

## **The Right Choice**

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“To live fully, we must learn to use things and love people, and not love things and use people.” — John Powell

### **Reading**

#484 by William Henry Channing

To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion, to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly, to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart, to bear all cheerfully, to all bravely await occasions, hurry never. In a word, to let the spiritual unbidden and unconscious grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony.

### **The Right Choice**

Good morning Humanists, pantheists, pagans, Agnostics, U-Jews, Bu-Us, freethinkers, Stoics, Skeptics, cynics, mystics, theosophists, and sun worshippers or maybe I should just say chains of carbon atoms. Is everyone okay with that?

It's not just people who've exploded into categories—when my parents were growing up in the 1930s they had milk and they had cream. There was chocolate milk, but it was too expensive so they mixed chocolate syrup into their milk. There was skim milk—it was a byproduct of cream, and poured into waterways, used as hog slop, and to make adhesives. It wasn't until after World War II that marketers decided to sell this as a health product.

When I was a kid in the 1970s there was whole milk, skim milk, 1% and 2% milk. In addition to chocolate milk Nestle came up with strawberry milk. When I was a teenager lactose-free milk arrived on the dairy scene.

Recently I walked down the milk aisle of the grocery store, where I haven't been in a long time because I no longer drink milk and don't have children at home. I was confused. No, I was paralyzed. There was a wall of milk. In addition to whole milk, skim milk, 1%, 2%, and Lactaid, we now have fat-free milk, organic milk, almond milk, soy milk, vanilla soy milk, cashew milk, coconut milk, and those are just the ones I remember. I think there may have been cage-free milk from peripatetic cows.

Pick any food sector and the choices of organic, semi-organic, free-range, sodium free, gluten free, seasoned or stuffed, pile up fast. Don't even get me started on the bread aisle. Although maybe someone can explain why bread crumbs are more expensive than bread. I was similarly incapacitated while

shopping for a pair of blue jeans with options such as straight, skinny, boot cut, baggy, boyfriend, stone-washed, acid-washed, zipper or button fly. Amazon sells 1,154 varieties of toilet brushes.

If you're like me you probably get dozens of catalogues a week in addition to what's available online, which is essentially everything.

Buying milk or jeans should be a trivial matter in the greater scheme of our lives. But it's now a complex transaction demanding an enormous amount of time and energy often accompanied by self-doubt and anxiety.

It's true that when people have NO choices life can be unbearable, or at the very least much less enjoyable. But as the number of choices continues growing, negative aspects begin to appear until a barrage of options leads to overload, at which point choice no longer liberates but debilitates, and may even be said to traumatize and tyrannize.

Assessments of well-being by social scientists reveal that increased choice and increased prosperity have been accompanied by decreased happiness in the US and most other affluent societies. As gross domestic product more than doubled in the past 30 years, the segment of the population describing itself as "very happy" declined by about 5%, or 14 million people, and more individuals than ever before were diagnosed as clinically depressed.

No one believes a single factor explains decreased well-being, but a number of findings indicate that the explosion of choice plays a significant role. Thus it seems that as society grows wealthier and people become freer to do whatever they want, they're less happy.

Yet marketers and advertisers have made new products impossible to ignore. It can be addictive to look at one more store, catalogue, or website before making a decision. Especially when you consider we have choices in almost all areas of life, including education, career, friendship, romance, parenting, location, travel, and religious observance, to name a few. Choice is essential to autonomy, which in turn is fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives.

Choices for retirement plans are mind-boggling. Medical choices abound. Health care has shifted from what I experienced growing up with the all-knowing paternalistic doctor telling the patient what must be done, or sometimes just doing it. Doctors often withheld crucial information, like the fact that you were going to die. Patients could be forbidden to look at their own medical records.

We suffered for it, either because doctors were arrogant or careless, or they were making a life-choice that depended on our own philosophy and psyche. The patient revolution which started in the 1980s has no doubt greatly improved medical care but has also gone too far.

My husband had prostate cancer and the doctor said you can watch and wait, do a radical prostatectomy, or implant radiation seeds. We said, okay which option is best for his age and stage. They said, you decide. Seriously, you have sixty years of medical practice between the three of you while he's a business professor and I'm a writer. We voted on prostate removal and he's fine. It was the size of a grapefruit. For all our advanced scientific knowledge health care is still mostly about fruits and vegetables—lumps the size of blueberries and limes and avocados. How's the new baby? As big as a watermelon.

