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Choice

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We talk a lot in the seminars about Choice and how important it is to “have choice,” or that we are “free to choose.” Have we ever stopped to think about why choice is important, or even, what is choice? It seems obvious that choosing our own path in life is very important to all of us.

So today I want to talk about choice. I think that if we understand choice in a context of responsibility and accountability, we will be able to understand how to make more effective decisions that take us forward to our purpose in life. A large part of life is a series of decisions and choices—some of them commonplace, some of them difficult. If the purpose of life is to experience fulfillment, satisfaction, and meaningful contribution, then the more we are conscious of our choices, the more we can fully experience our lives.

Why do humans, of all living beings, have the maximum amount of choice in life? Why do we experience joy, disappointment, and regret over our choices more than any other animal on the planet? What really is choice, and where does it come from?

First, the dictionary definition says: Choice is a selection from alternatives that requires an exercise in judgment. In other words, choice is choice! This is not very helpful.

Instead of a long philosophical and scientific discussion of choice, we could talk in terms of stories. Stories are interesting ways to learn, and our histories are full of stories with many meanings and many lessons. The Bible, as are all major religious texts, is a rich source of stories that teach.

The Bible contains one of the greatest stories ever told about the origin of choice. It is the story from Genesis about Adam and Eve, from the Old Testament. Most of us are familiar with this story.

The short version goes this way: God created the world. Then he created Adam. Then he created Eve, for God said it is not good to be alone. Of course as you know, they lived in the Garden of Eden. There was a tree in the garden that was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve, at the urging of the serpent, ate of the apple on the tree, and then Adam ate from it; their eyes were opened and they acquired the knowledge of good and evil. God then had them leave the Garden of Eden forever.

Regardless of your religious beliefs, whether it is a strict fundamental viewpoint or more interpretive, there is a great story here. I think it may be more than just a story of disobedience and punishment. I want to take a look at the metaphorical side—a deeper look into this story.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People” interprets the story somewhat like this:

Let’s say that God in the story was the Creator of all things. He knew everything that was going on. He created everything, thus it may follow that he knew that leaving Adam and Eve alone with a talking snake was going to bring trouble. He must have known that the knowledge of good and evil was too strong a power for Adam and Eve to resist. If we agree that God is all-powerful, then it follows that they must have eaten the apple with his permission.

Why on earth would God allow his creatures to suffer from the knowledge of good and evil, be banished from the Garden of Eden, and live a life of uncertainty and pain?

Is it possible that this is a story of the creation of man as a creature of choice? That this was the evolutionary step, turning power and responsibility over to man and woman? So this could be the story of God's great love, to turn his children loose, to discover something within themselves that they could only learn for themselves.

The question is, if we were given by God choice and the ability to choose, what was he asking us to learn? The tree was the knowledge of good and evil, and was he simply asking us to learn the difference between good and evil for ourselves? I think there is something much more fundamental than that. Maybe what God was asking us to do was to find, through our own discovery, the divine spark that connected us with ourselves, each other, and God.

Martin Buber the great Jewish philosopher put it this way:

“In the beginning God withdrew himself unto himself to make room for the universe. In the space provided by his withdrawal, he created the configurations that make up the world and filled each one with a divine light. Some of these forms were too fragile to contain the awesome power of his holy fire and so shattered. The breaking of these vessels created a crisis. Each scattered fragment contained a divine spark. To gather these sacred sparks together again was to become peoples’ task in the world.”

So in the beginning, was God turning his beloved creations, man and woman, out into the world to learn what they would never have learned if they lived forever in the Garden of Eden? God knew that the price for these lessons would be high—that with choice, we have to face the uncertainty, pain, and fear that goes with an unknown outcome. We have definitely left the Garden of Eden. The gift was choice and the price was also choice. With a single act, the story says, we became different from all other animals. We became, and still are, responsible for the outcome of our lives.

Before we talk about the lesson that choice was created in order for us to learn, I want to talk about why this story, as I mentioned earlier, can be interpreted as a great act of love. How can this be called an act of love toward man and woman?

