

“Making Choices”
Matt Alspaugh
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
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Reading: Bhagavad-Gita 4.19-23

The awakened sages call persons wise when all their undertakings are free from anxiety about results; all their selfish desires have been consumed in the fire of knowledge.

The wise, ever satisfied, have abandoned all external supports. Their security is unaffected by the results of their action; even while acting, they really do nothing at all.

Free from expectations and all sense of possession, with mind and body firmly controlled by the Self, they do not incur any sin by the performance of physical action.

They live in freedom who have gone beyond the dualities of life. Competing with no one, they are alike in success and failure and content with whatever comes to them.

They are free, without selfish attachment; their minds are fixed by the knowledge that all life is one. They perform all work freely in the spirit of service...

I have to admit I went to bed this Tuesday feeling pretty elated about the outcome of this election, feeling satisfied that most of my choices came out on top. In a larger sense I was glad that the people spoke, and part of their speaking is to restore the balance of powers between executive and legislative branches that is so much a part of the wisdom of our Constitution. We are so fortunate that even with all of the rhetoric and bitter language, these shifts can still happen in this country openly and without violence.

However, I am also chastened, knowing that many, perhaps some here today, and certainly members of my own family, are disappointed by Tuesday's outcome. I know too well the frustration of being on the losing end of other recent elections.

But almost as much as I enjoyed the outcome, I enjoyed the act of voting in this election. I voted absentee. A couple of weeks ago my wife and I drove out toward Yosemite for a few days relaxation in the fall break period that the seminary euphemistically calls 'reading week'. We carried our ballots with us so we could complete them on our trip.

As one who used to do low-level campaign work in Colorado, I well understand the strategic benefit of early voting. If enough people vote early, the temptation for candidates to do last minute negative campaigning and blitz tactics is reduced. Plus, it means you get to vote without feeling pressured. My wife and I sat outdoors, in the sunshine on the porch of the little cabin we rented, with glasses of wine in front of us working through our lengthy ballots. What's not to like?

While we were pleased to be voting early we still found that making our choices was a challenge. We had our voter's guide from the state, a collection of articles and endorsements from the local paper, and literature from various organizations we belonged to and other political

mailings we had received. Only through an analysis of all of these things could we determine how to cast our ballot—hoping, of course, that our votes would somehow combine with those of like-minded thinkers to bring some serious change in our country and its policies.

There is a concept in the Jewish tradition called Tikkun Olam. Tikkun Olam invites us to repair the world. Wouldn't we all like to find a guide-book, a set of step by step instructions for that task? Certainly many others who also meet in churches on Sunday mornings think they have this kind of step by step instructions about how to behave and who to love. To them, the instructions are clear and obvious, but I suspect that most of us have our doubts about such claims.

Lacking such guidance, we are left to our own devices to make good decisions and choices in our own lives. These are often slow and painful. We may become anxious about the outcome. How am I going to continue to afford a house for my family, knowing that rising interest rates might put me underwater on my adjustable rate mortgage? Or we struggle with motivations for our choices. Is this visit to my aging parents really to help them, or is it just one more attempt to seek approval for my lifestyle, a lifestyle that they may never understand? Or we live with regret at past actions, like that time when those words, those true but hurtful words just fell out of my mouth, irreparably straining my relationship with a friend. We may also struggle in community with difficult decisions, such as when the church is divided on an issue, and ultimately we must make a choice, perhaps at a heated congregational meeting, knowing that long-time friends may feel slighted no matter what we do.

And these are just the choices we face in our daily lives. As people doing social justice work, we are working with even more complex choices. When I visited Guatemala this summer as part of a Unitarian Universalist Service Committee delegation from my home church, we

struggled with how to respond to the suffering we encountered. The leaders of one village, which had been forcibly displaced by a hydroelectric project, asked us for specific items of aid, yet we could clearly see that previous aid attempts of a similar nature had been ineffective. How should we respond? Should we give them what they say they need, or what we think they really need, or nothing at all?

Sometimes, even the best of intentions go awry. For example, when aid agencies installed millions of tube wells in India to supply safe drinking water, no one realized that the groundwater was contaminated by arsenic, and now as many as half a billion people are now at risk of arsenic poisoning¹.

