<u>Climbing the Decision Tree</u>
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Some twenty years ago, I sat on a cushy armchair in an uber-posh home in the leafy hamlet of Concord, Massachusetts, where I lived. Across from me, on a matching chair, sat Rob, a 15-year-old private school chap who had been caught stealing Axe Body Spray from the local CVS and then thought it would be even more entertaining to ignite the aerosol spray with the lighter his school chum, Nick, had stolen simultaneously from the store.

I had been assigned as Rob's volunteer facilitator through the local Restorative Justice program which referred these types of non-violent juvenile offenses to us rather than to the Magistrate. The process was voluntary and a chance to learn from the mistake, apologize, and be restored back into the community. It was an amazing program.

Rob's parents were, naturally, aghast, but grateful for this alternative to Juvie, and they supported my interactions with their son. One of the tools we employed in the program is called a decision tree. The youth and I would start at the bottom of the trunk at the moment they first decided to proceed and then move up the tree describing the branches and leaves.

The word "decided" is required; the event wasn't "random," after all. Rob tells me: "First, Nick and I decided to go to CVS to get some soda and chips." "Then, we saw the Axe Spray and decided to steal it." Then we decided…and so on. I could see the cogs of his adolescent brain turning and that he was getting it – the decision he made had a trunk, branches and leaves, and he was the one who climbed that tree. During our closing circle with the victim (in this case, the store), this was a changed boy.

Each of us, like Rob and Nick, makes decisions and choices every day – some as benign as which flavor yogurt to eat for breakfast or which Netflix show to stream, to more consequential ones such as whom to marry or divorce, what job to accept, whether to take part in a fraudulent scheme or report a friend for a similar crime. And although decisions surely rank differently in significance in our lives, those choices essentially reflect who we are or who we would like to become, rather than what we do or what we own. I know I would have benefitted from a decision tree and a facilitator at different junctures in my own life.

If we are here, at a UU congregation this morning, we care about values-based living, and we strive to conduct ourselves with moral and ethical clarity and integrity. Right? Yet, the perennial question remains: How do we make good decisions? In a world bloated with choices, in a society built on acquiring and achieving, with its underlying toxic

strain of side hustles, scams, getting away with or getting over on – how do we keep our moral, ethical, and practical rudder straight in that rushing river?

On a website called Joke Buddha, I found this gem recently. It's entitled: "How to make right decisions"

"The other day," it begins, "I had the opportunity to drop by my department head's office. He's a friendly guy and on the rare opportunities that I have to pay him a visit, we have had enjoyable conversations. While I was in his office yesterday, I asked him,
"Sir, what is the secret of your success?"
"Two words"
"And, Sir, what are they?"
"Right decisions."
"But how do you make right decisions?"
"One word."
"And, Sir, what is that?"
"Experience."
"And how do you get Experience?"
"Two words"
"And, Sir, what are they?"
"Wrong decisions"

All good jokes hold a kernel of truth, don't they? Often, like my wayward adolescent, we develop the ability to make good or right decisions through the experience of making wrong ones. As a T-shirt I considered buying suggests: "Bad choices make good stories."

If you read the "Ethicist" column in New York Times, like I do with weekly relish, you bump up against a lot of choices and stories, and how the plethora of trivial and impactful dilemmas we humans find ourselves facing. Here's recent sampling: "I'm concerned my neighbor is neglecting their child. What should I do?" "Can We Fire Our Employee? His father just died." "I'm a Cancer survivor. Should I tell my matchmaking service?" "If you raised money after a fire, can you spend it on a vacation?" "Must I donate a kidney to my awful brother?" "Is it okay to take a law-firm job defending climate villains?" and my personal favorite: "Years ago, I bought a human skull. What should I do with it?" Bet you want to know the answer to that one: bottom line: "forget tracing it to family with DNA, give it a dignified interment."

[In the NYT, David Brooks notes that] psychologists and sociologists (and even neuroscientists) have been researching how we make decisions for decades. One of these scholars, Sheena Iyengar, conducted a study with American and Japanese college students. She asked them to list on one side of a piece of paper all of the decisions they would like to make for themselves and on the other side, the decisions they wanted to pass on to others.

The Americans filled up the side for decisions they want to make themselves. The other side as almost blank. The only decision they commonly wanted to hand off to others was “When I die.” Conversely, the Japanese filled up the side of the sheet with things they wanted others to decide.

Is this surprising? Americans have always put great emphasis on individual choice in our choice-happy, ownership culture. With the choice explosion over the past 30 years or so, we have gained more freedom to work and live where we want, to express our sexual and gender identities and practice a religion that resonates with our values, or no religion at all.

Of course, this freedom of choice has its upside. But the flipside of this phenomenon, or what’s called the “paradox of choice,” is that having 500 TVs to choose from online doesn’t actually make us happier, it makes us more anxious and less sure of our decision-making compass. I’d argue that with the avalanche of information and stimuli flowing through our culture, it’s become “ increasingly important to learn how to decide well and to develop the techniques of self-distancing to counteract the flaws in our own mental machinery.”

In their book, “Decisive,” the authors Chip and Dan Heath lift up a variety of examples. For instance, Suzy Welch’s 10-10-10 rule. “When you’re about to make a decision, ask yourself how you will feel about it 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now, and 10 years from now. People are overly biased by the immediate pain of some choices, but they can put the short-term pain in long-term perspective by asking these questions.” The Heaths also highlight a common tendency to narrow-frame, to see every decision as a binary - whether or not – alternative. When this happens, we can strive to step back and widen our options. And they support the idea that bad decisions can teach us to make better ones.

Of course, these strategies become more fraught for poorer or marginalized individuals who may have fewer resources and support (and not so many choices) when it comes to decision making. As researchers have shown, the stress of scarcity itself can distort decision making. Practical, survival-driven choices take precedent over desires. Those who experienced stress as children often perceive threat more acutely and live more defensively. Residing in an area of concentrated poverty can close down your perceived options and, in their words, “relieve you of the burden of choosing a life.” That is bone-crushingly sad. It’s hard to maintain a feeling of agency when you cannot envision opportunity or possibilities.”

Essays on decision science often mention the decision tree and how it enables the individual to “rewind the tape” and then follow the narrative. They also typically chart the rungs on the tree from the bottom up at the onset of decision making: 1. Define your question, 2. Add potential choices 3. Expand until you hit end points, 4. Calculate risk and reward, 5. Consider consequences (moral, ethical, and personal), 6. Evaluate outcomes.

Throughout this process, the individual needs to care (*we* need to care) about making good decisions and following through. We might then come to the realization that "living authentically requires choices that transform us in ways that may enable us to create and discover a new self. As a result, our choices are who we'll become, not merely who we have been or who we are now.

I believe Tess Gallagher captures that decisive moment of a transformed perspective in her poem, "Choices," when she recalls:

I go to the mountain side
of the house to cut saplings,
and clear a view
to snow on the mountain.
But when I look up,
saw in hand,
I see a nest clutched in
the uppermost branches.
I don't cut that one.
I don't cut the others either.
Suddenly, in every tree,
an unseen nest
where a mountain
would be.

So, may we pause and falter, and rise, and dance, and consider (and reconsider) and gain greater clarity and mastery through all the myriad moments of choice we will inevitably face in the everyday rush of our lives.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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