With the revolution in traditional care came an array of herbs, vitamins, diets, acupuncture, aromatherapies, copper bracelets, chakra stones, crystal clusters, and faith healers. More recently we have widespread advertising for prescription drugs. No drugs were advertised on TV when I was growing up except over-the-counter Excedrin for one very harried bus driver, and Roloids for a stressed-out math teacher.

Now what's the point of advertising prescription drugs on TV? We can't go to the pharmacy and buy them. Why are drug companies investing vast fortunes to reach us, the consumer, directly? "Ask your doctor if taking medical advice from commercials is right for you."

Clearly they hope and expect we'll notice their products and ask for prescriptions. I can't watch the news without seeing commercials for sleep aids featuring butterflies floating around the room. We didn't have that when I was growing up. We also didn't have a Starbucks selling Frappuccinos in buckets on every corner. Gee, does anyone else see a connection here?

Have you glanced at a college catalogue recently? There can be over 350 courses to satisfy the basic requirements, out of which students will choose a dozen at most. This is nothing compared to the television revolution – a thousand times as many shows on networks, cable and video streaming, available anytime we want them.

In the 1970s if we missed an episode of "All in the Family" we had to try and catch it in reruns. If we were lucky enough to find an old movie to watch late at night we didn't have a sense we were missing anything. And commercials were good for conversation, letting the dog out, snack runs and bathroom breaks.

The conundrum here is the fact that just because some choice is good doesn't necessarily mean that even more choice is better. There is a cost to having an overload of options.

As a culture, we're enamored of freedom, which is synonymous with patriotism and Americanism. We prize and value self-determination and are reluctant to give up any of our choices. But clinging to all the options available to us contributes to bad decisions, anxiety, stress, dissatisfaction, and even depression. Demands for perfection increase and we suffer from regret, missed opportunity, and feelings of inadequacy. This is often most keenly felt when we come home and put on the jeans we spent hours or maybe days weighing up.

The political philosopher Isaiah Berlin made an important distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty is "freedom from" – freedom from constraint and freedom from being told what to do by others. "Positive liberty" is "freedom to" – freedom to be the architect of our own lives, and thereby make them meaningful and significant. Often these two kinds of liberty go well together.

When I was growing up AT&T had a monopoly on phone service and treated its customers shabbily with high rates and poor customer service. Yet we were prisoners with no alternatives. Does anyone remember Lily Tomlin as Ernestine, the snorting, power-drunk AT&T operator?

*The phone company handles 84 billion calls a year, everything from kings, queens, and presidents to the scum of the earth. We're the phone company. We don't care; we don't have to.*

We'd take the day off from work and wait to have our phone installed and no one showed up. Time and again. And there was no way to phone them.

Long distance rates were exorbitant—if a long distance call came in you dashed off shouting dementedly through the house, yard and basement. LONG DISTANCE and people raced to the phone. We all had the schedule memorized. On weekdays the rates dropped after 11 PM. So if you got a long distance call before that someone was very sick. If they were dead they'd wait until 11 because what were you going to do? But there was no caller ID so we had no way of knowing who was calling. When was the last time you heard anyone shouting WHO IS IT?

So yes, it's good that this monopoly was broken up. Of course there is a dark side to freedom, just like there's a dark side to giving children cake for dinner. Suddenly we had Sprint calling in the middle of dinner to talk about our phone service, and MCI calling during dessert with their best offer. I used to play them off against each other by saying that Sprint was already there painting my house, what could MCI do for me...the gutters needed cleaning.

Perhaps the real seismic shift in choice is in relationships and having children. Most social norms about who you should or could marry have fallen away, thank goodness. Meantime, the Internet has made dating into a shopping exercise where you can click on a partner and drop him or her into your shopping cart.

Science has opened a whole world of reproductive options. When I was a kid you could either have children or you couldn't. I think my friend Lynn was the last person in the US to have twins where after the first one came out the doctor actually said, "Wait just a second, there's another one." These are two more enormous choices to occupy our attention and fuel our anxieties.

What to do about all this? Well, we'd be better off if we embraced certain voluntary constraints on our freedom of choice. For instance, buying Fair Trade coffee, tea, and chocolate. There's not as much to consider and it's ethical— a win/win. When I was growing up in the 1970s during a recession, oil crisis, and double-digit inflation, shopping was simple. Which was cheapest? Or as my grandfather said when asked if he wanted to be cremated or buried, "Surprise me."

