

The Burden of Choice: Is More Less?

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*"Each human is confronted not by a single occasion,
a single choosing, but by unpunctuated choosing.
Among the myriad decisions none stands aside.
In a lifetime of choice, a nationtime of choice, each matters."*

-- Rudy Nemser

Sermon

It was once common for the Election Day sermon to include direction from the pulpit about which candidate should get your vote. In the 1912 presidential election, John Haynes Holmes, the minister of the Church of the Messiah in Manhattan (a Unitarian church), urged his congregation not to re-elect the Republican incumbent, William Howard Taft, but rather to support his opponent, Woodrow Wilson.

Just before the service began on the Sunday prior to the election, news came to the church office that President Taft, who was a Unitarian, would attend the service that morning. With Taft sitting in the front pew, Holmes preached against his candidacy. Taft lost the election, and he later became the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and he served for 10 years as President of the National Council of Unitarian Churches, a position that permitted retaliation against the Rev. Holmes. But that's another story.

I was actually hoping the Secret Service would call this morning to tell us the President would be sitting right here in the front pew. But times have changed.

I won't tell you who to vote for. Let this hour be a blessed respite from the campaigning. But do vote. Based on projected margins and Electoral College votes, one analysis suggests that each additional vote in Pennsylvania is worth nearly 300 New Jersey votes. That's leverage. So do vote. It matters. And when you do, vote not for your own best interests, but for the interests of our great nation, for the protection of those inalienable rights we assert, and for the benefit of this fragile planet and all of its peoples.

On Wednesday let's begin the work of patching up the wide rifts caused by this divisive election season. My column in the November Newsletter, which is on line now, suggests some ways to start the healing.

That's the Election Day part of today's sermon. Next week we'll talk more about repairing the nation and moving on.

Tonight is the Pagan New Year, Samhain, Hallowe'en, the night when the veil between the worlds is thin and you are invited to remember the dead and to step over the threshold into the new year.

It's a time of choosing. Some of you might remember our Hallowe'en service in 1998 when we still met at

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Dickinson College. We handed out teacakes to be left at a crossroad as an offering to Hecate for assistance in making a critical decision. Bill and Suzanne Brown left theirs at a crossroad and came back the next week resolved that they would retire the next spring and move to Arizona, where at last report they were enjoying an active retirement.

There is a branch of psychology that studies decision-making and its effects on our wellbeing. Barry Schwartz, the out-of-touch jeans buyer and professor at Swarthmore wrote his recently published book to explore the costs of making a choice. In it he suggests that sometimes having many options to choose from does not serve us well.

Having the power of choice is an essential element of freedom and autonomy. Who hasn't experienced a toddler's insistent demand for control over his destiny by choosing not to eat or do something? Among the founding principles of our faith tradition is an affirmation of free will as essential to freedom and fulfillment.

But survey data suggest that we Americans, despite having more alternatives in many aspects of our lives, actually feel less powerful and more helpless than we did earlier. In a 1966 Louis Harris survey only 9% agreed that they felt left out of things going on around them. In 1986 more than four times as many – 37% – agreed with the statement. In 1966 over a third of respondents (36%) agreed that what they thought didn't matter. In 1986 the number had increased to 60%.² I didn't find more recent data, but my guess is the numbers have continued to increase. Despite more alternatives, we feel less powerful and more helpless, and that is particularly apparent in face of global terrorism.

Schwartz offers two explanations for the paradox: first as we experience more choice our expectations increase, and it becomes more difficult to satisfy them. Second, he argues, at some point the increasing number of options becomes overwhelming and we find ourselves frustrated or even paralyzed by not being able to choose wisely.

I suspect there is a third factor at play, which may be even more important. While we have many alternatives to choose from in some areas of life, in the things that matter most to our wellbeing we have fewer.

Let's face it, having 60 kinds of jeans to choose among or over a hundred channels of the junk that passes for most television programming or freezer cases filled with different ice cream flavors is less important than whether we have a job that pays a living wage, access to quality education and health care, clean air and water, and a safe place to sleep at night.

Research shows that we often want to avoid making a decision, particularly if there are multiple choices, tradeoffs, or the risk of negative consequences. Thus 75% of physicians presented with a hypothetical case history and asked if they would prescribe a new medication or refer the patient to a specialist would recommend the medication. But if they were presented with the same case and asked to choose among two new medications or referral, only 50% chose either of the medications.

A better alternative will often appear after we've made a decision or the choice we made will disappoint us in some way. Regret is likely to follow. You pick tomato juice and then remember, "I could a' had a V-8!" The first car I bought new had to have its engine replaced after 45,000 miles. The dealer said that was more miles than most people got from them. It was past the warranty. I felt buyer's remorse and was angry at myself, at the dealer, and at the manufacturer.

