

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Not “*What if?*” but “*What now?*”

“Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” That’s Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. I thought of this “understood backwards/lived forwards” conundrum as I drove to church last Sunday morning, and heard NPR’s Jenny Martin interview author Jenny Erpenbeck. Her new novel, *The End of Days*,¹ is the story of the birth of a baby girl in Eastern Europe before World War I. The baby dies. But, she asks, what if she hadn’t? “Four different [imagined stories] of the child’s life play out;” in each, she has the chance to grow into a woman; in each she faces death.

Jenny Erpenbeck is haunted by “the idea that there are lives not lived,” because of the turn-turn-turn of events. Echoing Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* and Mark Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger*, *The End of Days* keeps turning the kaleidoscope, and, with each turn, asks the question: “What if?” Reading, we are compelled inward: What if we’d made a different choice? What if we’d said yes? Or no? Or what if X hadn’t happened? Considering the endless trajectories of possibility, how would our lives be different?

I turned off the radio, feeling irritated. “What if” is not the right question. “What if” is not a helpful framework on which to construct a life of spiritual depth and meaning.

The question is not “What if?” but “What now?”

This is American poet Robert Frost’s

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both

¹ translated from German by Susan Bernofsky

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.²

*

Wouldn't it be amazing if every time we were about to do something regretful, the heavens opened and the theme song for *Jaws* started playing? You know it, right? It's those driving two notes, alternating, ominously, over and over. When composer John Williams tried it out on Steven Spielberg – just two notes on a piano – Spielberg thought he was kidding, but it's ranked as the American Film Institute's "sixth greatest score," "a classic piece of suspense music, synonymous with approaching danger." Williams described the theme as "grinding away at you, just as a shark would do, instinctual, relentless, unstoppable."³

Do we need to do it? (*Mark plays*) OR Let's do it!

So that doesn't happen. There is no scary music queued up to warn us to take the road not taken. And unless we're planning to circle back and take it, it's a terrible waste of precious time to dwell on the road not taken.

² Robert Frost (1874-1963), *The Road Not Taken* (Mountain Interval, 1920)

³ please see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaws_\(soundtrack\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaws_(soundtrack))

Hindsight is show-stopping if it's only employed as a weapon of "would have, could have, should have." Hindsight is only useful as it informs foresight. It's too late for the past to have been different. And given that we find ourselves here and now – in this life that Zorba the Greek called "the full catastrophe" – can we mine the spiritual reserve, find the courage, to ask not "what if?" but "what now?"

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Sharon Olds famously declined Laura Bush's invitation to the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C. This is from her shattering poem,

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre⁴ sandstone arch,⁵

... I

see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her,
its sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.

I want to go up to them and say Stop,
Don't do it – she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry, pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,

⁴ say OKE-r

⁵ omitted:

... the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head,

his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
but I don't do it. I want to live.⁶

.... I say

Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.⁷

Not “what if?” but “what now?” What was done cannot be undone. But, says the poet, “I will tell about it.” We will tell about it, and our lives will be defined not by what happened to us, but by what we did with what happened to us.

Here's a reflection by my colleague George Tyger, written in his book *War Zone Faith: An Army Chaplain's Reflections from Afghanistan*.

“We are on a dismounted patrol to the top of some ancient ruins. A short walk, but the ground is loose and steep. Rocks and dirt slide down.... The only way to make it up a steep hill while laden with gear is to look ahead [and] watch where you put your feet.

“The same holds true when moving toward any goal in life.... [There] is a balance of possibilities and limits. The possibilities: reaching the top,... or just getting through the deployment and getting home. The limits: an uncertain course, unstable footing, the dangers of this place, waning physical and emotional stamina. We have hopes, dreams, goals we seek to make real in our lives. We struggle with fear, loneliness, hardship. We must navigate the obstacles while keeping our sights on all that is possible.

“We crest the hill and stand atop thousand-year-old ruins. We look out across the city. Children play as well-armed soldiers stroll the streets. In the distance, the earth curves and the horizon falls away. So much possibility. So many limits. Where will we be six months from now? ... Will we reach our homes safely?

⁶ omitted:

.... I

take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint as if to
strike sparks from them,

⁷ Sharon Olds, “I Go Back to May 1937,” in *The Gold Cell*

“Whatever the answers to these questions may be for [us], there is only one sure way forward – [to] look ahead, but watch where [we] put [our] feet.”⁸

Not “what if,” but “what now?”

Just one more thing, then: Let’s stick together. Ram Dass’ teacher, Maharaj-ji⁹ said, “Love everyone, serve everyone; All is One.”¹⁰ If there’s anything that’s going to get us through “what now?” it’s living on purpose, with purpose; living in love with each other, and with the world, for the world. This is the call to the mission of the beloved community of memory and hope.

What now?

We say, “gathered in love and service for justice and peace.”

What now?

We say, We are building this road as we walk on it.

Beloved spiritual companions,

“Jaws” will not play,

and we are all standing on top of ruins.

In the face of the full catastrophe, let’s tell about it.

The question is not “What if?” but “What now?”

There is a new road to choose.

Let’s look ahead.

Let’s stick together.

⁸ George Tyger, *War Zone Faith: An Army Chaplain’s Reflections from Afghanistan* (Skinner House, 2013)

⁹ North Indian teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, known by his students as Maharaj-ji

¹⁰ *Sub Ek*, translated as “All is One”