

The Road Less Traveled

1978

“Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties in life as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy.”

“As Benjamin Franklin said, ‘Those things that hurt, instruct.’ It is for this reason that wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems and actually to welcome the pain of problems.”

“What are these tools, these techniques of suffering, these means of experiencing the pain of problems constructively that I call discipline? There are four: delaying of gratification, acceptance of responsibility, dedication to truth, and balancing ... they are simple tools, and almost all children are adept in their use by the age of ten. Yet presidents and kings will often forget to use them, to their downfall.”

In a nutshell

Once you admit that “life is difficult,” the fact is no longer of great consequence. Once you accept responsibility, you can make better choices.

In a similar vein

Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (p50)

Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (p216)

Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love* (p288)

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M. Scott Peck

This is the self-help book read by people who don't read self-help books. It contains none of the alluring promises of boundless joy and happiness that are the feature of personal development writing, yet has still been a massive bestseller. Famously beginning with the words "Life is difficult," it covers such gloomy topics as the myth of romantic love, evil, mental illness, and the author's psychological and spiritual crises.

Perhaps because of its lack of rosiness, it is easy to give this book our confidence—it works on the premise that once we know the worst, we are free to see what is beyond it. *The Road Less Traveled* is inspirational but in an old-fashioned way, putting self-discipline at the top of the list of values for a good life. If you believe that there are no easy ways to enlightenment or even full mental health, that factors like commitment and responsibility are the seeds of fulfillment, then you belong in Dr. Peck's territory.

Peck is a conventionally trained psychotherapist, but has been influential in the movement to have psychology recognize the stages of spiritual growth. He sees the great feature of our times as being the reconciliation of the scientific and the spiritual worldviews. *The Road Less Traveled* is his attempt to bridge the gap further, and it has clearly been successful. The book is welcomed by anyone who has found themselves torn between the science of psychology and the spiritual search.

Discipline

Self-control is the essence of Peck's brand of self-help. He says:

"Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems."

A person who has the ability to delay gratification has the key to psychological maturity, whereas impulsiveness is a mental habit that, in denying opportunities to experience pain, creates neuroses. Most large problems we have are the result of not facing up to earlier, smaller problems, of failing to be “dedicated to the truth.” The great mistake that most people make is believing that problems will go away of their own accord.

This lack of responsibility will damage us in other ways. Our culture puts freedom on a pedestal, yet as Eric Fromm showed in *Escape from Freedom*, people have a natural willingness to embrace political authoritarianism and give up their personal power. When it comes down to it, we shy away from real freedom and choice just as much as we avoid obviously negative things. Discipline is not only about “growing up” in terms of accepting reality, but in the appreciation of the tremendous range of choices before us.

The road and its rewards

One of the great insights of the book is how few people actually choose the spiritual path. Just as there are many well-qualified sergeants who balk at becoming an officer, Peck observes, people in psychotherapy often have little taste for the power that comes with genuine mental health. Life on autopilot is preferable to any major challenge.

The Road Less Traveled is rich with the stories of real people. Some of the vignettes demonstrate the transformation of a life, but in other cases people merely refuse to change, or in the end can't be bothered. Does this ring true? It is in these less extreme cases that we are more likely to see our own quiet turning away from a bolder, richer life. Rather than the horror of a mental illness, Peck says, most of us have to deal with the straightforward anguish of missed opportunities.

Yet why is this so, when the rewards are so great? The road less traveled might be the spiritual path, but it is also much rockier and dimly lit next to the regular highway of life, on which other people seem happy enough. However, Peck says that to ask this question of “Why bother?” we must know nothing about joy. The rewards of spiritual life are enormous: Peace of mind and freedom from real worry that most people never imagine is possible. Burdens are always ready to be lifted, since they are no longer solely ours.

Nevertheless, deepened spirituality also brings responsibility; this is inevitable as we move from spiritual childhood to adulthood. Peck remembers St Augustine, who said: “If you are loving and diligent, you may do whatever you want.” Just as our previous spiritual timidity and laziness resulted (as we can now see) in a very limited existence, so discipline opens the door to limitlessness in our experience of life. Only the more enlightened can be amused by the fact that others think they must lead a boring and restrained life; the walls that look stark from without may simply be shielding us from the glow of rapture within.

Love is a decision

What is the fuel on the road less traveled? Love, of course, and Peck is at his best discussing this thing that cannot be adequately defined. We tend to think of love as effortless, the freefall of “falling in love.” While it may be mysterious, love is also effortful; love is a decision: “The desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does.”

The ecstatic state of being in love is in part a regression to infancy, a time when we felt our mother and ourselves to be one; we are back in communion with the world and anything seems possible. Yet just as the baby comes to realize that he or she is an individual, so the lover eventually returns to his or her self. At this point, Peck says, the work of “real” love begins. Anyone can fall in love, but not everyone can decide to love. We may never control love’s onset, but we may—with discipline—remain in charge of our response. And once these “muscles” of love have been used they tend to stay, increasing our power to channel love in the most life-giving and appropriate way.

Final comments

The discerning reader will note the contrast between Peck’s belief that psychological change is necessarily slow, and the cognitive psychology view that our limitations can be removed without much trouble if we know how (see Martin Seligman, David D. Burns, Anthony Robbins). This is a basic divide in the self-help literature: the hard work ethic, components of which include building character and discovering soul; and the belief in mental technology, that our problems are not deep-seated and can be addressed by practical psycho-technological methods. If the former way is characterized by discipline and self-knowledge, the

latter says that if we only have the right tools, we can create whoever we want to be.

Those readers who exclusively cheer for the latter should balance themselves by reading Peck. He discusses, for instance, an experience that is not referred to in modern psychology at all: “grace.” A surprise burst of peace, gratitude, and freedom, Peck feels this to be the highest point of human experience, fruit of a life of discipline and purpose.

In his insistence on morality, discipline, and admiration of long-suffering, Peck’s writing can seem old-fashioned. Yet he is no conformist in his denouncement of the failure of psychotherapy to recognize people as spiritual beings, and the book has surprised many readers by its embrace of the Jungian, New Age concepts of the collective unconscious and synchronicity. Somehow, the blend of Christianity, the New Age, and academic psychology does work.

Peck’s classic will seem a little earnest to some, to others it will be full of life-changing insights. It is one of the giants of the self-help canon, having sold over seven million copies, and its title has entered the public idiom. In spite of what Peck says about resistance to spirituality, the less traveled road is clearly getting more traffic.

M. Scott Peck

Born in 1936, Scott Peck had a privileged upbringing in New York and went to exclusive prep schools and Harvard. He gained his MD at Case Western Reserve University in 1963, after which he began a nine-year service in the Army Medical Corps. Over the following decade he established his own psychiatric practice.

Though The Road Less Traveled was written in the mid-1970s, when Peck was 39, it did not make it on to the New York Times best-seller list until 1983. Thereafter it stayed on the list for so long that it entered the Guinness Book of Records. The sequel is Further Along the Road Less Traveled (1993).

Peck's other books include People of the Lie (1983) on healing human evil and The Different Drum (1987) on community life. A World Waiting to Be Born (1993) looks at the idea of civility at the personal and societal level, while Denial of the Soul (1998) concerns euthanasia and terminal illness.

As a chain-smoking martini drinker, the author does not fit the usual profile of the self-help guru and has also written on his other passion, golf (Golf and the Spirit). He lives with his wife Lily in Connecticut and Bodega Bay, California.