Life Outside the Ruts **Philip Gulley**

We had a big snow this past Thursday, which I always enjoy since I can manage the morning commute in my bathrobe and house slippers. Wrote all morning, then, being a man, had to inspect the roads and see if there wasn't a disaster or emergency I could further complicate. Maybe pushing someone out of a ditch, then getting them stuck even worse. Or rescuing someone on the verge of freezing to death, but forgetting how to stave off frostbite. Do you give them hot baths or warm baths? I can never remember. But the plows had been out, the roads were clear, and everyone was fine, so I went to the Mayberry Café instead and ate lunch with the Rotarians and heard a lecture on town government by Danville's town manager which left me optimistic about government and feeling good about humanity in general.

When I was growing up, we had a long gravel driveway and no plow. So when I started driving my father gave me advice about driving in snow. He said, "Go as fast as you can and stay in the ruts other people have made, and if you come up to a snow bank, do not slow down, hit it as hard as you can and bust right through it." This is my father's approach to many things in life. Stay in the tracks, forge ahead, and blast through the obstacles. Like all generalizations, it was mostly good advice, but not always.

So this week I was driving in the ruts on a country road, then came to a place where the ruts went one way and I wanted to go the other way, and it was difficult to break out of those ruts. The grooves kept snatching at the wheels, trying to pull me back into their familiar path. I wanted to go to Roachdale to see my friend, Charley, but the ruts said, "No, let's go to North Salem."

I was talking with a married couple once, they'd come to me for advice, which indicates the depth of their desperation. I asked them to tell me about their difficulties, which they did, and it occurred to me they were always driving in the same ruts. She'd do something that irritated him, he'd react the same old way, she'd respond in the same, old manner, and before long they'd be having the same, old argument. They could never break out of the tracks.

It happens with all of us, doesn't it? If not in our marriages, then in our jobs, or our spiritual lives, or our friendships, or with our children or parents or siblings. We've been driving down the same tracks so long we find it difficult to steer our lives in another direction. That isn't always bad, especially when the track we're on is a good one. But there are times we need to slip free of the tracks, get out of the familiar groove, head a different direction, but those old, worn ruts just keep pulling us back. We need to go to Roachdale, but we keep going to North Salem.

Jesus ran into that. He wanted to steer folks toward a more expansive view of God, but they were used to thinking of God in a certain way, and he just kept urging them to pull out of the track a bit, and they kept resisting, as we all do. Do you remember when the religious leaders caught a woman in adultery and wanted to stone her to death, as the law and custom allowed? Remember Jesus' response? He didn't argue about the immorality of the law with them. It's hard to persuade folks something is immoral or moral once they've made up their minds about it. We don't want to break out of the familiar groove of our thinking. So Jesus didn't argue about the morality of the matter, he just said, "Let the first stone be thrown by someone who's never sinned." So all of a sudden they can't steer down their customary path of accusation and retribution. They had to go a new direction. The Bible says they each slipped away, one by one, beginning with the oldest, the oldest either having more self-awareness or more years to sin.

Stop and think for a moment about our need to negotiate life a little differently. Maybe we've gotten in the habit of doing something ineffective or even destructive, just doing it over and over because it's comfortable and familiar and easy, and we find ourselves mired in that pattern, but needing to break out of it in order for our lives to take a more useful, productive direction.

Last week, I heard a mother and father talking about one of their kids. This child knew just how to push his father's buttons. The child would do something and the father would react by lecturing the child, because that was the pattern they'd established years before.

So Joan asked me, "Does it work when you lecture him? Does he do what you want?"

"No."

"Well…"

But that's the groove we had worn, you see. So the car always steered that direction.

Here's what I'm learning. Most of the time we live our lives habitually, not intentionally. We do most things without careful thought. We just do them out of habit. Now that's okay with some things. We don't need to give careful thought about doing dishes or mowing the lawn or other mundane tasks. We just need to get in the habit of doing them, doing certain things routinely.

But there are other things we do habitually, that we ought to do intentionally. We ought to give them more thought. We ought to be more mindful. I think this was the genius of Jesus. When other people were habitual and routine about certain things, he was intentional and mindful.

So when Jesus would meet lepers, instead of rejecting them, which was society's habitual response, he steered out of that rut and treated them with compassion. Or when something bad happened to someone, society's habitual response was to say they were sinners and God was punishing them. But Jesus would be moved to mercy and heal them.

That's what the spiritual life is—the decision to be intentional, to be mindful, to steer outside the ruts, so that you live more deliberately, more thoughtfully, more kindly, instead of just driving the same old groove of judgment, the same old rut of action and unthinking reaction. It's realizing that our lives don't have to be one long series of habits and routines and unhelpful, unchanging patterns that get us nowhere and keep us stuck. We no longer have to do things just because we've always done it that way. We can steer out of the ruts. It isn't easy. Custom and tradition and habit always try to pull us back, but it can be done, and when we do it, our lives can change dramatically and wonderfully.

People say, "Well, that doesn't happen. People don't change all that much." Don't you believe it. I know this guy who was heavily into drugs and alcohol. You'd look at him, and think, "That guy doesn't stand a chance. He's ruined his life." When he was 19 or so, he got drunk and was drag-racing his best friend.

His friend won, climbed out of his car to celebrate, and was run over and killed by this young man, who was sent to jail for manslaughter. When he got out, he took off and his parents didn't hear from him for years. They were worried sick. Every time the newspaper reported a body being found, they worried it was him. After awhile, they thought he was dead. About five years later, they got a call. It was their son, wanting to know if he could come home. They met him at the airport. They were so happy to see him, but he was still drinking, still on drugs. The next day he checked himself in to a detox center. Came out a month later, got a job, fell in love, got married, had a family, his spiritual life opened up, and on Sundays he and his wife and his kids go to his parent's house and eat and laugh and are so blessed.

There he was, in this rut, and he finally found the strength, courage, and wisdom to steer his life a new direction. Of course, it can be done. You bet it can. It starts when we realize our lives don't have to be a habit, a tired, inescapable rut. Instead, we can be mindful, and intentional, directing our lives in fresh directions. The Buddhists call it enlightenment. Sufis call it traveling into the presence of the divine. Kabalistic Jews speak of a clinging to unity. Judaism and Islam talk about living within the will of God. In Taoism it is called living according to the Tao or the Principle in which you are one with the divine current. And Jesus, well, Jesus called it being born anew.