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 Arlington Street Church
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The Right Choice

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that, the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

—American poet Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*.

I love that poem at this time of year, and, perhaps I love it most on the threshold of some momentous decision, love it in those rare times when we know we are making a choice that will change the course of our lives, a choice, like, say ... electing a new president! What we so easily forget, though, is that

the road is always diverging, meaning that, in every moment, we have choices to make. And even when we don't choose, as cellist Pablo Casals reminds us, even when we simply allow ourselves to be swept along in the headlong rush of life, *not to decide is to decide*.

To choose is a spiritual discipline. To choose and to commit ourselves to that choice - to declare with our lives that we claim it as the right choice for us - is a mark of spiritual evolution. To choose and to act on that choice, to support it and further it and, even, to put ourselves on the line for it, is divine living.

Hard as it may be for some of you to imagine, and loathe as I am to admit it, I missed the whole Paul Potts sensation in 2007. In the off-chance that any of you missed it, too, let me explain, briefly, that Paul Potts was born in England in 1970 and raised in Fishponds, Bristol, by his father, Roland, a bus driver, and his mother, Yvonne, a supermarket cashier. As a child, Paul was bullied in school, to which he attributes a lack of self-confidence that plagued him into adulthood. Paul grew up into a portly man with crooked teeth and a sweet smile who worked as a manager at a mobile phone store near his hometown.

On March 17th, 2007, Paul Potts auditioned for American Idol's English counterpart, Britain's Got Talent. In the YouTube clip of his try-out, he walks onstage and stands before an audience of 2,000 in the Wales Millennium Centre. He gives a nod, the taped music is switched on, and he sings *Nessun Dorma*, the beloved tenor aria from Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*. What emerges from this most unlikely source is surely the voice of an angel.

The audience rises to its feet and begins to shout. Judge Simon Crowell's sardonic sneer is replaced by a beautiful smile. Judge Amanda Holden weeps, openly, as do many members of the audience ... as do I, as I watch the clip over and over. Paul Potts is an overnight sensation and, as anyone who knows the first thing about opera will tell you, the rest is history.¹

One of many reasons I love this story, this victory, is what it says of Paul Potts' choices. His voice, he said, had always been a source of solace when he was bullied.² He had every reason to keep it to himself, to keep *himself* to

¹ youtube.com/watch?v=o7glOGq82xQ

² wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Potts

himself, yet when he arrived at that crossroads with cell phone sales down the better-worn trail and opera on the other, he made a stunning choice. It would be a mistake to think that the right choice was obvious, or easy, a mistake to miss the courage it took for Paul to step into the thin air of that stage. *Imagine!*

It's not always so dramatic; in fact, it may never be so dramatic for the vast majority of us. The opportunity to choose, choosing, and making the right choice may be so subtle, even the people who know and love us well may barely notice. But this is not about showing off; this is about living with integrity, living into the fulfillment of our highest purposes.

In the wake of Paul Newman's death in late September, the news has been full of wonderful stories about him. I love, especially, tales from the Hole in the Wall camps, now eleven camps around the world that have welcomed some 135,000 critically ill campers for five to ten days each over the past twenty years, free of charge. Apparently, some of the kids had no idea who the old guy was who was mowing the grass or driving the camp van. He himself loved to tell the story of sitting at lunch with a table of 8-year-olds. One of the kids kept looking at him and looking at him. Finally, gesturing to the lemonade carton, he asked, "Is this you?" Paul said, "Yup." And the child asked, "How long were you lost?"³

I think about Paul Newman at summer camp, or founding Newman's Own foods, and giving 250 million dollars of its proceeds to charity. Even his memoir was entitled not to draw attention to his extraordinary acting career, but, rather, to the power of philanthropy; it's called, *Shameless Exploitation in the Pursuit of the Common Good*. Paul Newman had a choice. In fact, years and years ago, he was already so wealthy he could very easily have chosen to do nothing more. Instead, even after his last screen appearance in 2002, he kept giving himself away, right up to the end, insuring that we would never think of him as "just" an extremely successful actor. We cannot fully describe Paul Newman without using the word *humanitarian*.

Sometimes, not even viewing our choices as choices, but, rather, as mandates - ethical or spiritual directives that speak to amplify who we are - is the highest form of making the right choice.

³ as told by David Horvitz, board chair of Hole in the Wall camps, to *People* magazine, 12/20/08

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen worked with a 24-year old bone cancer survivor, whose leg had been removed at the hip to save his life. Life's injustice had left him grieving and rageful, filled with a bitter hatred for well, able-bodied people.

After two years of therapy with Dr. Remen, which included the use of imagery and painting, he experienced a profound shift, and later began to visit others who had suffered severe physical losses. Once he visited a young woman, about his own age, who was recovering from a bilateral mastectomy. He was wearing running shorts, so his prosthetic leg showed, but she was so depressed about the loss of her breasts that she wouldn't even look at him. The radio was playing; in a last-ditch attempt to engage her, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around her room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. Finally, he got her attention. She looked at him in amazement, then burst out laughing. "Man," she said, "if you can dance, then I can sing."

A year later, he sat down with Rachel Remen to review their work together. Flipping through drawings he had made early on, he came to one he had made in response to her suggestion that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a vase with a deep crack in it. In black crayon, he had drawn the crack over and over, grinding his teeth with rage. It had seemed to him then that the vase could never hold water; it would never function as a vase again.

Now, he looked up at Dr. Reman and said, "Oh, this one isn't finished." Extending the box of crayons, she said, "Why don't you finish it?" He chose a yellow crayon, and drew light streaming through the crack in his body. "You see, here, where it's broken," he said, putting his finger on the crack, "this is where the light comes through."⁴

I think of the line from Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places."⁵ And I think of Moses, speaking to his people in the wilderness, "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore, choose life...."⁶

⁴ Quoted in Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*

⁵ 1929

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:19

My spiritual companions, may we choose to transmute our suffering into compassion, our prosperity into generosity, our talent into a gift to the world ... and let our light so shine. Mindful of the choices proffered in every moment, may we answer the call to divine living, choose, and give ourselves to the right choice. Like the poet at the fork in the yellow wood, may we consider well the road before us. Poet, essayist, and Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “What lies behind us and what lies before are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”