

# **The Fork in the Road**

**By Scott W. Petersen**

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A few years ago, I was having breakfast with a buddy of mine at Lou Mitchell's Restaurant over on Jackson Boulevard. We were talking. At some point in the conversation, he looked across the table and asked "*Scott – what is your favorite day in the year?*" It was kind've a quirky question to get when you're eating scrambled eggs and sipping coffee. But I thought about it – and responded that I really like Thanksgiving. Why? Wednesday is a quiet day at work. Thursday is a big family day. Great food. Friday is a day off. And *then* comes the weekend.

So I looked across the table and asked my friend "*So Chris – what is **your** favorite day of the year?*" Without hesitation he responded "*December 21<sup>st</sup>.*" I looked at him and said "why December 21<sup>st</sup>?" His reason? Because December 21<sup>st</sup> is the winter solstice. That big, inescapable turning point when the days begin to get longer. *That* was my friend's favorite day. An astronomical fork in the road over which we have no control.

There are a lot of things over which we have no control . . . the Stock Market, Washington, the coronavirus. And of course we have the calendar, the tyranny of the clock, gravity, physics, biology and accident all have their way with our lives whether we like it or not. And so do the actions of others – over which we have limited control. Then there is the lottery of birth – that confluence of sparks and genetics – that made you, you.

But there is also an *abbondanza* of decisions that we make on a daily basis for which we have a hand on the wheel. At least somewhat. And we have some level of influence over our destiny.

There are things we do that cannot be taken back. . . . The stone after it's thrown. The word after it's said. The occasion after it's missed. Time after it's gone. If we're lucky, there may be a "do over" – a "Mulligan" as happens on the golf course. But sometimes not.

Our lives often seem to be on auto-pilot. One day ends and the next begins. And there are no significant decisions about the roads we take. And tomorrow is. . . tomorrow. But then again – life can turn on a dime.

For everyone, there are major decisions. The heavyweights. Those life-changing forks. Like giant tuning forks. "*Should I ask her to marry me?*" "*Should I take the job?*" "*Should I say 'I'm sorry'?*" "*Should I major in medicine – or art history?*" "*Shall I yield to temptation?*" Then there are the little decisions. "*Hmmmm. . . . beet salad or chicken noodle soup?*" Of course if the chicken noodle soup is crawling with botulism, then that decision could balloon into a pretty big one. . . . .

In 1865, Lewis Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland*. One of the great lines. "One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. "*Which road do I take?*" she asked. "*Where do you want to go?*" was the Cheshire cat's response. "*I don't know,*" Alice answered. "*Then*" said the cat, "*it really doesn't matter.*" As Yogi Berra so eloquently put it "*if you don't know where you are going, you might end up someplace else.*"

The decisions, the roads and the forks just keep coming. And the roads we take matter. And often have consequence. Most decisions we make are based upon knowledge, convenience, planning and life experience. But sometimes, like Alice, we're not sure where we are going. And while we may see the fork in the road, we don't always see what lies ahead. . . . .

Lee Iococca once said – “*as you go through life, there are thousands of little forks in the road. And there are a few really big forks—those moments of reckoning. And moments of truth.*” We’ve all had them. And we continue to have them. Look around you. The person next to you. The one across the table. Each one of us has a narrative about how in the world we ended up sitting here tonight. It is an agglomeration of forks, bumps, twists, and turns that bring us together. Life experience and “*Poof!*” Here we are.

*The thing I scratch my head over is -- how in the world did I get here tonight?* Why am I up here – talking. And why are you sitting there listening? The quick – and easy - answer is because some of us belong to The Chicago Literary Club and some to the Fortnightly. But there’s *sooooo* much more than that. I took a lot of forks in the road to get here tonight. And a few bumps in the road too. All the same . . . . . here I am. With one big fork that made all the difference . . . . .

For me, life began in the one room attic of a Chicago bungalow at 6036 West Byron Street, here in Chicago. My father had to drop out of high school and my mother never went to college. I skipped second grade when we moved so I had just turned 17 at the time of high school graduation.

