

DOWN THE PASSAGE NOT TAKEN, TOWARDS THE DOOR NEVER OPENED
 BUC, September 19, 2010

Time past and time future
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present. (Eliot)

Footfalls echo in the memory
 down the passage which you did not take
 towards the door you never opened.

Will you now?

Go there, go now,
 around the corner
 through the first gate
 into your first world.

Go there, go now,
 to that point in time before now,
 before the choices you made
 made you what you are now,
 brought you here, now.

Go there, go now,
 to that intersection,
 when two roads lay before you in a yellow wood,
 to that moment in time
 before the decision
 before the mistakes
 and hindsight
 and second-guessing
 and regrets.

Going back is easy, requires no tricks, no sleight of hand:
 Time past and time future are never gone, always present.

Go there, go back,
 follow the passage, open the door
 make the other choice now: what happens?
 How does life go when you go the other way?

Marry another man
 Take the second job offer instead of the first
 Have a third child:

Choices bypassed the first time through the intersection.
 Choose them now: now how does life look?

Say something else
 Turn back and touch her
 Decide not to leave but to stay:
 How goes it for you on the road not taken?

Check the baby once more
 Refuse to let him drive that night
 Take your daughter along instead of
 leaving her home alone:
 Go down the passage, open the door:
 What happens next?

“If only I had acted otherwise, chosen differently,
 everything would have turned out all right.”

Would it really?
 Time past is not fixed and forever fled from our grasp.
 It shifts, malleable, as we shape and reinterpret it.

For this brief time, in the High Holy Days,
 the books of our lives stand open.

Go there now, go back,
 re-do
 undo
 take back
 change
 make right.

There is still time for time to turn.
 The books are open, not yet sealed.

What might have been and what has been
 are in your hands
 and it is still not too late.

Most of the time, the choices are easy ones. What to have for breakfast, whether to
 carry an umbrella, which movie to see, when and where to go on vacation, what to buy
 for a birthday present, whether to go to church or sleep late Sunday morning. Easy

choices, made countless times each day, some with scarcely a thought given, others after a brief reflection, a couple of conversations.

But then, from time to time, come those times where a life-changing decision rises in our easy path, when we cannot see what has to be done because both options have to be done and neither option is the right one, when our usual criteria for decision-making fall away because the choice is so profound and so ambiguous and so unexpected and so beyond our experience that we have little or nothing to guide, and yet we *have* to decide. Two roads diverge in the yellow wood, we cannot travel both, and however long we stand and look down each as far as we can to where they disappear in the undergrowth, we get no clear sense of which way to go. What then? How do you determine what to do at such a difficult life intersection?

Churches often set up shop around such intersections, as places where one can find guidance in sorting through complicated decisions. Some churches claim to have all the answers, the right answers, rock-solid truth—and thus would seem to be just what is needed when choices become impossible for us to determine alone. But those wonderfully clear answers, those “right” answers, take no account of individual differences, of shifting needs, of complexities, of situations in which nothing is clearly right or wrong and every possibility seems to bring pain. Those absolutely “right” answers no longer appear so right when the persons involved, in all their contradictions and with their messy lives, are taken into account.

Communications theorist Paul Watzlawick, in studies of individuals facing complex decisions, found that one reason we get caught in uncertainty, unable to reach a conclusion, comes from what Watzlawick called the “utopian fallacy.” When the

consequences of a choice become great enough, and the options complicated enough, we may stall out because of our increased desire to make the “right” decision. The response is understandable: the more there is at stake in a choice, the more important it is to choose wisely and well. So we consider our options ever more carefully and thoroughly, sort through all the possibilities and consequences again and again, intent on coming up with the right choice.

