

A Path, Not a Battle

Category: Cancer

written by Dana Cook Grossman | June 15, 2021

I grew up on a farm in Connecticut, went to college in Rhode Island, and have lived my entire adult life in small-town Vermont, so the mores of rural New England are deeply engrained in me.

That means Robert Frost's poetry is part of my vernacular. (I own two hardcover copies of *You Come Too*, a collection of his most popular poems: one copy was printed the year I turned ten and bears my name on the flyleaf in childish script; the other bears a notation that I bought it used for 25 cents the summer after I graduated from high school. I can't bring myself to deaccession either copy.) Some Frost excerpts are quoted so often they're clichés, especially hereabouts. If you're leaving an evening gathering, "I have ... miles to go before I sleep" is a typical throwaway line. If you're off on a quick errand, "I sha'n't be gone long" is what you say as you step out the door. If small-town politics rear their head, "good fences make good neighbors" is the expected prescription.

The most quoted of all Frostiana is, of course, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by." That line gets trotted out whenever someone is deciding which of two paths to take, as a reminder to consider uncommon choices. Sometimes, however, one ends up on a road "less traveled by" as a matter of chance, not choice.

Two years ago, I was diagnosed with a rare form of Stage 4 oral cancer, despite having no risk factors for the disease. An onerous course of treatment offered a chance of a good outcome, however. Suddenly, Frost's platitude acquired new meaning. I realized the biggest choice I faced was not *what* to do—I'd be dealing with cancer, no matter what treatment decisions I made—but *how* to deal with this unsettling turn of events, what mindset to adopt.

It's usual to frame an experience with cancer as a battle: "You can fight this," people say. "She battled cancer valiantly," obituaries proclaim.

Instead, I decided to frame what lay ahead of me not as a battle but as a deviation in my path. Not like a win-lose proposition, but like a steep stretch on a trail "in a yellow wood." Today, I feel well and grateful. I credit that to science. To unwavering support from family and friends. And to my framing of the past two years as a path, not a battle.

"That has made all the difference."

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