My guidance counselor in high school, Mr. Hillman, said he could get me a job as an assistant plumber. I thought about it. Yet some of my friends talked about “college.” “*College. . . .*” A lot of folks may take it for granted, but my parents and I never really talked about “college.” But I went to my father and asked him “*Dad - what about college?*” You can kind’ve see a fork in the road coming. . . . .

My father had only one friend – Mister Swanson – who had gone to college. My dad asked if I wanted to talk with him. I said “yes.” So we sat down with Mister Swanson who told me he had gone to Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

He said he *might* be able to get me an interview but I was very late. Most college applicants don't apply in May or June.

My mother, father and I piled in the car and drove out to Rock Island where I had an interview with the Director of Admissions – Mister Henning. Mister Henning was kind – but he advised that the incoming class had been full for quite some time. And he rightly observed that my grades were not very good. My parents both worked and I rarely studied. But then he paused. He commented that he still had a few discretionary openings available. He liked that I was an Eagle Scout so he said he would admit me on academic probation. If I didn't have a "C" average in the first semester – I would be O-U-T. My father asked if I wanted that – I said I did – and a few months later I was in *college*. The second youngest kid in the class.

Going to college was pivotal. It was a big wide road. That became a superhighway. . . . .

That first semester, I had six courses. I got five "C's" and one "B." The "B" was in *swimming*. . . . . and I was off of academic probation. And here I am. Well, almost. There were a lot more forks between then and now.

In my senior year of college, I was trying to figure out what in the world I might do after graduation. I got to talking to two friends who said they were going to law school. *Law school. Hmmmmmm* . . . . That sounded pretty good. So I went to law school.

While in law school – I used to see the girlfriend of an old fraternity brother from time to time. One day she said "*Scott – I have a girl that I think you should meet.*" In my own inimitable way, I probably said something like "*Duhhhh – okay.*"

And she introduced me to her roommate – a girl from Rye, New York. That girl from Rye is here tonight. She took a *major* fork in the road. By saying “yes.”

There have been more forks in the road since then. Do we stay in Chicago or move to Oregon. Do I take the job? Should we buy the house? Should we have children? What do you want for dinner – beet salad or chicken noodle soup?

Our decisions can be the crossroads of life. But our five senses can also appreciate forks in the road.

For example -- there is a Fork in the Road Restaurant which is located at 215 North Rochester Street in Mukwonago, Wisconsin. Great menu with “adult beverages.” According to one website, the place is actually haunted – with the sound of “ghostly footsteps and the clicking of pool balls rolling across the floor.” Maybe the ghost had the chicken noodle soup.

Or if you live in Pullman, Washington, there is a Fork in the Road Catering Service that provides large trays of pulled pork, smoked chicken and roast beef with just about any side dish you can think of.

While eating that pulled pork, you can listen to Neil Young’s musical album – “Fork in the Road.”

Or you can watch a local Knoxville, Tennessee Public Broadcasting Service on cooking titled “A Fork in the Road” featuring Chef Garrett Scanlan.

If you want to see a *real* “fork in the road,” I suggest you take a trip to Centerport, Pennsylvania, where Main Street divides with the big question of whether to go left toward Shoemakersville or to the right to “parts unknown.” There

is a genuine nine foot “fork” situated on a pedestal – which cautions drivers of their options to head for the known – or unknown.

And if you want to read about it – you can always pick up a copy of James Oseland’s book - *A Fork in the Road* published in 2014 by Lonely Planet.

The term “fork in the road” is also Biblical – from the Book of Ezekial 21:19-23 “*And make a signpost – make it for a fork in the road leading to a city.*”

Robert Frost authored the classic poem “The Road Not Taken.” He concludes with the lines: “*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.”*

Forks in the road. We all have them. Bumps, grinds, twists and turns. Our lives are the product of the seeds we sow, the decisions we make, the roads we take. Or don’t take. And sometimes – as Robert Frost said – it can make all the difference.

So here we are. How in the world did *I* end up here tonight? By my count, there was one monster fork and 146 smaller forks in the road. That I took.

Or was it 147. . . .? Thank you.