



# Purposeful Wanderings

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

©2019 Bradford L. Glass • [www.RoadNotTaken.com](http://www.RoadNotTaken.com)

Vol. 18, No. 4 -- April 2019

## Labeling Leads to Divisiveness

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."

— from "On the Brink of Everything," by Parker Palmer

A variant on last month's "blame game" is the "label game." You know the theme: he's a capitalist; she's a liberal; he has ADHD; they're Christian; I'm certified; she's a veteran; you're the boss; they're Ivy League; it's impossible; he's wrong. Everywhere we go, we hear labels. On one hand, they're often convenient shorthand for ideas we hold, for topics we commonly discuss, and for issues we often debate. And at some level, labels may be "valid," on occasion, even helpful. Yet I know of no more outrageous way to limit, divide, repel, instigate or abdicate than to use labels the way we growingly do. It seems we use them, intentionally, to evoke preconceived notions, to manipulate the thinking of others, and to abuse one's own position or power. In these cases, the damage labels create far outweighs any benefit.

When we label, and whether positive *or* negative in intent, we evoke, in ourselves, and significantly, in others, a sense of the *meaning* a label holds. Each of us sees meaning in a different way. It's personal; how things matter – *to you*. Not only is language imprecise on its own, but there's no *common* language for what holds meaning. *You can't experience someone else's experience*. This is why *intention* is so crucial. If you're *trying* to deceive, it's easy. If you're *looking* to be offended, you will be. Yet we hide behind our negative intention, holding others hostage to the scam.

Example: This past week, I heard a U.S. Senator ask someone if he were a capitalist. Now, aside from his obviously-accusatory voice tone, the question itself is fraught with judgment. And this is true no matter your politics, no matter your definition of the term, no matter the context of "manipulation" (which I define as using language to entrap). Who cares? Well, for one, I do. In even the most traditional sense, I may fall under the definition of capitalist when it comes to entrepreneurs creating thriving businesses through their creative genius. Yet I may be just the opposite when it comes to those same businesses abusing employees for their own personal gain ... or when it comes to caring for the health of a nation. Even with those opposites, one's opinion in the matter isn't the issue; it's the intent to manipulate.

Did you ever notice, for example, how much less a child can do, how much less is expected of him or her, how his or her potential in life is judged (in a limiting way) as soon as there's a label of ADHD attached? True, distinctions such as these allow for generating new possibilities that may not have been available, or known, beforehand. Yet that's not where the distinction stops. Labels constrain the very potential we're "trying" to manifest.

I recall a potential client here on Cape Cod years ago – director of a small, private yacht club – who asked my help to create a strategic plan for their organization. I made one request: "Tell me what you mean by 'strategic plan.'" Instantly defensive, he said, "Hey, we're considering hiring you to help us develop one, and you don't even know what one is." My reply was simple: "I've read hundreds of 'strategic plans' over the past 30 years, and I can't recall a single one that was either *strategic* or a *plan*, so I'd just like to know what it means – *to you*." Needless to say, I wasn't hired. At that point, however, nor did I want to be.

I've always despised labels, not only for the trap they offer to one wanting to deceive or judge, but also for the misunderstanding widely-divergent meanings can evoke. I prefer full sentences, ones that offer background and explanation, ones that invite *dialogue* – two-way exchanges conducted in an environment of mutual respect and with an intention of learning. Like the beautiful quote introducing this article, learning is an invitation. That was *not* the intention of the senator, or the yacht club's director.

What's *your* experience? Where have *you* been subjected to a label that has limited you or left you misunderstood or devalued? Where have you *used* labels to do the same to others, intentionally or not? How often do your exchanges with others qualify as true dialogue? What roles do *new perspectives* and *learning* play in your life?