Instead of "the best" we're better off seeking "good enough." When I was a kid there weren't any waterproof boots. Now there are many. If your boots are waterproof that's good enough. As my mother liked to say regarding just about anything, "If someone is your friend because of your boots then that doesn't say much about either of you." Pick some boots and embrace and appreciate those boots. Some people don't have any boots.

We can remind ourselves not to be second-guessers. That's why people renew their wedding vows. There have been a lot of choices since the day you first said "I Do."

I had an argument with a writer over a book called *The Bridges of Madison County*. My friend ridiculed the bestselling love story for its sappy plot and purple prose, like many other critics at the time. It elevated to a spiritual level the fantasy in which an exotic stranger materializes in the kitchen of a lonely housewife and takes her into his arms. Passages went like, "With her face buried in his neck and her skin against his, she could smell rivers and wood smoke, could hear steaming trains chuffing out of winter stations in long-ago night times, could see travelers in black robes moving steadily along frozen rivers

and through summer meadows, beating their way toward the end of things.” Should she stay or should she go? Spoiler alert: She stays, he goes. But at least see the movie. The reason the novel sold fifty million copies worldwide and became one of the bestselling books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is because it was about a choice, the kind of choice we’ve all made where we don’t ever get to see The Road Not Taken. A spirit doesn’t appear like in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* or Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* to reassure us that when faced with a difficult decision we’ve done the right thing, or whether we’ve chosen the perfect person to be our partner.

We tend to define “perfection” as flawless or unsurpassable. The Latin origin suggests “per” means “complete” and “facere” is “to make.” Perfection can therefore mean to make something complete. I prefer that definition, as it demonstrates how it’s possible to pass contentment right by in search of something perceived to be better, when the pursuit of happiness often means to decide on happiness.

Similarly, we’re better off when we lower our expectations about the results of our decisions. And always include a gift receipt. This was summed up in kindergarten—it’s the thought that counts.

We’d be better off if many of the decisions we made were nonreversible—like working with the children we have rather than scanning the playground for different ones.

We’d be better off if we paid less attention to what others around us are doing or buying. Back to that cadre of elementary school teachers who were right about so much, especially when it came to eating paste and running with scissors, who said, “Just worry about yourself.”

Some of these conclusions fly in the face of conventional wisdom that the more choices people have the better off they are, and that the best way to get great results is to have very high standards, and that it’s always good to have a way to back out of a decision.

But unless you’re extremely dissatisfied, make it a point to stick with things, at least the more mundane ones. Shopping around too much can be just like drinking too much—it can leave us with a pile of poor decisions and a bad hangover.

To best manage the problem of choice overload we must decide which choices in our lives really matter and focus our time and energy there, letting other opportunities pass us by. We of course want the best surgeons and the best cancer care, and the best politicians, so be sure to vote. But by tending to the important decisions we’ll choose better and feel better.

*When Breath Becomes Air* is a memoir by the neurosurgeon Dr. Paul Kalinithi, who attempts to answer the question What Makes A Life Worth Living? He wrote it while battling Stage IV lung cancer. Here is his final quote in the book, which is directed at his infant daughter, and what he desires most to communicate to her, knowing that he’ll probably die before she has the ability to remember him.

"When you come to one of the many moments in life when you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing."

Dr. Kalinithi died in March of 2015 at age 37 when his daughter was just seven-months-old. "Sated joy"...these words resonate with me. Sated joy, not sacred joy, whatever that is and as nice as it may sound, but sated joy. The conscious decision that a desire has been fulfilled and you've been blessed with enough.

This culture of abundance can so easily rob of us satisfaction. When it comes to choice we need to ask ourselves whether it nourishes us or deprives us, whether it makes us mobile or constrains us, whether it enhances self-respect or diminishes it, and whether it enables us to participate in our communities or precludes us from doing so.

Freedom is essential to dignity, public participation, and nourishment, but not all choice enhances freedom. In particular, increased choice among goods and services may contribute little or nothing to the kind of freedom that counts. Indeed, it may impair freedom by taking time and energy we'd be better off devoting to other matters, *because the most important things in life aren't things*. Singer-songwriter and peace activist John Lennon said, "If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set then there'd be peace." Unfortunately he was assassinated by a mentally ill man with a gun.

Finally, choices, like so many things, can be a blessing and a burden, so in tackling them, instead of wishing you the very best, I wish you good enough. I wish you sated joy.