We are more likely to feel regret for taking an action that turned out badly than for failing to take an action that would have benefited us, and worse if we have just missed something than if it was a long way out of reach. Our regret is greater when we get all but one of the lottery numbers correct than it is if we miss most of them. But we aren't likely to feel any regret if we don't buy a ticket at all. We feel worse if we are a half-hour

² Barry Schwartz. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) p. 103.

late getting to the airport and discover that our flight was delayed by 25 minutes and just left than we would had it departed on time.

When you evaluate the experience that resulted from a choice you have made, you do it by comparison to some standard. Perhaps the standard is what you had hoped or expected the experience to be and you evaluate it as either having failed to meet your hopes or your expectations or having exceeded them. Or perhaps you compare the experience to others you have recently had or to the report from someone else about their experience and evaluate whether this one was better or worse.

You made a choice to come here this morning. You could have slept in, stayed home and lingered over the Sunday paper, gone out for a walk, or any number of other things. No doubt you are already evaluating your experience based on the expectations or hopes you brought with you, in comparison with another experience of worship, or by what someone else told you about this congregation.

A recent breakfast at Faye's in Carlisle wasn't as good as the breakfast I had at the Homemade Café in Berkeley last February, which is the gold standard for breakfast in my book. I regretted ordering the sausage when it came out and I remembered how much I didn't like it the last time I was at Faye's. It didn't measure up to the sausage at the Homemade. But even the meal at the Homemade in February wasn't quite as wonderful as I had anticipated from that old favorite spot after several years of being away. Sure, the breakfast was good and the coffee was strong, but in my imagination the place is perfect, and of course it isn't and it never was.

The solution to being overwhelmed by choice, Schwartz proposes, is to make a conscious shift away from seeking to make an optimum choice and instead seek one that is satisfactory. Looking for the optimum — the best — is a setup for failure, especially when the selection involves tradeoffs, as nearly every choice does. You can never know for sure if you've made the best choice until you've examined and evaluated all of the options, and as soon as you decide, something better will likely appear. Next year's new car will have more bells and whistles and maybe get a extra mile per gallon of fuel. The jeans you buy this week may go on sale next week. Your dream house will come on the market just after you've signed a contract to buy one that's really OK. Looking for the best is a setup for regret or procrastination in the face of anticipated regret.

Instead, Schwartz suggests that you think about how important a choice is to your wellbeing. For the ones that don't matter as much, just make a choice and move on. Is it really worth driving to half a dozen gas stations to save 2¢ on a gallon — 25¢ on a fillup? If something better comes along you can at least pat yourself on the back for not investing a huge amount of psychic energy in something that was relatively trivial. Save your energy for the things that really matter.

Next he suggests that you establish a set of minimal criteria before you begin looking and choose the first alternative you find that satisfies your minimum standards. He argues that being a satisficer — someone who is content with a choice that satisfies her or his minimum standards — will save the time and energy you would have spent seeking the impossible best, and allow you to make your decision efficiently and move on with fewer regrets. Sure you could a' had a V-8, but the tomato juice was just fine, thank you.

Of course the flip side of too many choices is to not have any alternatives or to have too few of them. Even if you are a satisficer, if there aren't any options that meet your standards, you'll have to either lower your standards or do without.

Now we're coming to the scary Hallowe'en part of the sermon.

I was amazed to hear from a representative of Ames-True Temper that the quality of their various lines of garden tools is dictated by Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Lowes, who are their three biggest customers by far. While they could theoretically make higher quality tools, none of the big three would buy them and consequently there isn't enough market for them.

Wal-Mart is by far the biggest retail business with sales of almost \$250 billion a year, which is four times more than the second biggest retailer, Home Depot. Wal-Mart is the biggest corporation in the world – bigger than even Microsoft, Exxon, or General Electric.

It's almost impossible to get much information about buying strategies directly from the Wal-Mart, and manufacturers have become so dependent on them that most refuse to talk about their relationship for fear of retaliation.

Those who do say that Wal-Mart deals with them honestly and rationally and always pays their bills promptly. They demand that orders be filled on time – and they mean on time – deliveries may not be a day early nor an hour late. Representatives of Wal-Mart will assist their suppliers in upgrading information systems and improving production efficiency.