**Exercise:** Set aside 15 - 20 minutes of personal quiet time each day, designed to grow awareness of your thinking by exposing the unconscious stories (judgments, labels, etc.) that underlie your consciousness. During this reflective time, replay in your mind several situations, events and conversations from your day. In your replay (now), notice your thinking (then). By tracing your behavior back to the thinking that created it, you see how old, unconscious thinking colors what you know as “reality,” often inhibiting your true self. Awareness causes your thinking to change, naturally. No need to judge or change what you discover; it’s about learning. After some comfort with these basics, turn your gaze toward your *intention*. As you replay your day, notice how your thinking helped form your *intention* – what you “wanted” from the situation or conversation. Notice how your intention then impacted your behavior. Notice also how *aware* of this you were in that moment. Do you notice places where, perhaps out of uncertainty or fear, you may have manipulated a conversation (or others, or yourself) so as to disguise your unease? As the relationship between awareness and intention becomes clearer to you, envision how specific situations might have been different had you been more aware, and had you therefore made different choices. Without judgment, see if you can demonstrate to yourself that *every* conversation goes just as you “intend,” even if intention was chosen from old habits – unconsciously.

If you want some added perspective, observe for intention in others ... not to *judge*, but to *discern*, learning consciously what they’re up to. This awareness can offer you new choices, ones not available to you when you didn’t notice. The fact is that you’re aware of what others are up to anyway, unconsciously; you “sense” when their words and actions don’t match. Noticing others works the same way as it does for noticing your own thinking. You’ll be able to get a pretty clear sense what they may “want” from a situation, and how they use language to “get it.” You’ll notice when their intention is transparent (words, voice tone, body language all match), or if they’re saying one thing while meaning another. Are you dealing with the senator, or with “honest Abe?”

**Life lessons from nature:** Paradox, the idea of “both this and that, simultaneously” doesn’t create problems in nature. A storm can wipe out life on an island, and nature keeps creating, renewing life over a remarkably short period of time. A storm is a storm; an island is an island; and life goes on being life. We’d look at all of this and wonder – how could nature be so cruel, or why do “bad things happen to good islands,” or perhaps notice how nature continues to regenerate herself regardless of circumstances, or perhaps even how her ability to do so could have sustained such amazing life forms and unbelievable balance everywhere on earth. Mystery.

If we were to continue anthropomorphizing nature (making her appear human in form), we might say nature doesn’t hold herself back from being herself. Destruction and creation are equal partners in the journey of life. Chaos and uncertainty are raw materials for a process that never ceases, yet continually seeks a state of balance. And it may just be that nature doesn’t have to worry about being someone else. What is ... is. What isn’t ... isn’t.

Barry Lopez, perhaps my favorite nature writer, said this about the way we live and grow: “An individual life becomes truly adult ... when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of paradox. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.” In some respects, he offers an eloquent and artful way for us to see value in living authentically, being ourselves, not holding ourselves back. We’ll never have all the answers, never “get it all right,” yet it’s only the attempt to do that, the belief that we can (or need to), which holds us back.

**Another workshop offering: *Living Authentically ... in a World that Would Rather You Didn’t*.** Wednesday, April 17, from 7-9pm (Eastern), I’m offering an online videoconference program designed to help you discover your own, unique truth, then honor your discovery by *living it*. Think of it as an antidote to a world determined that we go along with the thinking of others, even to the denial of our own. Release the struggle of trying to live what you think *should* be, and step with confidence into what *could* be. Personal authenticity leads to freedom. Program fee: \$30. Questions? Send me an email. Registration required ahead – link to details and registration on my website ... or [here](#).

**Book of the month: *Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, by Thich Nhat Hanh.** It’s my belief that underneath all the damaging impact of our labeling is a level of personal fear that runs pretty deep. I mean, if we lived in complete self-trust, we’d have no need to manage the opinions or agenda of others. Thich Nhat Hanh, well-known Zen master, monk and author, delves to the space of our fears, offering practices that help bring us to a place of peace. And if you’re on Cape Cod, you’ll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.