

“The Burden of Too Many Options”
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Reflections

Do you know which sermon in a minister’s career is the most difficult one? You’d think it’d be the first one, that first daunting time standing in the pulpit, putting your words and heart out there for a congregation, wouldn’t you? I remember *my* first sermon, now sixteen years ago, which I preached on the work of Jim Henson. It’s hard to believe that being up here ever made me that nervous. But no, the hardest sermon is not the first one; it’s the *second* one, because then you have to come back and preach again after you’ve already said everything you know. A fairly reliable sign of inexperienced preachers is that their sermons contain several sermons-that-might-have-been.

One thing that comes with preaching experience is the willingness to prune my manuscript mercilessly, until the deadwood is gone and only a single sermon remains. And so most weeks I have the opportunity to reflect upon our reading and the observation that where our trail leads us often demands that we cut away the writing that used to seem so clever and necessary. If there’s anything more daunting than that blank page or, in my case, that blank screen, it’s knowing that the creative process is going to demand that I trim away all of the side-paths, all of the other sermons-that-might-have-been, until only this final work remains. A preacher starts with a mass of ideas like a block of marble and chisels away everything that is not the sermon itself. It is an experience that we must make our peace with, or else be miserable on a weekly basis, grieving for all those ideas we could not keep.

Being faced with an unblemished world of possibilities is both thrilling and daunting. And when we acknowledge that each choice we make eliminates the possibility of other choices that will not come again, we may find ourselves paralyzed with indecision. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “When I behold my possibilities I experience that dread which is the ‘dizziness of freedom,’ and my choice is made in fear and trembling.”

Odd – we don’t usually think of freedom as something inspiring “fear and trembling”. Our culture is built upon the cornerstones of freedom and self-determination, and these values are vital to the sort of lives we expect to shape for ourselves. And we’ve become accustomed to having them at our disposal, too; life without freedom and autonomy would be well nigh unbearable to those of us raised on these principles. But even as having no options may be a terrible experience, it is also clear that a proliferation of options has not always increased the quality of our lives. Our society has dedicated much of its resources and attention to making more options available to us, and it’s worth spending our time together this morning exploring these unanticipated challenges generated by the movement for ever more possibilities.

Many of the choices we face on an everyday basis would have been unimaginable to people a few centuries ago. The notion of being able to choose whatever we want to eat, what to wear, how to entertain ourselves, what career to pursue, where to live, what to believe, whom to love – all of this would have seemed a bizarre fantasy to our forebears. Even when choices did exist in the pre-modern era, there were almost always moral absolutes that rendered them practically no choice at all, like getting a divorce or coming out as gay or lesbian. The modern age was marked by the concerted challenge to divine authority and the institutions founded upon it, and the Enlightenment fueled the possibility for many that this alternative authority could simply be individual self-interest. The rise of individuality, combined with the explosion of

productivity in the Industrial Revolution, has transformed utterly the role of choice in our lives. John Stuart Mill noted that, while liberty has for centuries been valued as a means to other ends, like justice or a better society, today it functions as an end in itself. Choice has become an activity of its own – note the evolution of shopping from getting the goods we need to a hobby in its own right.

The result is a culture that caters to our enjoyment and expectation of options. Barry Schwartz, the author of *The Paradox of Choice*, counts in his neighborhood supermarket 85 different varieties of crackers, 285 different kinds of cookies, 95 kinds of chips, 80 choices in pain-relievers (in case this shopping is giving you a headache), 40 options in toothpaste... on and on, a total of 30,000 different items in a typical supermarket. In every kind of store, even in institutions that have now begun to function like stores – universities, and even religious communities – we are glutted with possibilities to a degree that our species has never faced before.

It was while I was overseas, teaching at the Unitarian seminary in Transylvania, that I took seriously the possibility that this trend is not necessarily progress. My friend the Rev. Sándor Kovács had been at my seminary in Berkeley for a year as minister-in-residence, and returned to Transylvania just as I was arriving there. Sándor was quite frank with me about the ways in which life in the United States had affected him, and one of the strongest responses he had was at that abundance that Barry Schwartz noted in the supermarkets. In Transylvania, you could get white bread, brown bread and black bread – why, he demanded to know, did we think that we needed 30, 40 brands to choose from, most of them indistinguishable from one another? Another colleague here in the States told about when his family hosted a Polish exchange student for a year, and she burst into tears upon seeing the thousands of kinds of food in their supermarket; it was both wonderful and terrible, she sobbed, to see such an excess of possibility.

Planted in my mind was the question, has a greater number of options really increased the quality of our lives? Schwartz and his contemporaries are convinced that a proliferation of options has not changed our lives for the better; in fact, he claims, it has in many ways made our lives less meaningful and satisfying. Have any of *you* found yourselves overwhelmed with the task of making a new purchase? Of choosing an insurance provider or a pension plan?

