

WEEK THREE: NEW PATHWAYS

He has been dubbed one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, having received four Pulitzer prizes. He was a prolific writer, with some of his poem titles imprinted on our cultural psyche. One of my favorites is *The Road not Taken*, in which Robert Frost opines the struggle of choosing between two paths, wondering if he'll one day regret which one he took. In the end he chose the less traveled one, and that path, his final line notes, "has made all the difference."

Speaking of paths, did you know that your brain is like a massive transit system, with major freeways and highways, medium-sized roads and smaller pathways that are continually being formed and reformed by the signals your billions of neurons send to each other? The process is incredibly complex, but here's my very simple take: Based on the things we repeatedly think or do, our brains act like a road crew every night, coming in to clean things up; strengthening the pathways we've used most and ignoring those we haven't, until neglect causes them to fade away.

This explains a little how those negative messages from painful experiences end up like earworms we can't get rid of (see Day 2). Because those thoughts have been repeated so often over the course of our lives, our brains treat them like major highways, maintaining them daily as long as they keep playing in our mind. Thankfully, it doesn't have to be this way—our brains are amazingly *plastic*, which means when we make a choice to change, our brains follow suit, although it can take some time for those neural pathways to catch up with the desires of our soul.

Back to *The Road Less Traveled*. Imagine that you are standing in front of two mental roads that veer off in different directions—one well-worn and one less traveled. What might they be for you? Perhaps the path of negative self-talk looms large, while God's truth about who you are is more narrow and less trodden. Or maybe the major road is a raucous one of busyness and distraction, while the less maintained path reflects peaceful balance through daily communion with Jesus. As you pause and ponder this fork in the road, what would it take for you to begin to choose the one less traveled?

I remember a time when I was deeply moved by the depth of Jesus' compassion for others. I saw, perhaps for the first time, how alien this facet of his character was for my "get the job done" personality that meant I often missed the needs of hurting people around me. Compassion was a "road less traveled" for me. But knowing or even desire wasn't enough to change a lifetime of behavior patterns. As I discovered some of how the brain works, I knew I had to forge a new neural pathway, so I started doing these three things:

- I asked God daily to do in me what I could not do for myself.
- I read, memorized and meditated on Scriptures about compassion, especially in the life of Jesus.
- I acted out compassion whenever I had the chance, whether I felt like it or not.

It has taken some time, and I still have room for growth, but I can see how I've changed and become more of the person I want to be, more like Jesus, my beloved role model. Now I experience deep joy and satisfaction when I get a chance to care for someone I might once have ignored.

What if, instead of feeling condemnation for all that you are not, you decided to seize the incredible opportunity to become who you really want to be? While these kinds of changes don't happen overnight, those ways you've longed to be like can become a deeply rooted part of who you are. The moment you decide to choose the "road less traveled," your brain, so fearfully and wonderfully made, goes to work to forge a new way of being. And that, my friend, is the path that will make all the difference.

W3-DAY 1

READ

Quietly read Jeremiah 6:16 and Matthew 7:13-14. Read them one more time, aloud if possible, hearing Jesus speak directly to you.

REFLECT

Ponder these questions:

- What are the four things Jeremiah advises God's people to do? Write each one in your own words.
- What are the two pathways and the two destinies Jesus lays out?

Pray:

- Offer words of praise and gratitude to Jesus that he has called you to a path of life.
- Consider one area of heart or character in which you would like to become more like Jesus. See yourself standing before two pathways—one being the less traveled one that will take you to who you want to be. Ask God to speak: *Lord, what will this look like if I take it?*
- See the other pathway, the broad, more traveled road that takes you away from who you want to be. Ask God to speak: *Lord, what does this path look like in my life write now?*

RESPOND

- Write out a sentence that describes the pathway you want to form in your mind so that it shapes your life. (Example: *I want to demonstrate the kind of compassion Jesus did when I see hurting people*).
- Ask God to create a new neural pathway that can help fulfill this desire.
- When you find yourself on the more destructive pathway, see Jesus holding out his hand, waiting to walk with you where you want to go, to be more like him.

W3-DAY 2

READ

Quietly read John 10:1-10. Read it one more time, aloud if possible.

REFLECT

Ponder these questions:

- What does this passage tell you about Jesus? His heart? His character?
- What does this tell you about yourself? About your relationship with Jesus?

