

The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep . . .
(Robert Frost)

In a recent documentary on the 1960's – mention was made of the above line from Robert Frost's poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. You may remember it:

Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village, though; / He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near / Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake. / The only other sound's the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep.

Seems the poem could mean: I'm too busy to stop to take in a snowy woodland scene during a winter evening. I have miles to go before I sleep, miles . . . too many things to do and simply can't stop, even though it's the darkest evening of the year (Christmas Eve?). After all, isn't that the American way – go, go, go, no time for leisure, obligations, promises to fulfill?

But is that really what the poem is about – *action*, no lingering? The poet blames the horse for questioning why he has paused for a moment to admire the mystery of forest and lake amid snowflakes falling silently. But I think the horse is really a front for the poet himself who feels himself prodded to keep going, not to stop. It is *he, harnessed as he is* to some kind of errand, that shakes his own bells, his conscience. And his conscience wins out. He snaps out of his reverie because he *has promises to keep . . . miles to go before he sleeps*. He forfeits a moment of grace.

In the haste our everyday world imposes on us we miss the signals all around us that offer us access, portals into a contemplation of nature, of creation, of even events in our lives that were deeper than we realized, pondering which can transform us into ever more deeply human beings – with wonderful consequences for the world we inhabit.

But we brush off such moments that are in fact never merely idle but alive with some kind of presence or signal of God, if we but give them the time to seduce us . . . as Frost himself was seduced in this poem by *woods lovely, dark and deep* before, as he writes, *harness and jingles and promises to keep* woke him up to business as usual.