And Wal-Mart will dictate the price they are willing to pay. Take Vlastic pickles as an example. The producer had positioned itself to peddle pricy premium-packaged pints of pickles. Wal-Mart asked them to produce a gallon-size jar of plain pickles priced at \$2.97 retail. That's plenty of pickles, more than most families can put away before they turn putrid, at a price lower than Vlastic's much smaller standard retail jars, but Wal-Mart saw the cheap giant-sized pickle bargain as a promotion of the family-sized deals it promised its patrons and promptly procured and placed pallets of gallon pickle jars in the checkstand proximity.

The average store sold 10 or 12 gallons a day. That's a quarter million gallons a week for all Wal-Mart stores, and it meant pumping up production from planting and picking to the pickling and packing plants. Vlastic's sales boomed overall, but their customers bought fewer of the higher-priced, smaller jars. At puny net profits of less than a penny a jar, while sales picked up pace, overall profits pathetically plunged 25 percent. Vlastic pleaded for reprieve, but Wal-Mart particularly wanted a \$2.97-a-gallon pickle pack pact and politely pronounced that they would place all of their pickle procurement elsewhere if Vlastic didn't produce the popular low-priced pickles pronto. It was no picnic and poor Vlastic was in a pinch and petitioned for bankruptcy protection.³ Pity.

Other American manufacturers that have done business with Wal-Mart have been forced to close their American production lines and import goods, mostly from China, or declare bankruptcy. Levi Straus, MasterLock, Hoover vacuums, Loveable Garments, and Huffy bicycles are among them. There are secondary and tertiary impacts as well. Carolina Mills, which supplies thread, yarn, and fabric finishing has closed 10 of its 17 US factories as its customers, many of whom sell the finished goods to Wal-Mart, have been forced to export production. In Western New York, Buffalo Color, a major supplier of indigo dye used for denim, was forced into bankruptcy. So much for Wal-Mart's Buy American campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

It's not just the Wal-Mart suppliers and their former employees that are hurting. Local businesses like Castles Lumber and Hardware in Carlisle have been forced to close their doors when customers choose Wal-Mart, Lowes, and Home Depot over the local store. Maybe you can save a few bucks that way in the short term, I don't know – I'm personally boycotting Wal-Mart, though I can hardly avoid Lowes as there seem to be no remaining viable alternatives.

But you sure can't get the same level of service and knowledge at the big stores, and they remove profits from the community. Castles was a generous neighbor, helping Project SHARE for example, to supply grocery carts to their clients who had to walk further to the food bank after it moved, and fixing them when they broke.

We still have another choice. If enough consumers stopped buying at Wal-Mart we could stop the export of many thousands of jobs and perhaps save a few of the neighborhood businesses that return so much to the

³ Charles Fishman "The Wal-Mart You Don't Know." *FastCompany* Dec 2003, p. 67. (<http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/77/walmart.html>)

community. That would mean considering not just the price of things, but their cost as well. While the price may be cheap at Wal-Mart, the cost is high. After most of the competition has been run out of town, we'll be forced to shop at Wal-Mart, to accept the quality of goods they dictate, and to buy the things they decide to put on the shelf.

But that choice to shop somewhere else may be going away, and that really frightens me. New Wal-Mart stores open at a rate of one every 42 hours.

In Iowa during the first ten years Wal-Mart was there, the state lost 555 grocery stores, 298 hardware stores, 293 building supply stores, 161 variety stores, 158 women's clothing stores, 153 shoe stores, 116 drug stores, and 111 men's and boy's clothing stores.⁴ Many of them left empty storefronts on Main Street, a disaster for urban planning that forces people into their cars just to buy a quart of milk or a pair of socks. And that means higher costs for all of us. No one could make a credible claim that all of the closings are the direct result of Wal-Mart coming to the outskirts of town, but there is no doubt it was a factor in many of them.

Those local stores purchased legal, banking, accounting, graphic, and advertising services in their hometowns that Wal-Mart doesn't use much.

You can help. Don't shop at Wal-Mart. Buy your books at the local independent bookshops. Patronize the downtown stores while there are still a few left. Get good locally grown produce at the Farmer's Market. Buy locally produced goods from locally owned merchants.

It's about choice and maintaining a reasonable number of real options, keeping viable alternatives in the areas that really make a difference in the quality of life and to the planet, and finding effective ways to make decisions that satisfy us rather than expecting a never-attainable optimum.

Then you may discover that you have more time and energy for the things that really matter. For relationships and family, for nurturing yourself and your community, for working to heal the planet. For all life is a gift, and we are called to use it in the service of abundance of love, not things.

May we know that and may we have the courage to decide to act on it. Amen.

⁴ Bill McKibben. "The Morning After: A Quietly Radical Model for the Red States and the Blue" in *Orion* Nov-Dec 2004, pp. 70-71.