Pray:

- Spend a few minutes with a grateful heart before your Good Shepherd.
- Think of the “less traveled path” you identified yesterday. Ask Jesus: *What will it look like today for me to hear your voice and follow on this path? What doors/gates might you open for me?*
- Consider the well-worn way of being that is forged in your brain’s neural pathways, which has stolen the abundance Jesus has for you. Ask God: *Lord, how has the enemy stolen the life you have for me through this?*

RESPOND

- Review your sentence from the previous devotional in which you described the pathway you want to form in your mind so that it shapes your life. Write it out again and read it aloud.
- Continue to ask God to create this new neural pathway that can help fulfill this desire.
- When you find yourself on the more destructive pathway, hear your Good Shepherd calling your name, ready to lead you where you want to go, to be more like him.

W3-DAY 3

READ

Quietly read Psalm 25:4-13. Read it one more time, aloud if possible.

REFLECT

Ponder these questions:

- How does the Psalmist pray related to spiritual direction? List each thing he asks.
- What does this tell you about God’s path for you?

Pray:

- Spend a few minutes using this Psalm as a time of praise by going through each line. For example: *Lord, I thank you for wanting to show me your ways...*
- Think of the “less traveled path” you have identified this week. Look back at the Psalm and pray each line that speaks of direction, keeping this neural pathway in mind. For example: *Lord, make me know your ways of compassion...*
- Consider the well-worn way of being that has been forged in your brain’s neural pathways and has stolen the abundance Jesus has for you. Ask God to forgive and purify your heart where you have cooperated with this or consciously allowed it to continue.

RESPOND

- Review your sentence from the previous devotional in which you described the pathway you want to form in your mind so that it shapes your life. Write it out again and read it aloud.
- Create a simple “breath prayer” with a couple of lines from this Psalm. Here are a few examples:
Breathe in: *Make me to know your ways O Lord.*

Breathe out: *Teach me your paths.*

Breathe in: *Lead me in your truth and teach me,*
 Breathe out: for you are the God of my salvation.

Offer this as you breathe several times a day, focusing on the new mental pathway you are pursuing. Do this especially when you start to hear negative or destructive thoughts.

W3-DAY 4

READ

Quietly read Proverbs 3:1-8. Read it one more time, aloud if possible.

REFLECT

Ponder these questions:

- What promises do you see here, especially about pathways and direction?
- What instructions do you see?

Pray:

- Consider what this means: *In all your ways, acknowledge him.* Spend a few minutes acknowledging God's goodness and faithfulness in leading you. Offer a heart of gratitude and worship.
- Think of the "less traveled path" you have identified this week. With this desire in mind, ask God: *What do you want to teach me about this? How can I trust you with all my heart here? Where have I settled for my own wisdom instead of knowing you?*
- Consider the well-worn way of being forged in your brain's neural pathways you are replacing with the "less-traveled path." Ask God for healing and refreshment, for his steadfast love and faithfulness to replace negative self-talk. See him moving you off of this path and onto the new one as he straightens your way.

RESPOND

- Review your sentence from the previous devotional in which you described the pathway you want to form in your mind so that it shapes your life. Write it out again and read it aloud.
- Create a way to remind you of this throughout the day—a reminder app or sticky note on your mirror or steering wheel. Each time you see it, speak out the new path God is building in your soul (this helps your brain catch up!)
- Look for ways to act out your new pathway today. For example, if you are replacing anxiety with trustful peace, find opportunities to pause, breathe deeply and let the Spirit fill you. Or if you are replacing irritability with kindness, find opportunities to be kind to others—on the highway or in the grocery store or at work or home. (This too helps your brain catch up).

W3-DAY 5

READ

Quietly read Deuteronomy 11:18-25. Read it one more time, aloud if possible.

REFLECT

This passage is a great overview of what it takes to change our way of thinking and being. Read it again and envision the “territory” you are entering as the new way of thinking and being that you have been focusing on. Then ponder these questions:

- What are the specific ways that God lays out to deepen the impact of this message on your life? Write out a list.
- How does God summarize his desire in verse 22? (Write out the four things)
- What are the promises God gives if you do these things? Make a list.

Pray:

- Spend some time thanking God for the new ways of thinking and being that he is imprinting on your neural pathways, and on your soul.
- Think of the “less traveled path” (way of thinking and being) that you have identified this week. Read verse 22 again and ask God: *What are the ways that I am growing in this? How can I experience deeper growth?*

RESPOND

- Review your sentence from the previous devotional in which you described the pathway you want to form in your mind so that it shapes your life. Write it out again and read it aloud.
- Look back at the passage and choose at least two new ways that you can be more intentional about traveling on your new mental pathway.
- Look to the next several weeks and set a plan to continue establishing this new way of thinking and being. It can take several weeks, if not months, to replace old thought patterns with new ones, so be patient with yourself!