exception. Despite billions of dollars and all the best "technology," the river still wants to follow its least-energy path. Problem is that this path doesn't go where the Corps wants it to go. There's a point along the river in central Louisiana, where the Atchafalaya River branches off to the west. The Mississippi wants to join it. If you were to stand at this place, you'd *feel* the "inner truth" of this river, exerting its pull toward the west. The Corps is standing its ground ... so far. Levees have risen into hills, land around them has subsided, coastlines have been eroded, small floods take on gigantic proportions. And New Orleans is well below sea level.

The Mississippi serves as a metaphor for how our lives are pulled by two worlds. The Corps of Engineers embodies every one of the "rules of the game" that describe our *external* world. They "know" it's about winning by force, and even nature's laws won't deter them. They're blinded by certainty. They're even trying to teach the river the same silly rules *they've* been taught, perhaps believing the river will one day "get it." Meanwhile, 'old man river' just keeps on flowing, immune to the idea of the struggle because, as part of nature, its *internal* world is all it knows.

**Book of the month: *Big Magic*, by Elizabeth Gilbert.** You may know her as author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, here she opens a path to the creative genius inside us all, *and* to the fears inside us all that *keep* us from that genius. I love this: "The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them." And perhaps even more, this: "All I know for certain is that this is how I want to spend my life – collaborating to the best of my ability with forces of inspiration that I can neither see, nor prove, nor command, nor understand." And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.