Watzlawick claimed that the problem arises when we begin believing that there is a right choice, and that the right choice can actually be found if we work hard enough, think carefully enough, ruminate long enough, weigh options thoroughly enough. Convinced that reaching a right choice is possible, we become lost in the search for that choice and never move forward. Liberal churches like ours can especially be prey to this dilemma, as we tend to believe that the right choice will be the one choice everyone can agree on. When have you ever seen that unanimity in our church here? How could it ever be possible, given our diversity? Yet we can so easily freeze on making a decision the moment someone expresses disagreement, especially if that disagreement is coupled with a threat to quit the congregation. So we fall into that “utopian fallacy”, hold onto the conviction that a right answer lies somewhere out there and can be, must be found.

Watzlawick notes that rarely, if ever, is there such a perfect, “right” answer—and especially so when the decision to be made is a complicated, difficult one. If we could give up our belief in the existence of a “right” answer, then we would be able to make a decision. But while we cling to the notion of coming up with a “right” answer, we will remain stalled at the intersection, sorting and pondering and weighing pluses and minuses—going nowhere.

On a mild early autumn day years ago, when golden leaves made the air itself seem golden, I packed up my belongings, and those of my small son, and left my marriage. The decision had been a long time coming, for it was one of those decisions where the stakes were high and every choice would bring hurtful consequences. Yet I had become convinced that nothing short of leaving the marriage would enable me to move forward with my life, grow my career, and provide my son with a happier home environment. Throughout that long, sad day, as each item went into a box or suitcase, I found myself reviewing my options one more time, and reaching the same conclusion: none of us were thriving, and surely life would improve once the marriage, which seemed to be the source of unhappiness, was ended. I had clearly made a mistake in choosing to marry this person. Now I intended to go back to that fork in the road where I had taken the route leading to marriage, and this time take the other route.

So we parted ways that day—for the first time. For I soon discovered that my decision did not lead inevitably to better lives, more happiness, for anyone, least of all myself. The road not taken, which seemed to be the right way, had just as many challenges as the road taken the first time. I did not feel any better, or more satisfied, or more content with my life, or more sure of doing the right thing, than I had before. So I reconciled and returned, only to leave for good not long after, when I finally recognized that whatever choice I made, staying married or divorcing, was going to be hard and involve giving up some of what I wanted. There was no road that would be easy, no road that would guarantee happiness, no road that could ever be without pain. What I needed to discover was not the right way, but the way I could commit myself to with integrity and live into fully, with all its satisfactions and challenges, all its rewards and sacrifices.

We come upon two roads, sometimes more than two roads, diverging in the yellow wood of our lives again and again. If life is not to come to a halt, we have no choice but to select one of those roads and walk it. Looking for a signpost or some indication of which is the “right” road is of no use, for at such intersections, where much is at stake, there are no signs. And while some churches may claim to offer those signs, the offer is a spurious one, based on a mistaken belief that God or the universe intends only one outcome and has only a single vision for us. The sacred mystery surrounding our lives is not so simple nor so small. Instead, we are offered a myriad of possibilities, all possibilities, every choice we might make and more, and wherever we go, on whatever road we walk, however easy, however difficult, we are not alone and nothing we do is ever lost.

Yesterday we concluded the Jewish High Holy Days, a period that began with the new year of Rosh Hoshanah and Saturday culminated with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. During this time, Jewish tradition envisions God holding open the books of our lives in which all our deeds of the past year have been recorded. While the books remain open, for this brief period of time, we have the opportunity to change the record, to undo what we regret having done, to rewrite our lives. Rewriting the book of one’s life is no easy matter. It means breaking with old habits, always difficult; it means admitting that I have been wrong, never easy; it means losing face, starting over, saying I am sorry.

Jewish tradition also teaches that the veil separating the Holy of Holies in the temple, the place where God dwells, is opened on Yom Kippur, suggesting that we are especially close to God while we take the difficult step of acknowledging wrongs and starting anew. So at this sacred time, in this place made sacred by memory and hope, let us take

advantage of the door that stands open for us today. May we forgive ourselves; may we forgive one another; may we begin again, in love.