

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 29 October, 2017

No Regrets

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.¹

~ Robert Frost

If we're lucky, in the course of lifetime, we come to a lot of crossroads. They tend to be scary, or heartbreaking. We might appreciate them more if we remember that crossroads mean we have choices. When we're out of choices – when we're between a rock and a hard place – we're out of luck.

¹ Robert Frost (1874-1963), *The Road Not Taken* (Mountain Interval, 1920)

Here's a paragraph from author Tayari Jones' *Silver Sparrow*. It's been keeping me up at night.

“I am neither religious nor superstitious,” she writes, “but there is something otherworldly about the space where two roads come together. The devil is said to set up shop there if you want to swap your soul for something more useful. If you believe that G*d can be bribed, it's also the hallowed ground to make sacrifices. In the literal sense, it's also a place to change direction, but once you've changed it, you're stuck until you come to another crossroads, and who knows how long that will be.”

Suddenly, I'm paying attention.

Is this a crossroads?

Speaking figuratively ...

Where's the devil in the details?

What offering should we be making to the gods?

And seriously – dead seriously –

Are we really ready to commit to the path that lies ahead?

My friend Mike Ward probably doesn't even remember giving me one of the most important pieces of advice I ever got. I was at a crossroads, perseverating, unable to decide by what metrics I should choose which way to go. Mike said,

Stop doing things you'll regret.

That cleared it up! And two things happened, really; I chose, and chose boldly. But, perhaps more importantly, I committed to *befriending regret*. There it is, toward the top of my personal mission statement: I pledged that if I were going to make a mistake – and I make them every day, all the time – I'd make a good one: a wholehearted mistake as opposed to a half-hearted mistake. And I'd learn from it, by G*d, even if it felt like my heart would break and I'd never stop crying.

Gordon Marino, a professor of philosophy, told this haunted and haunting story: “... I was sitting poolside in Florida with a retiree who was standing in the warm aqua water, beaming with friendliness. We started chatting, first about his hometown, Pittsburgh, and the many great athletes from there. Soon the conversation pivoted to Vietnam and his experiences as a draftee there. Embarrassed because I was spared from that jungle and moral crucible, I just listened. First it was a few madcap stories about his arrival [there], but then his thoughts swam along a darker current.

“Moving his arms underwater, he recalled, ‘One time I had just gotten paid and I was gambling, playing poker with this 14-year-old Vietnamese kid. A great kid. He was studying English, wanted to make something of himself! Well he won, fair and square. He cleaned me out of my whole paycheck. I was drinking heavily back then. I picked up my M16, pointed it at him, and demanded my money back. He gave me [the] money.

“All I could do,” says Gordon Marino, “was shake my head and tell him ... that every ugly deed ... I committed had also been fueled by alcohol. As though I’d missed the point, he said, ‘I haven’t had a drink in decades. But you know, I’d give anything to be able to see that kid now, grown.’ His voice swelled with emotion. ‘I would get on my knees and ask his forgiveness. I would say that I hope [he’s] had a great life, and that [I’m] sorry.’”²

What do we do with that kind of regret – the kind where there’s no chance for a do-over, the kind that we can never make better? My own answer is that we do what this gentle man did:

First, we quit drinking, for example, or quit doing whatever it was that got us to that crossroads and into that tangle with the devil – swapping our soul, as Tayari Jones says, for something more useful.

Then we feel the full horror of the regret, and we don’t allow ourselves to look away – not to shame ourselves or to fuel our guilt, but to take the full measure of our fall.

And then we think hard and long about how we can make it right, and make it right, and keep making it right – not that situation, necessarily, but situations like it;

we choose differently,
and live our amends.

*Regret is useless to us unless we befriend it,
and take its wise counsel,
and choose life.*

Don Juan Matus, the Yaqui Indian Shaman, goes one step further. He says to his student, Carlos Castaneda, “The thing to do³ ... is to turn to your left and ask advice from your death. An immense amount of pettiness

² Gordon Marino, “What’s the Use of Regret?” *New York Times*, 11/12/16. Please see mobile.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/whats-the-use-of-regret.html

³ deleted: “when you’re impatient”

is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it, or if you just have the feeling that your companion is there watching you....”

O, there it is: What we really want to do at those crossroads is to check in with our death. If that sounds harsh, it is. If it sounds draconian, it is. If it sounds depressing, it’s not. It’s just a little reminder that we don’t have all the time in the world to get this right; a little reminder that, in the light of death, the opportunity to make life-giving choices is a gift. Don Juan says, “The aim is to balance the terror of being alive with the wonder of being alive.... In a world where death is the hunter, my friend, there is no time for regrets or doubts. There is only time for decisions....”

“[And] death is the only wise advisor that we have. Whenever you feel, as you always do, that everything is going wrong and you’re about to be annihilated, turn to your death and ask if that is so. Your death will tell you that you’re wrong; that nothing really matters outside its touch. Your death will tell you, ‘I haven’t touched you yet.’”⁴ We’re not dead yet. So let’s live – really live.

Beloved spiritual companions,
Crossroads – choices – are good luck.

Let’s take that road not taken,
and make something of it.

Let’s stop doing things we’ll regret,
and when we make mistakes,
make them wholeheartedly;
make something
of our fortune and misfortune.

Befriend regret.

Ask advice of death, our wisest advisor.
The opportunity to make life-giving choices
is a gift

Let’s really live.

⁴ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*, p. 34 ff