“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” So spake our late New Hampshire neighbor, Robert Frost.

In a nation not known for its love of poetry, these words have become familiar, indeed ubiquitous.

“The Road Less Traveled” has been the slogan of the New Hampshire Division of Travel and Tourism. It’s been used in television commercials for luxury cars, mutual funds, and AT&T. It’s the name of a wilderness adventure program for teens, a Southern California store selling eco-friendly lifestyle products, a greatest hits compilation of Melissa Etheridge, and Episode 5, Season 4, of Battlestar Galactica. It’s fodder for countless newspaper and magazine headlines. And of course it’s the title of the self-help book by M. Scott Peck that spent a decade on the New York Times bestseller list while selling more than seven million copies in twenty-three languages.

Why is this notion of the road less traveled so popular, so pervasive, so satisfying?

It celebrates the classic American impulse to individualism, sweetened with a sense of superiority. By taking the less traveled road we take pride in discerning what others missed, making the uncommon choice, avoiding the crowd. And that makes all the difference.

Unfortunately, that’s not what Robert Frost meant. And it’s not what he said.

There is no road less traveled, not in this poem. The road less traveled is a trick, a fiction of the narrator’s hindsight.

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,—not better, not worse, just as fair—
And having perhaps the better claim,—perhaps—
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

The two roads, according to the narrator at the time, were “really about the same.”

And both that morning equally—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.
Robert Frost’s poetry is neither sentimental nor overstated. The thunderous piano crash of the last line, “And that has made all the difference,” is out of tune with the poet because it’s not the poet’s moral at all, but that of his self-deluding narrator.

Fortunately this narrator has enough integrity to tell us the facts. He tells us the roads were worn “really about the same” and “equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black.”

There is no road less traveled here. There are two roads equally traveled.

Only later, “ages and ages hence,” will the narrator retroject into the scene the self-satisfying fabrication that he chose the less traveled road. Knowing his own weakness for the obvious if inaccurate moralization, the narrator predicts his own self-deception. In bemused self-awareness, the narrator admits

This moment of self-mocking prophecy reminds me of the Bruce Springsteen song “Glory Days,” where the singer muses on the nostalgic impulse: “I hope when I get old I don't sit around thinking about it, but I probably will. . . . Time slips away and leaves you with nothing, mister, but boring stories of glory days.”

Now you don’t have to believe my interpretation of the poem. You don’t have to believe the text of the poem. But you might want to believe Robert Frost.

“You have to be careful of that one,” Frost said. “It's a tricky poem—very tricky. . . . I wasn't thinking about myself there, but about a friend who had gone off to war, a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other. He was hard on himself that way.”

Far from a hymn to rugged individualism, the poem is a gentle satire of indecisiveness, the distortion of retrospection, and the seduction of self-justification. That’s why the poem is titled not “The Road Less Traveled,” but “The Road Not Taken”—for there will always be a road not taken, and we will never know where, for worse or for better, it might have led.

Why are we so easily caught in the same snare as Frost’s narrator? Why is this poem so widely misunderstood to proclaim the superiority of the minority—those who choose the road less traveled?

(While asking these questions I should point out, before anyone else does me the favor, that I, too, have claimed the road less traveled by asserting that most people misunderstand the poem!)

Few of us wish to be so far outside the mainstream that we are utterly isolated, a splendid majority of one. But there is a powerful appeal in defining our own tastes, beliefs, and
opinions as too refined for the crowd. The most precious gems in the world are precious precisely because so few can possess them.

A lot of academic writing defies comprehension (some, I daresay, by our friends and neighbors across the street)—its very obscurity, even opacity, proving to both author and reader that they partake of a communion of profundity beyond the reach of virtually anyone else on the planet, when all it really proves is that some very, very smart people can’t write.

(What do you get when you cross a literary deconstructionist with a gangster? Someone who makes you an offer you can’t understand.)

The entire tradition of gentility and aristocracy is based on the superiority of the few. The word “common” commonly means “usual,” as in a common occurrence, or “shared,” as in something in common. But sometimes growing up I was startled to hear my mother use the word to mean “vulgar,” as in something only a commoner would do.

When African-American Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed was in first grade, his best friend was an African-American schoolmate named Grover. One day Grover taught Mark a rhyme containing the N-word, which Mark innocently recited to his mother. His mother hit the ceiling. “I won’t have that language in my house,” she said. “We’re not common Negroes. I won’t have it.” She insisted that Mark tell Grover they couldn’t play together anymore. Heartbroken, Mark lost his best friend.