Knowing that our most carefully thought out decisions may result in harm for others, how do we proceed with choices in life? It is easy for us to get tangled up in a kind of ‘analysis paralysis’, doing nothing while we seek more guidance or information. We end up with a laundry list of possible outcomes and choices, and we think this will make things easier. But recent studies have shown that having more choices actually makes life harder, not easier.² Perhaps this is why some folks who go to church on Sunday mornings like their partisan voter’s guides just as they like their black-and-white theology. They take comfort in simple solutions to any problem, no matter how complex. They want simple rules.

Sometimes, the simple approach really is the best. Especially in a crisis, the need for simple, clear rules is paramount. Consider the hospital emergency room, where things can get crazy in a hurry. Because time is of the essence, doctors and caregivers follow protocols for treatment. Often these are fairly simple decision-tree procedures crafted from years of prior

¹ <http://www.newscientist.com/channel/opinion/mg19025450.600>

² <http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun04/toomany.html>

knowledge. These protocols certainly bring harm for some, but the hope is that for most, they lead to good treatment.

But crafting clear rules is not always a matter of applying a simple decision tree. I used to part of a neighborhood association and at one point we were trying to deal with issues arising from the five drinking establishments that existed within a block of my house. We explored what could be done about the noise, the drunkenness, and parking issues that arose. We worked with local lawmakers, the city councilperson and state legislature, who were supportive of us and our plight. But we learned some of the limitations of crafting ordinances or laws to address situations like ours. Laws have to be simple and clear, so that everyone could know if they were in compliance or not, so that police could quickly judge whether a situation needed a response. Our more complex ideas on resident parking, for example, just weren't workable. And this is before we even confronted the many other stakeholders whose competing interests were involved. How could we arrive at a decision that would satisfy both the taxpaying business owners and the taxpaying homeowners?

I watch in sadness as this country struggles to find a fair solution to its healthcare crisis, an issue so thoroughly knotted among special interests and history that no solution appears to be possible. It seems like someone is always touting a simple solution to this issue. Right now, the current simple solution is Health Savings Accounts, and years ago it was single-payer, and before that it was HMOs, and before that it was employer-funded plans. This problem defies resolution by any simple solution in part because the network of entities involved is so complex: individuals, employers, providers, insurers, governments, pharmaceutical companies, researchers, caregivers, offshore providers and on and on.

We've been trying to fix the system for years, yet we've only managed minor tweaks. Meanwhile people are dying or living in pain needlessly, or living in fear of an unaffordable medical illness. As a result, some are making limiting life choices, such as staying in a bad job or a certain locale to keep healthcare benefits, or even choosing whom they will date based on the potential partner's health coverage.

It's easy to become paralyzed when we're faced with such large, complex, difficult decisions. And the world is filled with them. Many of us cope by choosing to do nothing. In fact, doing nothing -- the null decision -- is in itself a decision. Viktor Frankl, the psychotherapist, writer, and Holocaust survivor, counseled a US Ambassador by telling her: "Sometimes the right thing to do is only 55% right." His point to her was that "sometimes you do not know you are right until you look back, and even then you do not know. ... You have to commit or you are just paralyzed."³

Many of us cope by choosing to just avoid the hard issues altogether. Some of my friends who have taken vacations in the Caribbean islands remarked at being disturbed by the level of poverty in these areas. Tourist agencies have responded to this market concern not by addressing poverty, but creating what one writer calls the "all-inclusive resort [or enclave], walled off from the surrounding countryside and importing its food and furniture, its designs and designers, its fabrics and fashions from the U.S. mainland."⁴ On top of this, our nation remains one of the stingiest donors of aid to developing countries. Of the 22 member countries of the

³ Kate Holbrook, et. al., *Global Values* 101, 2006, p. 183.

⁴ <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~drclas/publications/revista/Tourism/barberia.html>

Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, essentially the old ‘first world’, the US was second from the bottom in aid relative to national income.⁵

As Unitarian Universalists, we are not satisfied to ignore the issues. We want to consider the consequences of our own actions; we are called to reach beyond the rules. We are called to look deeper at the situation before us, to set aside the checklist or the law book or the protocol and consider things in all their multi-layered complexity and interconnectedness and relationship. We may have an opportunity to adjust the situation, to reduce suffering or broaden the class of beneficiaries even if it means bending the rules or going off-protocol. We may also have an opportunity to use our newfound and hard-won experience to agitate for changes to the rules.

