

Lecture Sheet
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IN THREE WORDS I CAN SUM UP EVERYTHING ABOUT LIFE: IT GOES ON. (ROBERT FROST)

Robert Frost is one of the best loved of all American poets. He had a keen insight into human life, and many of his poems reveal it clearly. Much of his work revolved around the life and times of rural New England, where Frost spent much of his life. Though he got a rocky start in his long career as a poet, he eventually emerged as one of the most popular poets of his age, winning four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry.

At the age of 86, Frost read one of his well-known poems, *'The Gift Outright'* at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. And in 1962 Frost was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, *'In recognition of his poetry, which has enriched the culture of the United States and the philosophy of the world.'*



Two of Frost's better known poems to modern readers are, *'Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,'* and *'The Road Not Taken,'* claimed by some to be one of the most commonly misunderstood poems in the English language. But I will leave that assessment to the literary critics.

When we consider Frost's personal life, we understand why he might have made the statement being addressed in this post. His life was visited with pain, grief, and loss from its beginning to its end. Frost lost his father when he was 11, succumbing to tuberculosis. The family was left with only eight dollars. Then Frost's mother died of cancer in 1900, when he was only in his late 20's. His sister had to be committed to a mental hospital, where she died nine years later.

Robert also suffered from depression, as did his wife, Elinor, and several members of his family. His daughter Irma was also committed to a mental hospital in 1947. Robert and Elinor had six children. Their son Elliot died of cholera, their daughter Carol committed suicide, daughter

Marjorie died from puerperal fever, and their daughter Elinor only lived for three days after her birth. Given all of the tragedy in his life, we can see why he would have said,

In three words I can sum up everything about life: it goes on.

I'd like to unpack this quote on two levels. I'm choosing not to discuss a third level, because I think it will create discussion that's not helpful in our examination of the quotation. The third level is the one that addresses LIFE AFTER DEATH. The sense in which LIFE GOES ON after death in another realm than the one we know on earth. This is an important issue to theologians, philosophers, and people of faith. I'm not suggesting it isn't an important matter to address. Just that I'm not going to address it here because I don't think Frost had life after death in mind when he uttered the words we're considering. I'd like to address the two areas that he most likely had in mind.

IN THE WAKE OF TRAGEDY, LIFE ON PLANET EARTH GOES ON

Frost was reminding us that no matter what happens on earth, human life will continue. **Life goes on.** Unless a giant asteroid hit the earth and renders earth inhospitable for life. Unless through some nuclear madness we blow ourselves up. Short of some incomprehensible tragedy on our planet, **human life goes on.**

Men and women will continue to find each other and become partners. Babies will continue to be born. Children will grow into adults. And the cycle will continue into the future. Only a catastrophe of immense magnitude would end human life on planet earth. I don't think Frost was saying this because he thought we didn't know it. But as a reminder in case we forget it. When we reach the point of despair, we can always take hope and encouragement knowing that LIFE GOES ON. It always has. It probably always will.

IN THE WAKE OF DESPAIR, LIFE FOR EACH PERSON GOES ON

More likely Frost was referring to **life going on for individuals**. This was a man who experienced untold grief and loss in his life. No doubt there were times when he approached despair. Or entered despair. We know he struggled with depression. But somehow he managed to navigate the dark waters. It reminds me of the words of President Theodore Roosevelt:

*At some time, on some point, the devil masters
each of us...It is not having been in the Dark House,
but having left it that counts.*

Frost must have been in the Dark House many times. But he got out. Which is maybe one reason he said that he learned that LIFE GOES ON. His life went on. And he knew the lives of others would go on too.

He must have experienced times so dark that he despaired of life itself. He must have wondered at times if he had the strength to carry on. He must have wondered how he would ever recover

from his losses. Would he ever heal from the pain of what he once had but had no longer? Would the loss debilitate him? Would the loss disable him for the rest of his life?

These were questions he must have asked given the level of pain he suffered. But through it all, he endured. And each time he recovered from his loss, he must have thought...LIFE GOES ON. We don't always know HOW it will go on. We don't always know WHEN it will go on. But it does. And that should encourage us all. No doubt it encouraged Robert Frost too. He must have clung to the old adage...

THIS TOO SHALL PASS.

He might have encouraged himself with the words:

I'LL BE OKAY. JUST NOT TODAY.

We don't know if he ever thought these things or if he ever said them. But he may well have. We know that something got him out of the Dark House.

Let me leave you with a couple additional quotes on this subject. One is by Gustave Flaubert, who said:

*The most glorious moments in your life
are not the so-called days of success,
but rather those days when out of dejection
and despair you feel rise in you a challenge
to life, and the promise of future accomplishments.*

And the American psychologist, Rollo May said:

*Courage is not the absence of despair,
it is, rather, the capacity
to move ahead
in spite of despair.*

Or as Robert Frost said:

LIFE GOES ON...