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Level III First Place Winner

Letter to poet Robert Frost concerning his poem, “The Road Not Taken”

Dear Robert Frost:

As a young person in the world today, I often feel as though I am trapped, suffocated, and chained. The things that I had been told would lift me up invariably tethered me down. I felt as though I were a passenger aboard a train speeding forward on a one way track, moving faster than I could comprehend with no station in sight. My life was on a fast track to a place I did not want to go. It was a destination beyond my sight, my comprehension, and my desires. An utter feeling of sheer vulnerability accompanied my ostensibly auspicious path in life. Whatever solace I find when these emotions overtake me come from the great authors of the world. They craft a portrait of the world that casts new light on the seemingly ominous, shadowy existence in which I live. It was during one of my forays into poetry that I read your masterpiece, “The Road Not Taken,” and discovered a startling truth: I could not only control the direction that the train of my life traveled, I could also select the track it traveled on.

I will, on occasion, slip away from my nightly activities for a rare moment of solitude and contemplation. The crisp air that often blows through the calm Ohio night gives me the perfect atmosphere for reflective thoughts. While I sit under the stars and watch the clouds pass over the loon, I ponder the deep and complex subjects that many prefer not to think about too often. Love, sex, money, mortality, family, friends, God ... and maybe, more than any other of these subjects, the future. Not just the future, but *my* future. I am told that everything I do will affect my future, but I often feel as if the future I am expected to aspire to is shaping me rather than the reverse. Society has done a great disservice to young people. The heavy burden of expectation weighs us down. Our parents and teachers tell us of the grand staircases we will ascend before we are even able to hold a pencil. Excellent grades will lead to prestigious universities, which will in turn lead us to that which society has defined as the hallmark of success—affluence. Every fiber of our being is to be directed toward living a life of pleasure and luxury. I knew this view of the world was malformed and demented, but I had no clue as to how to live another way.

When I was in Second grade, a letter had been mailed to my parents. A school counselor had identified me as a gifted student. My father smiled triumphantly, and my mother hugged me with joy. The situation overcame me and I did not know how to react. I saw how ecstatic my parents were at the news, so I quickly embraced my new role as a “gifted student.” Teachers expected more from me, but they treated me with an almost reverent attitude. I provided nothing but the perfect grades that my parents expected. In middle school, I was dropped into the world of advanced classes, and I hit the ground running. People constantly told me of my intelligence. I was more than happy to accept the praise. The future might have been distant, but it was a frequent topic of conversation. I might be a doctor or a lawyer. I might be a great scientist or a stock broker. My career would be esteemed and high paying, whatever it was destined to be.

It felt as if the path was already forged for me. I merely had to walk a map someone else had drawn. Excellent grades, excellent colleges, excellent jobs; all these were supposedly the ingredients of an excellent life. Then I entered high school, and the plan was ruined. Going through grade school, everything had just come naturally to me. I never had to study; I never even truly had to pay much attention in class. Homework never required more than five minutes of work. My tests always came back with near perfect scores. It was my geometry class during my freshman year that shattered my illusions about my own abilities. I could not bring myself to study or do my homework. My grades began to suffer, severely suffer. For the first time in my life, I failed a class. My ego took a huge blow. The disappointment I felt caused me to go into a state of borderline depression. I had lost all confidence in myself. This lack of self-discipline extended to my other classes, and those grades began to suffer as well. I acted out in school as a coping method. The vivid images of success I saw were no longer clear. I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, and my options seemed to fade fast. I believed that the

measure of success was money. My passions were to be laid aside in pursuit of success. Whatever I enjoyed doing, it would have to come second; I would be an observer to my life but never an active participant, a guilty pleasure I could indulge in only after success was fully grasped. Poetry, literature, philosophy, theology, human interaction—these were my true passions. One day, while indulging in reading to avoid thinking about my worsening academic circumstances and future prospects, I came across a book of your early poetry. I knew your name, but I never knew your story. I opened the book to a random page, and my eyes fell upon “The Road Not Taken.” You, too, had a road set before you, but you saw another way. You saw an alternative, a way to live with your passions. You knew that once you abandoned the way society had set before, when you took the road not taken, you would never come back for love of what you did. You took the path of a poet. That which you loved was not a guilty pleasure, but your life itself. It was like day had broken in my life. The sun was shining on a path for the first time. I knew then not to pursue money. My life would be judged not by the standard by which I pursued the goals of the world, but by the extent to which I made others better, even if only a little. I decided to live for others, to not only capture and improve the depth of the human experience. I would be a writer and a minister. To me, the two were inseparable. I would live my life to help others, and to leave the fullness of the humanity in those I met to be read by generations to come. For the first time in my life, I was free and fell madly in love with literature.

I owe you an immeasurable debt, Robert. When I saw the way I changed, I could now see the future, not completely clear, but bright in the path I chose. I knew that I would not follow a map another had drawn, but I would draw my own as I went. As I became motivated, I began to walk a path I had decided for myself. My grades improved, and I was full of joy. I walk this path today. It is not easy, and it will never be easy. I will not be walking a smooth road. My road will be ridden with obstacles, but it will be my road, and I would rather traverse the heights of an unconquerable mountain than comfortably ride down an already paved road. Your brilliant and simple poem, “The Road Not Taken,” has been perhaps the most decisive influence in my life, and has inspired me in more ways than I could ever count. I must thank you again, Robert. The world has told me that life is a matter of ascending to the mountains peak. You have shown me it is a matter of stopping at the place which you love and flying.

Sincerely,

Richard Sammartino