

There is a road through the Village. In the village are domestic comforts, the steady life, a fixed social order, the primacy of the intellect, security of various sorts, and the promise of good things to those who fit in. The village gods are Hearth and Plough, Law and Custom. Priests and politicians mediate.

There is a road through the Forest, mysterious, moonlit, where feral eyes gleam in the shadows, where the wild things roam, and the outcasts settle and the rebels hide. Bird-masked dog-toothed dancers' whirl around bonfires in forest glens, casting wild shadows on the leaves. The forest's gods are Thunder and Blood and Stone, Green Fire and Bone. Their presence is raw and pure, direct and unmediated.

Between Village and Forest is a meadow where the roads cross, and the Village and the Forest can meet on neutral ground.

The roads also bring travelers speaking strange tongues and bearing tales of mysterious gods and goddesses, of mysterious wonders in faraway lands. They bring the wagons of the tinkers and mummers and traders. The Trickster deities are the unpredictable rulers of the roads. Coyote, Mercury, Hermes, Anansi, Loke....

From the forest come the outlaws and the rebels. The loners and the shape shifters. The Green Men and the fierce Red Women. Skittish faery folk and other wildlings lurk along the hedges.

The villagers venture out to trade and wonder, bartering food and books and steel for shimmering cloth and foreign spells and spices. There are no price tags. You must barter and barter well. Novelty sparks romance. Village boy and tinker girl. Village girl and tinker lad. Foreign blood sneaks its lusty way in, past the disapproving eyes of sceptered village gods and goddesses, seated on their thrones in the ancient temples. Village blood seeks its lusty way out with the caravans, eventually spreading around the world.*

The crossroads have long held a powerful place in the human imagination.

In Greek mythology, crossroads were associated with both Hecate and Hermes, with shrines and ceremonies for both taking place there.

In Great Britain, there existed a tradition of burying criminals and suicides at the crossroads. Crossroads were also commonly used as a place of criminal punishment and execution, which may have also been a reason for it being a site of suicidal burial as suicide was considered a crime.

In Western folklore, a crossroads can be used to summon a demon or devil in order to make a deal. Some of you may be familiar with the story that the famed blues guitarist Robrt Johnson made a deal with the devil at a crossroads at midnight, his soul in return for his ability as a musician. Many such stories abound.

Crossroads are gateways, doors between worlds. The intersection between the natural and the supernatural. Between the living and the dead. The veils between them are thin there, especially at night.

Right about now you might be asking yourself, just what does this have to do with what appears to be a difficult year ahead?

After all, the messages we're getting from the media and the pundits and our leaders is one of critical choices ahead, choices that will irrevocably shape our future, choices that will lead to either our destruction or our salvation.

They may be different depending on your politics or social location, but you know what they are for you.

These are almost always binary choices. Heck, I'd say 99% of the time we are presented with either-or choices about some person or idea or policy. There's little nuance or ambiguity, when the world is full of nuance and ambiguity and fuzzy boundaries.

But the power of the crossroads is not found in dualities, in choosing village or forest, where choosing one denies the other. Its potency lies in the dialectic betwixt-and-between, the both-and, the neither-nor.

This is not compromise and reconciliation. This is the emergent way of holding the tension while fully participating fully in both extremes of the contradiction.

The power of the crossroads is the power of the liminal, the domain of the interesting, of uncommon sense. Liminality is pure potency, where the elements of culture and society are released from their customary forms, and anything is possible. Magic walks here, with wildness by its side.

To be in touch with wildness is to have stepped past the fenced fields and wandered far from the twinkling of the village lights. Wildness is a form of sophistication, because it carries within it the true knowledge of our place in the world. It doesn't exclude civilization but prowls through it, knowing when to attend to the needs of the committee and when to drink from a moonlit lake. It will wear a suit when it has to, but refuses to trim its talons or whiskers.