I, too, was on notice to avoid the common. In my early twenties I broke up with a lovely young woman for a number of bonehead reasons, one of which was her habitual enjoyment of popular novels.

Unitarian Universalists can fall into this trap, too. Only three out of a thousand Americans identify as Unitarian, and only a fraction of these actually join our congregations as members. Our official adult membership totals a mere 160,000, a number that inches up year by year, barely keeping pace with population growth. Last year fewer than half of our congregations reported any growth at all.

We are indeed an elite. But do we want to be?

For long-time Unitarians, it may literally be in our blood. When Harriet Beecher Stowe moved to Boston in 1826, she found that “All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian. All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians. All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches.” Today, as a percentage of the population, we are more elite still.

My late colleague the Rev. William Burnside Miller, a longtime parish minister, charged that many of us are all too happy to keep Unitarian Universalism to ourselves. Many of our congregations, he insisted, are more like “private clubs open to members only. After all, if you have discovered ‘Truth,’ ‘Beauty,’ and ‘Right’ and know that only a small elite can possibly attain that goal, then surely you do not want to be sullied by the intellectually, spiritually, or culturally unwashed. We smugly congratulate ourselves,” Burnside declared, “on our rejection of proselytizing, grandly affirming a gracious tolerance of differing points of view. We then sit content with our small numbers, knowing that our way can only appeal to people who are truly superior, which is to say people just like us. After all, if small is beautiful, then tiny must be terrific.”

Clearly, First Parish in Cambridge does a better job of welcoming and encouraging newcomers. Every Sunday visitors arrive, are personally greeted, sign a green or blue card, mingle at social hour. Some of them return again and again. They join the church, volunteer, head committees, sing in the choir. “They” become “we.” And when you ask them why they
chose First Parish in Cambridge over other congregations they visited, they will often say something like, “I felt warmly welcomed here.”

But I wonder how often we neglect to invite others to join us in worship here, or to embrace them when they do, because we assume consciously or unconsciously that their culture, class, education, or mode of dress disqualifies them from membership.

Not officially, of course. Officially, we welcome everybody.

But do we?

In every Unitarian Universalist congregation I’ve ever known, I’ve heard people say they love how many like-minded people there are here. But religious community is not about thinking alike or being alike. It’s about finding in our different ways of being human our common humanity and the spark of divinity.

Difference is not consoling. It’s challenging, unsettling, sometimes disturbing. What is consoling is that in our difference we’re the same as everybody else: flawed, struggling, innocent, alive.

First Parish in Cambridge is historically Unitarian, but since 1961 we have also been Universalist. Universalism means we welcome all souls. Not just the elect, the visible saints, the chosen few. All souls.

All human beings with inherent worth and dignity. In religious language: all children of a common God—a common God.

If we welcome all souls, Unitarian Universalism can be a saving faith for our times.

We can be a dynamic religious movement offering solace and salvation to thousands and millions served poorly or not at all by other houses of worship—where we find a sacred place to be ourselves, free to inquire, to grow, to challenge, and to change, not oppressed by orthodoxy but nourished by community, serving others and working for justice.

We can be a powerful religious voice to answer those who in the name of religion speak hatred, fear, and prejudice.

A few years back, the Unitarian Universalist Association mounted an advertising campaign with the slogan “The Uncommon Denomination,” which some of our congregations still use.

You know what? Instead of The Uncommon Denomination with 160,000 members, I’d rather be The Common Denomination with 160 million members!

I like to say that every Sunday at First Parish in Cambridge is Bring-a-Friend Sunday. Two Sundays coming up soon are especially appropriate for inviting newcomers: February 14, Valentine’s Day, when the worship theme will be “To Haiti, with Love,” and the following Sunday, February 21, when the sermon topic will be “Can Unitarian Universalists Be Saved?”

Every day, Unitarian Universalism saves lives: the lives of troubled youth, sexual minorities, heretical thinkers, those burdened by sorrow and loneliness and oppression, those simply seeking as we sought the unique gifts of Unitarian Universalism.

We don’t need to proselytize or convert anyone. We need only open our doors and keep them open.

We can keep the road less traveled for ourselves. Or we can welcome all souls as companions on the journey.

Amen and Blessed Be.