



# Purposeful Wanderings

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

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## Separate or Together? (It Depends)

*"The laws of nature that dictate the sunset dictate our demise. But how we travel the arc between our own sunrise and sundown is ours to choose. Will it be denial, defiance, or collaboration?" – Parker Palmer*

Despite pain, grief and strife caused by the pandemic of 2020, its clouds hold "silver linings," too. It has clearly demonstrated (beyond *intellectual* doubt, anyway) that there's more that *unites* us than *separates* us. Everyone on this planet is subject to the same *risk* – we're all in this *together*. Yet at the same time, each of us still has a *personal choice* – how we respond to that risk. Risk is communal; choice is personal. Seeds for a dilemma.

Sadly, we've become attached to the phrase "all in this together" more for its folklore than its validity. Looking at "us" from space, however, we're one ... no boundaries, no such thing as separateness. The separateness we experience, (which shows up in our personal choices), is a construct of our unconscious, habituated thinking.

So, here we are. We *know* the facts. But "knowing stuff" doesn't mean a damn thing, as history has proven over and over. We know *lots* of stuff, yet our behavior commonly belies our knowing. So the big question that faces us – for which the jury is still out, mind you – is not whether we *know* we're in this together, but whether we will *behave* as if we are. [My *OPINION* is that our shared strife *could* be an opening to a more peaceful, caring world.]

The seeds for a path forward are planted every day. They germinate with the *personal choices* we make – about "how we travel the arc between our own sunrise and sundown" – each day, as Parker Palmer notes. I've seen striking examples, a wide variety of such choices, running the gamut between two extremes:

- I've seen selfless personal 'sacrifice' in the interest of the common good. And I word it this way because we still do not know – for *certain* – how our choices actually *contribute* to the common good; we act out of faith.
- I've seen personal denial and defiance of the idea of responsibility for the common good. And I word it this way because to "politicize facts" as a way to favor self-interest is an outrageous breach of critical thinking.

Underneath it all, the dichotomy points to our divergent ways of dealing with life's uncertainty. As humans, we need to feel safe. (Sadly, some never will, while others enjoy a sense of [oft-contrived] comfort.) At issue is how our minds somehow equate certainty with safety. They're not the same. Convinced otherwise, though, we make stuff up, pretend it's "fact," then defend it, often with self-righteous anger – just so we "feel better." Nonsense. Making ourselves feel better doesn't change facts. *They're* not the same, either. Another thought from Parker Palmer: "I envy people who practice disciplines that allow them to spot illusions before they get lost in them."

When facts are superseded by "opinion," we're sentencing ourselves as a society to a place that can't offer peace (divisiveness is its opposite, not a path to get there) and isn't sustainable (in people, economy, or planet). True, facts often evoke discomfort. Yet a far better strategy for managing such discomfort would be to learn how to grow a constructive personal relationship with uncertainty *as it is*. Neither denial nor defiance changes a thing.

Where does this lead us? I suspect the sense of separateness we feel – the one that leaves us making stuff up to feel safer in an uncertain world – is a *result* of not knowing *ourselves* deeply enough to trust our capacity to deal constructively with uncertainty. And I therefore suspect that this same "fear of self" is what we then *project* onto others, whether it be about pandemics, or about the huge societal issues that plague us today – race, class, gender, poverty ... to name a few. We're afraid of ourselves, so we blame those different from us, so we can "feel better." We *say* "love thy neighbor," yet our behavior is far better adapted to judging them than loving them.

So, are we in this separately, or are we in this together? It depends. It depends ... on the choices we make. And the choices we make depend on how we [choose to] see – ourselves, others, life, world. Awareness and acceptance pave the path forward. The first stone in the path, perhaps: we're all the same, just in different ways.

**Exercise: *Separate and Together*:** There's a part of each of us that's *different* from everyone else. Think of it as soul, inner truth, essence, reason for being here. It's the part of you that's so naturally "you" that you may not yet have recognized it as your authentic self. And then there's a part of each of us that's the *same* as everyone else. That's the part that's living life, making your way in the world, trying to find peace in spite of turmoil, worried about life's struggles, fearful of death, committed to friends and family, etc. We're all in *that* part together.

The part of you that's *unique* needs nurture. In deep personal inquiry, you "discover" this version of you, with an intention of learning how to bring your gifts to the world, expressing your innate truth through how you live. The part of you that's *shared* with others needs nurture, too. It invites collaboration, community, with a *common* intention to be part of something bigger.

The "trick" is to find balance between the two. Favoring only what's the *same*, you risk becoming a feather in the wind, ever uncertain (perhaps even in despair) of why you're here, and who "you" really are. And favoring only what's *unique* (to the exclusion of connection with others), you risk becoming self-centered (perhaps even lost). Awareness, acceptance, patience and self-trust lead to the capacity to live wholeheartedly from both.

Perhaps over several sessions of personal quiet time, explore **both** parts of you – *separately*. Questions to guide your inquiry: What about me is *separate* from others (uniqueness)? What parts of me are *shared* with others? What's my *balance* between both versions of "me" look like today? In what ways might I find a "more balanced balance?" What behaviors suit me in the "unique" aspect of myself but fail me in the "shared" setting? What behaviors suit the "shared" aspect of myself that fail me in the "unique" setting? Through this exercise, you build a model of your "way of being in the world" that honors both parts of you ... as one.

**Life lessons from nature:** This month's book suggestion, *Bear Came Along*, is a beautifully-crafted nature story. Collaboration and cooperation build community – assemblages of parts, all *different*, yet woven together by *shared* interest and commitment. Collectively, they behave as one. It's just how life (in nature, anyway) works!! So worth the read. As good as any "life lesson from nature" anywhere to be found.

**My book: *Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn't*.** Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth; the self-trust that emerges will light your way forever. Insights, perspectives, personal reflections and exercises ... so you can make your life your own, not someone else's. All you need to know [here](#) – intro, samples, purchase link – for you or as a gift.

**My next book (?):** As a way to stay centered during my [even more quiet than usual] days these past few months, I decided to write for a few hours each day – on purpose. The result: an almost-done book called *A Field Guide to Life*. At the moment, it's in the form of a series of 12 booklets, each exploring one of the many *challenges* facing our lives and times. As an example, one is entitled "A Field Guide to REALITY." It exposes how what we steadfastly believe is "reality" as an illusion, constructed out of the elements of our largely-unconscious, habituated thinking. Coming to see this fact for what it is can open us to a new world of potential – possibility that has always been there, yet has gone unnoticed, hidden only by a belief that it doesn't exist. Don't believe it? It explains why two people confronted with identical information reach two opposite conclusions – while both are convinced *their* view is correct. At this point, I'm not sure what the final form of this series may take – a boxed set of booklets, a book, online video courses, podcasts. Stay tuned.

**A PODCAST:** I was recently invited to be a guest on The Living Alive Show, a podcast hosted by Autumn Shields. I know Autumn, so it was a fun and easy exploration into "living authentically ... in a world that would rather you didn't." If you'd like to listen, here's a [link](#). It's 35 minutes long. You can sign up for her on-going programs there as well. I'm sure she'd welcome you, *and* that you'd gain from the experience.

**Book of the month: *Bear Came Along*, by Richard Morris, illustrated by LeUyen Pham.** A children's story – decidedly appropriate for adults, too. Beautifully written and exquisitely illustrated, it evokes a sense of wonder about collaboration and community in times of strife. A stirring message, especially in troubling times. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.