The healthcare issue is a good illustration of a difficult decision-making process in the public arena. Not only are there many options to consider and many interest groups involved, but the problem touches on deep moral issues of individual rights, compassion, and societal norms that are hard to articulate, much less agree upon. The network of interconnection among players and issues is complex and there are many linkages.

But even on personal level, our decisions are made more complicated by our greater sense of the interconnectedness of things in the world and of the relationships between people. We try to consider how the effects of our decision will ripple out and touch those around us, whether they are our children or an unknown coffee bean picker in Honduras. This makes our struggle with good decisions even harder.

The reading we considered today is from the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most important of all Hindu scriptures. While I don’t consider it or any scripture as an instruction manual, it can be

⁵ <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp>
#ForeignAidNumbersinChartsandGraphs

a helpful guide. This text describes a conversation between Arjuna, a warrior, and Lord Krishna, who in the Hindu henotheistic pantheon we might consider as God.

Krishna appears in the flesh, serving as Arjuna's charioteer, on the eve of a great, almost cosmic battle. Arjuna is resistant to fighting, knowing the great suffering that will occur, but Lord Krishna persuades him to proceed. Our text is part of Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna.

The Gita, like the Bible, raises uncomfortable issues. Read literally, it condones violence. The orthodox interpretation is that the Gita supports a caste system, and the role of the warrior caste is to fight. However, an alternative and more mystical view is that Arjuna's battle is an allegory for the spiritual struggle that we all are engaged in. Lord Krishna appears to help Arjuna engage in this spiritual struggle, and is advising Arjuna on the question of action and inaction. This passage invites us to consider the meaning of our actions. What motivates in our choices? Are we focused on outcome — on security, or winning? This sort of focus is not helpful, and such intention taints our actions.

The text reminds us that we live in freedom when we move past the dualities of life. There is not some separate 'us' living inside our heads, watching the TV screen of our eyes, and pushing on the levers controlling our arms and legs, but a unified Self that is interconnected with all beings and all things. When we fully accept that all life is one, we can abandon anxiety about our decisions, no matter how complex the situation is. Our security is no longer based on the results of our actions. When we are part of all of life, we don't only have to be concerned about the negative impact of our actions. We understand that our actions are merely part of the flow, part of the larger picture. Thus we become content, regardless of whether our actions lead to success and failure. We are able to let go of outcome, to not compete, to really do nothing at all.

A recent study⁶ shows that a particular part of the brain becomes active the instant we make a costly or embarrassing mistake, such as the moment we pass a waiting cop car, reflexively look at the speedometer, and realize our lead foot has done us in again. This part of the brain fires only when these errors involve a personal cost. What's interesting is that in some people, those dealing with obsessive-compulsive disorder, who often struggle with excess anxiety and fear about making mistakes, this part of the brain is active for all decisions, not just bad ones. Learning to control these emotions, to detach, may be healthy step for all of us. Part of the psychological wisdom, understood by the ancients, and embedded in this scripture, is to learn, over time, detachment from outcome.

Sharon Welch, a feminist Unitarian Universalist theologian, develops what she calls a theology of resistance and hope for justice work that includes this concept of detached decision-making. Central to her thinking is the idea that “[the] divine is that relational power”⁷ that connects us “with others, with nature, and with ourselves.”⁸ She tells us that the proper response to knowing that we have caused others harm is “not guilt but repentance, that is, a deep commitment to make amends and to change patterns of behavior.”⁹ Guilt is not helpful, change is. In the end, she reminds us, “these justice making movements are holy, all of them are flawed.... Our efforts are partial, yet they are divine in their love and courage.”¹⁰

I think there is a great freedom in knowing that our choices and decisions are imperfect and partial. The act of repairing our lives, and repairing the world is an ongoing one, and

⁶ http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2006-04/uomh-orp041006.php

⁷ Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 1989, p. 173.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁹ *ibid.* p. 174.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 180.

certainly a never-ending one. Let us not be daunted by the complexity or the enormity of the problems. Let us be bold and choose acts of repentance, acts of change and repair, knowing that it is the motivation for our acts that counts far more than the outcome.