It must have been difficult to create a world in which you turn your beloved creations out into the world. On a smaller scale, it is like a situation that I recently faced with my son going off to college, out into a world of drugs and sex. I wanted to shelter him. (Never mind that I survived the same things years ago in my life.) I still felt I wanted to shelter him.

For all of you who have children, you know the anguish of letting go of a loved child into the world of uncertainty and responsibility. But just like our children, we realize that letting go is the only way for them to find that spark within themselves. We keep rescuing them from time to time, as I imagine God does with us. Too often, however, we realize that this rescue just delays the inevitable lesson that will be learned sooner or later. A greater act of love is maybe letting people learn their own lessons.

The book *The Prophet*, which is a poem I have quoted so often in these talks, has a beautiful passage on children that goes this way:

*Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And yet they are with you they belong not to you.
You may give them love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of
tomorrow which you cannot visit
Not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them
but seek not to make them like you.*

*For life goes not backwards nor carries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and he bends you with his might so
you may go swift and far.
Let you bending in the archer's hand be for gladness: For even as He loves the arrow that
flies, so He loves the bow that is stable.*

There must be great love to allow the arrow to fly—a trust that the benefit outweighs the price in the end. That to be fully human is to be fully responsible. Free to choose.

So if choice and responsibility are what makes us human, does every choice we make have value? If we follow the reasoning thus far, we would have to say that every choice we make, or have ever made, has the potential to contribute something to our lives. Every choice we have made has the potential to add to our experience and fulfillment in life. But to create this value we first need to choose awareness. Awareness is knowing that every moment is a choice and that every choice has benefits and prices. Through this awareness we slowly begin to see the lesson we were meant to learn.

Awareness is the knowledge that we can, at any given moment, choose the glasses through which we view our lives. That no matter what it requires of us, no one can take away our choice of how we see the world. Awareness is a practice that requires great patience and understanding.

For others, and especially for ourselves, awareness allows us to learn the lessons and opens the door for more. And it often takes some time or distance from the choices we have made, to really see their value. The price we pay for returning to the garden is sometimes pain and confusion that comes with our judgment and our “wrong choices.”

I recently heard a story that illustrates the difficulty of choice. I will paraphrase this story as best as I can, for I only heard it and did not see it in print:

This is a story about a dream. In the year 2000, there was an expedition sponsored by some US and Canadian corporations for a climb up Mt. Everest. Mt Everest, as you probably know, is the highest mountain in the world—over 29,000 feet high, nearly the same height at which a commercial airliner flies. The goal of the expedition was to clean up the mountain as well as climb it. There was much trash and debris left by past climbing expeditions.

Among the climbing team was a man in his fifties. He was in superb physical condition and had trained for years to climb Everest. As a teenager, he had set himself this goal. His training included long distance bicycling, running, weight training, and altitude climbing in order to reach the summit of Everest. Of the six billion people on the planet, only a few have ever been to the summit of the world's highest mountain.

The physical and mental discipline required to climb Everest is almost beyond comprehension for those of us breathing here at the altitude we are at now. Above approximately 25,000 feet, it is referred to as the death zone. This is where oxygen is so scarce that even with a bottled oxygen supplement, the body and mind begin a process of dying. At this altitude the body slowly starves to death due to lack of oxygen.

The base camp of Everest, where the actual climb starts, is at 17,000 feet—higher than most peaks in the continental United States. It takes many days of walking just to reach the base of the mountain. From this base camp climbers attempt to reach the summit via a series of camps located higher and higher until the climbers are within striking distance of the summit. The last camp is above 25,000 feet. You cannot eat, drink, nor sleep properly at this altitude. At this altitude it is said that you begin to regress to a very primitive state of mental capacity. Thinking is difficult and even simple acts, such as putting on boots or gloves, take a superhuman effort.

