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 Arlington Street Church
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Not to Decide is to Decide

Not to decide is to decide. With this ominous declaration, the great cellist Pablo Casals, haunts us, drives us, inspires us to deeply understand that in not making a decision, we relinquish our prerogative to choose. When we don't decide, what happens next will happen to us; rather than acting, we will be acted on.

Granted, while every decision shapes our lives, most of the choices we make – and we make them all the time, every day – could hardly be categorized as ultimately life-shaking, though they may feel that way at the time.

For example, *Parenting* magazine's *Five Big Choices to Make for Your Baby* include putting them down to nap when tired or only for scheduled naps, starting solids at four months or six months, and using a pacifier or not (also known as “to nuk or not to nuk”).¹ Then there's William Carlos Williams' poem, *The Red Wheelbarrow*:

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow

 glazed with rain
 water

 beside the white
 chickens.

Undeniably, the Five Big Choices may feel momentous with a newborn in our arms, and I can imagine, I guess, that there may be days when the whole world depends on a wheelbarrow. And then there's this, from Apple's Steve Jobs: “Remembering that

¹ Please see Patty Onderko, *Five Big Choices to Make for Your Baby*, at parenting.com/article/5-big-decisions-to-make-for-your-baby

I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.... Remembering that [we] are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking [we] have something to lose... There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

But what if our heart is divided? What to do when there are only momentous choices as far as we can see, or, worse, only terrible choices? Worst, what to do when we freeze? I shared with you recently that the results are in: studies reveal that we regret more what we *haven't* done than that which we *have* done; if the question is *To do, or not to do?* the answer is *Do*. Except that, as Alcoholics Anonymous' common wisdom teaches, *When in doubt, don't!*

So *what* is it we're supposed to do?! How can we build the muscle of decision-making so that we can live happier, healthier, more productive lives, as free as possible from the regret of not having chosen? *How can choosing become a spiritual practice?*

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When presented with a decision to make, some of us, as Steve Jobs directed, follow our hearts, or go with our gut. Others of us research. The heart-and-gut folks find the researchers tedious. Those who research find the heart-and-gut folks impulsive. Good news! It turns out that combining forces of instinct and intellect yields the most fruitful decisions. Yet one more reason to join forces in a spiritual community!

But what about when it really is up to us, and we really can't decide? Consideration turns to rumination turns to brooding. This is known as analysis paralysis.

When we were in high school, my neighbor, Linda, was unintentionally pregnant. To have a baby or not? She thought about it day and night, but she couldn't move; she was frozen. And then it was too late. Not to decide is to decide. After the baby was born, the question was whether or not to relinquish it for adoption. Days turned into weeks turned into months. Linda never got past her ambivalence. I don't know what happened to Linda, or if that baby ever felt welcomed and loved. Not to decide means never getting to *yes*. The opposite of wholeheartedness can look a lot like heartlessness.

While the capacity to reason distinguishes us in the world of animals, it turns out that “the fount of reason” is located in the most recently-developed part of our mammalian brains – the neocortex. Reasoning is a fairly recently-acquired skill. Overwhelmingly, “we still walk around with ... [a] Stone Age brain – a mess of emotions,

imperfect memories, and a short attention span. To top it off, it never has all the facts to make the 'perfect' decision....

“[It] gets worse: We even make decisions without being conscious of having done so.... [As a rule, we've] decided on a course of action ten seconds before [we're] consciously aware of having made any decision at all.” In other words, our default is the dinosaur response. All the more so when the going gets rough: we revert to listening to commands from the amygdala, the most primitive part of our brain.

When we get anxious about making decisions, we become exhausted and overwhelmed. We become exhausted and overwhelmed when we get anxious about making decisions. It's a closed system. And we do it to ourselves. It's easy to careen into all-or-nothing, right-or-wrong thinking and fight-or-flight behavior. Nuance is lost. But the truth is that many, many situations offer no surety. This is worth committing to memory: there is no “right” answer. When we internalize that, and choose to believe it, the door opens to intuition.

Yes, it's easier to learn to research decisions than it is to learn to trust our intuition, go with our gut, and lead with our heart. But it turns out that researching will not make us happier. In a study of students facing the choice of a career, those who considered every option were compared with those who looked until they found an option that was “good enough.” Those who researched exhaustively did end up with higher-paying jobs, but weren't as happy as the “good enough” gang.

Why?