Without the creative vitality of wildness, the village stagnates, its order turns repressive and oppressive. The greater our investment in security and status, the more dangerous the crossroads appear, and the village seeks to rule the roads and the forest, bringing it all under the sway of order. *

I'm increasingly disturbed by how fearful of the crossroads we have become. It's almost as if the ancient superstitions have risen from the grave to haunt us.

And I think that leads us to the understanding of this story and these archetypes as sort of a map of our soul and our relations with self and other. We need to think of this a system that can't really function well without all of its parts.

There is a part of us that craves the fixed order of the village, and a part that craves the wilder ways of the forest. A part that welcomes the caravan and a part that fears the foreign.

All those are contained within us, and within our communities. We need them all, and what's important is that they remain in some kind of dynamic balance.

And we are terribly out of balance.

This may be because we have no center to ground us these days. Without a center, balance is simply not possible.

I'm probably not alone in feeling politically homeless these days. The extreme right and the extreme left are increasingly intolerant, while an authoritarian illiberalism breeds on both sides. Our politics have devolved into sheer tribalism. Each side declares the other as evil. The center is demonized. We're reduced to feuding, like the Hatfields and McCoys, the Bloods and the Crips, the Montagues and Capulets. If the other side is for it, then ours is against it.

That leads to some pretty incoherent and inconsistent politics and social movements.

I think Shakespear got it right in Romeo and Juliet when he wrote: A plague on both your houses. And like the citizens of Verona, I think a lot of us are tired of the gang warfare that our politics has essentially become. We're tired of nothing getting done, huge problems being ignored, the tumult in the streets, the

corruption. The us-against-them mentality that permeates our media and our politics.

A plague on both your houses, says the dying Mercutio, his demise the result of the feud between the Montagues and Capulets.

The choice between the feuding houses isn't really much of a choice, is it? One powerful family vs another. The color of your doublet, the crest you wear are different, but their aims and actions are the same: the triumph of their side. God help you if get in the way. Hence Mercutio and his curse.

I wonder if this "choice" we have between the right and the left is a similar one, one that misses something we deeply need in this troubled time.

Some way out of this tribal hell we find ourselves in, back to some kind of center.

Partly, this is a struggle between whose side will rule the village. But perhaps the center isn't where we think it is.

Maybe it isn't in a place between the right and left, between the conservatives and the liberals, between the individualists and the collectivists.

Maybe the center is really at the crossroads in the meadow, and what we need is something wild from the forest, something strange and novel from the roads, something steady from the village.

What those are isn't clear yet.

We must be willing to stay in the liminal space of the crossroads, and be there long enough for something to emerge from the betwixt and between. That takes patience and the ability to sit with the uncertainty, letting the new arise from the tension.

I noted earlier that the village and the forest and the roads from far away are all contained within us, and within our communities. And also within the other on the other-side of these binaries. These various aspects come in different blends and strengths in every individual and every community. It's important we see ourselves in all of them.

The crossroads can be a spooky and terrifying place, and an exciting place of possibility, and both at once, our fear and our desire all mixed up in our hearts and minds.

And that's a good thing, I think. It feels very alive.

But it sure is uncomfortable to be there. Our culture hates discomfort. We don't want to be there, or stay there, even a little bit. But that discomfort means we're on to something.

And that's also where the center is. And it's up to us to keep calling people back into that discomfort with us, back to the true center of the crossroads, where magic walks with wildness, and anything is possible.

Binaries tend to close the doors of possibility.

So when someone presents you with one of these either-or choices, I invite you to take it to the crossroads. Take it to the crossroads and lay it down and sit with it until it makes you uncomfortable. Invite others to sit with you in that increasing discomfort.

Then sit with it some more together, and perhaps a door will open, or an unseen path reveal itself. Or maybe not. There are no guarantees.

But like the poet said, the best way out is through. And we have to find some way to do that together, no matter how uncomfortable it is.

Let's close with an excerpt from *The Great Wagon*, by Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī.

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill

where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep

*Thanks and credit to Martin Shaw for his description of the crossroads from "A Branch from the Lightning Tree".