Questions of motivation and purpose are ancient memories that give way to pure commitment and force of will. The climbers must reach for something inside themselves that will keep them moving forward. There is surrender to a goal and a fight against the survival instinct. Years of training, perhaps a lifetime of dreaming of reaching the summit, is now reduced to putting one foot in front of another, gasping for breath for five minutes, then taking another step. Your fellow climber is fifty yards ahead of you. There is no conversation, too little air to talk. Each climber reaches down within himself or herself to find the strength to take another step. The cold is penetrating, the wind brutal. Hunched over against the immense cold, the goal is reduced to one step at a time. These are the conditions in which our climber now finds himself.

He is following a sherpa, a native guide. The man takes a step into deep snow and falls. He sits on the snow and cannot get up. He is a thousand feet below the summit. The weather is beginning to turn worse, with snow flurries and clouds beginning to blow in. The Himalayan range stretches out before him for hundreds of miles in every direction in a panoramic view. But our man cannot go on. He sits in the snow. The guide and others in the party reach the summit and return. On the guide's return down from the top, he stops and talks to the climber sitting in the snow: "You must either go on to the top or descend; if you stay here any longer you will die. I cannot carry you."

I paraphrase his description of his choice: "I knew I had a lifelong dream of climbing Mt. Everest. Now I may die here. I had trained for years with absolute commitment, the summit is above me, should I stand and continue even though I may die trying? Suddenly another thought came into

my mind. This thought was of my wife and children, sitting at home half way around the world. Waiting for news. I saw their faces and heard their voices. I felt that I knew with absolute clarity what was important in my life. With my last remaining strength I struggled, stood, and started down the mountain. I made a decision and struggled out of the snow to my feet. I turned down the mountain.”

He chose and made it down, and was reunited with his family much later at a tearful airport gathering. He had failed to reach the summit of Mt. Everest.

Now, in order to make this a really good motivational story, he would have gone on to the top, driven by the picture of his loved ones. There are a million motivational stories of people overcoming great obstacles to reach their dreams.

But this story is really more like-life. Things do not always turn out as planned. What makes this a great story is that he chose love over a personal goal. Maybe it’s a story of letting go of ego, maybe a story of love. But it is definitely a story of choice. The climber decided to choose what was truly important to him. The goal of reaching the top was a great goal and a great personal challenge, but the love for his family was the most important thing to him.

Is this story about letting go of a dream, abandoning a goal, and failure? I think it is more a story about choice. Did our climber make the right choice? Perhaps he would have made it to the summit and returned safely, perhaps he would have perished. Who knows? We will never know. Life is sloppy and uncertain. Choices are made, prices are paid, benefits reaped.

In a single moment, a choice was made that altered his life forever. Maybe he learned what was really important. Possibly, he learned his limits; whatever the lesson, he was a different man at the bottom of that mountain on his return than he was when he started.

We all want to make the right choices in life. We want to maximize our gains and minimize pain and loss. How do we then make the right choices? Here is simply my point of view on this: There are many right choices.

Sometimes any choice we make will work out. We choose from either love or fear. We choose from a responsible position or as a victim. We choose from trust or disbelief.

If we choose the path that we know will promote vitality and self-worth in ourselves and in others, we can seldom go wrong. If we choose from awareness, knowing we are responsible, we often cannot go wrong. If we choose to trust our intuitions and our hearts, we often end up in the right place. If we know that for every choice there is a value, even if it takes a lifetime to learn, we will learn the lessons of choice.

Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst, often talked and wrote about the phenomenon of synchronicity. That is something like “there are no accidents”; that each choice that puts us more in the world, more with people, more challenges, the more likely we are to meet our real destiny. To meet a special person who could change our lives often means making choices out of the ordinary. Very few people meet their destiny on the couch.

What lesson are we to learn from the gift of choice? Banished from the Garden of Eden, how are we to return? We return by honoring the divine spark in ourselves and others. We choose compassion when it is the most difficult thing imaginable. We lighten up on ourselves and laugh out loud! We know that choice was our great gift.

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