Perhaps “because a world of possibilities is also a world of missed possibilities. When [we] look at every possible option, [we] tend to fixate more on what was given up than [on] what was gained. After surveying every option ... [we] are more acutely aware of the 'opportunity cost' of [our] decision[s]... [including] all the opportunities [we] had to turn down....” The study concludes that “it's better to settle for 'good enough' most of the time. Lower expectations and fewer regrets will make [us] ... happier.... Considering every option is almost never necessary, and should be reserved for the most important life decisions. Ultimately, it's more important to maximize happiness than options.”²

There is a vast difference between impulsiveness and intuition, but for many of us,

² Kirsten Vala, “Choking on Choice,” in *Psychology Today*, 4/21/06. Please see psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making

there's a lot in the way of being in touch with our intuition. Unitarian Universalist author Dan Wakefield asks, “How do we know when it's g*d?” In other words, how do we distinguish the “still, small voice”³ from the loud, chaotic voices of ego and fear?

Rule number one: Do not let your instincts boss you around. When we make snap decisions, we would do well to go one step further, asking *Why did I choose this and not that?* Good strategies for pre-decision making include rephrasing the central questions; making a list of our alternatives; trying to recall what happened if there was a “last time” we made this kind of choice; and remembering that distance gives us perspective. This may be the best advice of all: sometimes, we just need a break from thinking about the decision we're facing. We can choose to take a vacation from fretting.⁴

Yet another way to distinguish the “still, small voice” of intuition is to take a hard look at what we cherish – our values – and see how they are being affected by the choice at hand. I heard recently, though I couldn't verify it, that most of us have established the core of our values by the age of three. We may need to take a step back and make sure that, when the going gets tough, we're not reverting to thinking and acting like a three- year-old. This is especially important for those of us who, instead of thinking our way into acting, act our way into thinking.

There are many exercises in values clarification, worthy of our attention. My favorite comes in the form of three questions:

1. How will it be to eat the fruits of your actions? Are you willing to live with the consequences of being “caught?”
2. What would those you admire most think of your actions? Christians frame this question: WWJD? What would Jesus do? We want to consider not necessarily our friends, who might fear for our well-being, but our heroes. Bring a hero to mind. What would they think about your decision?

And 3. Having chosen this, would you feel proud to defend your choice on the front page of the newspaper?

Values clarification puts decision-making clearly in the category of spiritual practice. Still, beyond research and analysis, beyond impulse and intuition, sometimes, all that is left is prayer. I commend us to Reinhold Niebuhr's *Serenity Prayer*, which asks, in part,

³ I Kings 19:12

⁴ Nando Pelusi, “Fretting Over Decisions” in *Psychology Today*, 11/11/08. Please see psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making

G*d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
 courage to change the things I can;
 and wisdom to know the difference....

Sometimes, making difficult choices has to be entrusted to the depths of our courage and wisdom, and a prayer for serenity.

I was deeply moved, recently, when, following his diagnosis with an aggressive, ravaging form of prostate cancer, Kem's stepmother's husband, Richard Morris, decided to forgo painful and invasive treatments and, instead, opted for palliative care to manage the pain and live out his remaining days in peace.

When Richard's friends learned of his decision, several of them stopped by the house in the hopes of disabusing him of his decision. Hope against hope, they said. Life at any cost! But Richard was resolute. He was clear about his values, and clear about his goal: he valued quality of life over quantity of life, and, having lived almost 80 years, his goal was to enjoy a peaceful close to his time among us.

When I called them last month, Richard's wife, Pat, answered the phone. "Last night, after dinner together – just the two of us," she said, "– we spent the evening sitting in front of the fireplace, reading. Before he went to bed, Richard said to me, 'You see, if I'd opted for surgery and chemotherapy, we never would have enjoyed an evening like this.'" A photo of Richard, taken the day before he slipped into a coma, shows him up and dressed, standing in the desert sun, his arms around his sisters, standing on either side, smiling, peaceful, and free.

Beloved spiritual companions, while every decision shapes our lives, no matter how momentous our choices may feel at the time, precious few will be radically life-altering. Still, not to decide is to decide. We would do well to remember that the best decisions are made with the winning combination of both instinct and intellect, though it is more important to maximize happiness than options. May we take a vacation from fretting, seek to distinguish the "still, small voice" of intuition, and find comfort in the fact that, usually, there is no "right" answer.

Since Richard's death, I have carried around these few lines from Denise Levertov's poem *Beginners*. I'll share them with you now.

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We have only begun
 To imagine the fullness of life.

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We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding

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so much is in bud.