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On Choice Points

A Time for Choosing

For a long time I can swim along comfortably in the moving currents of the steady stream of life. Work progresses, families grow, and most of us perform our duties pretty much in accord with long-standing mutual expectations. Life isn't simple, but it is fairly regular and predictable. All of this regular part of life and work and following mutually understood expectations is, I think, tremendously important. I think that this sort of regularity is the basis of most of the sustained productivity and achievement that have built civilizations. But it is not what I want to call attention to.

I want to call attention to the irregular points—the points that begin the creation of new civilizations. The critical points in life for me are the surprising ones, points where standing expectations are violated. These are points at which choices are made, consciously or unconsciously. These are the points that set courses that change a family or change a city. Sometimes choice points come up slowly and gradually. I'm pretty sure I don't notice them until it is too late. Sometimes choice points come up suddenly and dramatically. I am startled and disturbed by the flat demands they make on me.

Faced with a choice point, I find that I am much involved emotionally. I feel all sorts of things. I seem to be scared, angry, hurt, sad, and even sometimes glad—all at once. I can pretend I have no choice, like saying that I must climb

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the mountain because it is there. I can try to restore the old order and way of looking at things, like saying we've got to train more old-fashioned humanitarian country doctors. I can try something new like going around without a watch just to see if time has come to mean more to me than it should. I can be just immobilized by it all, while my pulse races, and my brow sweats, and my scalp itches, and my nerves are paralyzed.

Whatever I find myself doing, I become aware that I must make a choice. I must make a choice or find the choice made for me. I must choose from whatever alternatives my experiences have stored up and from whatever alternatives my emotions make available to me. I must try to calculate the risks involved, and manage my fears while calculating.

Faced with a choice point, like whether to challenge a bully or offer him friendship, I know that my choice may expose some of my weaknesses, and I could be humiliated. I know, also, that new and more realistic learnings may become available for both me, the bully, and our fellows. And I know that, even if I am wrong in my choice, the bully, my fellows, and I could emerge better men, humbled perhaps but not humiliated.

Faced with a choice point like making a proposal of marriage, I know that it is an exciting and frightening and critical point in life. I may even see that there can be no inconsequential

choice. I can be scared about making the choice, and I can be deeply grateful that I have the freedom to choose, and even be proud that my choice will have consequences. And I can still be scared to choose.

To explain some more of what I mean by choice points, let me repeat a story that was making the rounds of young parents during the late 1940s. The story had a real basis, as most stories do, and this is the basis of that story.

Just after World War II, I was one of the thousands of married veterans who found themselves students in the universities of the country. My wife, my daughter, and I lived in a cracker-box apartment, partitioned out of a former barracks building, transplanted from an abandoned army camp to a former girls' athletic field. It was an interim period of life, and we suspended many of the demands we might make on one another and on our friends. We dressed more casually (and economically), we ate more simply (and economically), and we entertained each other more spontaneously (and economically).

There were ninety families in the half-square block area where we lived, and some hundred and fifty children under ten years old. You can see that the wives almost always grasped any opportunity to get away for a short time. One Saturday my wife and a neighbor planned a day-long shopping tour. I agreed to "sit" with a pair of two-year-olds, our daughter Pam and our neighbor's son Oscar. Oscar, like a lot of other kids in that half-square block, was a fellow who

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met life more than halfway. His brain was as fast as light and as sharp as a needle; his body was as tough as leather and as active as a tiger cub. He entered a room like a whirlwind. Two minutes after entering, he handled, asked questions about, and tested the strength of every object and every person within his reach. We loved him and knew him well. That morning only unbreakable objects were within his reach. His mother, as she and my wife were leaving, turned in the doorway and said, "He didn't eat any breakfast at all. Try to get him to eat some lunch."

I didn't know it then, but that remark set into action a chain of choice points. I didn't recognize most of them at the time, but looking back I have never forgotten any of them. And I have looked back at them often. Let me tell you how it went.

Being a graduate student in psychology, I felt I knew a thing or two about children. In fact, I had just finished a course in child development and a lot of observations of two-year-olds. I knew that they would play, separately mostly, without much supervision. Sure enough, they did just that, requiring little from me. I just kept them in sight and congratulated myself on my good judgment and skill at minimum supervision.

Lunchtime came. I called to them sprightly, "Who would like some lunch?"

Quick as a flash, Oscar snapped back, "Not me!"