Studies have shown that this explosion in the number of options available to us can be confusing, frustrating and paralyzing, even to the point where the very freedom we are trying to exercise is diminished. Edward Rosenthal calls this irony the “inversion of choice” – the effect of options actually weakening our ability to choose. He asks us to imagine stopping in to buy a cell phone during our lunch break and being faced with 70 different models. We may not feel that we have enough information to make an informed choice among them, but we don’t have all day to spend on the task, either; we’re likely to walk out of the store empty-handed, feeling frustrated and a bit foolish.

The inversion of choice helps us begin to make sense of the puzzle that Americans are spending more time shopping than ever before, but enjoying it less. We are given more choice than we’ve ever had, but our behaviors reflect that we are actually feeling less sense of freedom. Somewhere along the line we have passed a point of diminishing returns.

My reading about the proliferation of choice has left me with a few surprising truths that I’d like to share with you this afternoon. Not only do these observations apply to our participation in secular society, I believe they also have some on our experience of this religious community and what we have to offer each other.

Truth number 1: more options make the task of choosing more difficult, to the point where we may actually give up our freedom to choose

It's not surprising that deciding between six flavors of jam is easier than between 24 flavors, if only for the greater number to compare. What is perhaps surprising is that too many options elicits an emotional response in us as well, and not a positive one. Perhaps you've noticed as I have how common it is to see other shoppers utterly vapor-locked at the array of options before them. Studies have borne out that our feelings of overwhelm may simply shut down our ability to decide. When shoppers were offered samples from either of the aforementioned six or 24 flavors of jam, having more choices made them far less likely to actually buy the product, even at a reduced price for having participated in the study. At this point, Schwartz says, "choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize."

In a similar way, being overwhelmed can paralyze us so that we fail to make more important decisions. Researchers Sheena Iyengar and Wei Jiang at Columbia University saw that, when people are given more options for their 401(k) investments, they become more likely to make no choice at all, even when failing to choose causes them to miss out on their employer's matching funds program. Not only is the experience of making complicated choices frustrating, we run the risk of abdicating important choices entirely.

Truth number 2: more options do not always lead to making better choices

This goes to the heart of the argument for free-market capitalism, doesn't it? Schwartz uses the example of deregulated utilities to illustrate that giving the consumer more choices does not always serve us well. In the past, we relied on elected officials to make utilities choices for us, for better or worse. Today, it's up to the consumer to figure out the competing providers and packages, and studies show that we *won't* shop around for better services, but usually prefer to stick with the provider we've always had, or go with the most familiar name. The difference is that we now do it without a state regulator to help us avoid being swindled.

Truth number 3: more options in unimportant areas can distract us from more important decisions

Implicit in my colleague Sándor's criticism of Americans having too many options is the judgment that we waste our attention and energy on relatively unimportant choices. Schwartz jokes, "I think that in modern America, we have far too many options for breakfast cereal and not enough options for president." Economist Fred Hirsch calls this the "tyranny of small decisions". And my colleague in Kenosha, the Rev. Georgette Wonders, observes, "...too often the hypnotic nature of seemingly endless consumer choices means we spend a whole afternoon choosing a pair of jeans and ten minutes skimming campaign literature before we run into the polls to vote." The demands of making many unimportant choices may leave us ill-equipped for our most important decisions.

Truth number 4: more options may leave us less satisfied with our choices.

Not only do more options diminish the enjoyment we might feel in the exercise of our freedom to choose, research shows that we are often left less satisfied with the choices we've made. One of the places I noticed this was in San Francisco while I was in seminary. It would be easy to assume that having easy access to The City would be a great opportunity for a single gay man to have a social life and a community of connections and activities, but I actually found it quite a disappointing experience. True, there were thousands of other single gay men, but the very availability of so many potential dates meant that everyone else seemed to be keeping their options open, in case Mr. Right was just around the corner. Having so many possibilities left everyone hoping to "trade up" to a better model.

**Truth number 5 (and this is the last one):
more options can paralyze us in moments of crisis.**

This is one of the most sobering observations that researchers noted. Physician Atul Gawande recalls a time when his newborn daughter had a medical emergency during which she stopped breathing. Doctors asked Gawande as a colleague whether he wanted her intubated, a decision that he was certainly qualified to make. But he remembers, "Even if I made what I was sure was the right choice for her, I could not live with the guilt if something went wrong... I needed [her] physicians to bear the responsibility; they could live with the consequences, good or bad." Gawande notes that as many as 65 percent of people say that, if they got developed cancer, they would want to choose their own treatment, while among people who actually *do* get cancer, only 12 percent want to make this choice. What this tells me is that we are often more enthusiastic about having choices in theory than we are in the practice of day-to-day life.