I had missed another choice point and I had made another mistake. I shifted my approach. "All right," I said, "I'll have some lunch. If you two want to join me you can." Pam watched the whole thing with fascination.

I was pretty good at heating up canned soup. I knew they both liked bean soup, and soon I had a pot of bean and bacon bubbling away. Then I remembered my textbook. The thing to do was to give Oscar some positive choices; no questions which could be answered yes or no. With that thought, I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The pot of soup and the sandwiches were ready, and I asked, "Who wants soup and who wants sandwiches?"

"I don't want any lunch!" Oscar was quiet and firm.

"OK," I returned, with phony indifference.

I sat down and began to eat. Pam joined me. Perhaps she knew how desperately I needed support. Perhaps she was just hungry. Oscar played with a toy truck.

I had passed another choice point. By now I was aware how much I was on the spot. I knew my choices had consequences. In some way I didn't understand, I knew, also, that the consequences went beyond food and nutrition. Courage and cowardice, freedom and slavery, support and indifference—in some small way all of them were involved.

After a time I turned to Oscar. "Don't you like bean soup?"

"Sure. But not for lunch."

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“What would you like for lunch?”

Oscar’s eyes sparkled with lights of mischief.

“I’d like a worm!” Oscar shouted.

“A worm?” I was shocked. He was tickled.

“A worm!” This time he shouted louder.

I was well aware by now that I was in a special kind of fight. For Oscar it was independence day. For me, it was examination day; my resourcefulness as an adult was being challenged. For Pam, it was loyalty day. She was supporting me, and she knew well how much I needed her.

“OK,” I replied, “a worm.” Outside we went. I rammed the spade into the ground with rare vigor, my excitement mounting. Soon I extracted a nice, long earthworm. Back into the house, a quick wash job, and the worm was on a plate before a surprised but unruffled Oscar.

“You didn’t cook it.”

I moved quickly. Out of the plate, into a fry pan with a little butter, and in no time the worm was *earthworm sauté*. Back on the plate and again in front of Oscar. He looked up at me and in unbelievable innocence, said, “Cut it up.”

I moved even more quickly. I cut the worm into two pieces. I nearly growled.

“Eat.”

“You eat with me.”

At a time like that, at a choice point like that, even knowing my own foolishness, I could not go down in defeat. In my anger and tension, I felt sure I had only one alternative—deceit.

I picked up half the worm, pretended to eat it, and palmed it into my pocket. I did the trick

pretty well. Oscar's eyes were on my mouth, pretending to chew. He never looked at my pocket. As I finished my chewing, Oscar's face clouded over, his mouth turned down and he began to cry. In between his sobs he struck the last blow.

"You ate *my* half."

That was the end of that battle. But it will never leave my memory. For me, that lunch with Pam and Oscar summed up all the dimensions of all the chains of bungled choice points that have cropped up in and around my emotional problems of living with people. They seem simple to summarize now:

When to fight and when to run away; and how to fight and how to run away; and

When to be dependent and when to be dependable; and how to be dependent and how to be dependable; and

When to offer love and when to seek love; and how to offer love and how to seek love.

Just to Define the Issues

I am going to write as if choice points really had just two alternatives. It is perfectly clear that life is not really as simple as that. It is also clear, however, that simple ideas are really the most useful ones. They can be assembled and taken apart and reassembled to fit together into many different kinds of understandings of the emotional problems of living with people.

Simple stones can be fitted together into many different kinds of complicated and beautiful

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structures, some for working and producing, some for playing and laughing, some for searching and learning, some for sitting and pondering, and some for kneeling and praying. In the same way, I shall try to assemble and take apart and reassemble my simple pairs of emotional alternatives to try to define and understand many different kinds of complicated and perplexing emotional problems, some for working and producing, some for playing and laughing, some for searching and learning, some for sitting and pondering, and some for kneeling and praying.

I shall try, as carefully and clearly as I can, just to define these emotional choice points, these emotional problems of living with people. I can offer no clear solutions to the problems. I really do believe that my simple summary of emotional choice points, and their two-way choices, just may be perpetual emotional problems of living together. To define the issues is task enough for me. To resolve them is too much for me. But, it has meant a lot to try carefully to think about just what is involved in these perpetual problems of living with people:

When to fight and when to run away; and how to fight and how to run away; and

When to be dependent and when to be dependable; and how to be dependent and how to be dependable; and

When to offer love and when to seek love, and how to offer love and how to seek love.