Why, then, have we made such a fetish out of the freedom of choice, in Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's words, if it can be such a daunting and demoralizing experience to have too much of it? One reason is that, up to a point, having options *does* improve our quality of life. But when abundance takes us far past what we need, to the point of over-abundance, we actually experience our lives as deteriorating. Schwartz even goes to connect our overwhelm to more serious consequences, like clinical depression.

Another reason is that each "yes" we say to one option means saying "no" to others, and we have become accustomed to having our cake and eating it too. One illustration of this unwillingness to let go is from a Hindu tale on how to trap a monkey: a hole is drilled in a coconut shell just large enough for a monkey's hand to fit through, and food is placed inside. When the monkey grasps the food, its fist is too large to be pulled back through the hole, but it is unwilling to let go of the food, making it easy prey for hunters. I'll leave it for you to decide whether you are ever trapped that way.

This leads me to an observation of Schwartz' that I find especially important: some of us are what he calls "maximizers" and others "satisficers". Maximizers are always on the lookout for the very best outcome in every situation, always determined to make the very best choice. Like my experience of life in San Francisco, they are also plagued with regret that there might be a better choice out there somewhere. A *New Yorker* cartoon I saw illustrating this showed a college student wearing a university sweatshirt saying "BROWN... but my first choice was Yale." Another college-related example was cited in the *New York Times* this week, as well: there is a trend for high-school seniors to go through the lengthy and expensive application process for as many as 20, 25 different colleges. Maximizers are so busy envying what they don't have or worrying that they won't get their ideal that they can't enjoy what they do have.

Satisficers, on the other hand, do their best to make a smart choice, and then make their peace with that decision, like ministers must do with the painful editing of our sermons.

There's much to enjoy and appreciate in the abundance that surrounds us, but it's easy to let that appreciation harden into a sense of expectation. We can come to believe that a variety of options should be expected in every situation, and that we're entitled to raise a fuss if we don't have as many choices as we expect. But entitlement is a serious spiritual illness in our day, and leads us into feeling chronic disappointment and resentment at the world that will not bend over backwards to satisfy our wants.

How, then, do we thrive in a society where a multitude of options seems to be here to stay? How do we appreciate the freedom to choose, and exercise this freedom wisely, without being debilitated by the quantity of possibilities?

I think that, first of all, it's helpful simply to recognize that being flooded with options is not always a good thing, and that we might be more aware of our responses to so many possibilities. Once we question an assumption like this, we begin to look at it with a different eye, and then have the opportunity to change our responses.

Secondly, I'd encourage us to keep our decisions in perspective, and not squander our attention and energy on relatively unimportant choices. Not every option is a battle worth taking on, especially when we acknowledge that we're often too overwhelmed to give enough attention to our most critical decisions. The liberty that is at the core of American culture and, indeed, at the core of Unitarian Universalism, is not at its heart about getting more and more choices. Amartya Sen elaborates, "We should ask ourselves whether [this freedom] nourishes or deprives us... and whether it enables us to participate in our communities or deprives us from doing so." Part of the meaningful exercise of freedom is recognizing when we are legitimately called to trade off some of our autonomy, as when we form relationships. Keeping perspective about the freedoms that matter most to us, and letting go of less important decisions, is a significant way of simplifying our lives

Third, it's a good idea to be explicit about the values that help us choose from among these too many options. If I'm committed to buying coffee that is fair-trade, if I'm committed to doing business with companies that use fair labor practices, if I'm willing to pay more for a product that is relatively friendly environmentally, it helps to be clear with myself about these values. Whenever I feel a twinge of doubt or regret about a past choice, I can remind myself that it was for good reasons that I chose how I did, and make my peace with these decisions. Don't underestimate the value of this step, because chronic regret is one of the most debilitating emotions we experience. Recognize that we always have a limited amount of information and time out of which to make a decision, and let go of those choices that cannot be revisited.

We would also do well to recognize the escalating expectations we have in a society devoted to providing us with more choices. The line between appreciation and entitlement is one of the most important distinctions to make in a life that is satisfying and balanced. By practicing gratitude for what we *do* have, rather than participating in the national hobby of cultivating dissatisfaction, we can shape a life that is filled with joy, rather than restless acquisition.

The demands of modern life present us with some tremendous challenges, many even as a result of the very gains that we've struggled for and won. In the face of each new situation that arises, in each choice that we resolve, we continue to learn how to preserve our humanity and make real our freedom, more evidence that we are each and all a work in progress. May we face these challenges, mindful of our deepest values, that we might choose wisely and enjoy an abundance that is truly meaningful.