

"The Next Right Thing"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto (Online)

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When I was a child growing up in Winnipeg in the 70s, we went to Mrs. Jones' house for lunch.

Every day, while eating wieners and beans or Kraft Dinner with stewed tomatoes (my personal favourite) we would watch "Truth or Consequences" and "Let's Make a Deal"...the two popular game shows at the time.

I don't remember much about "Truth or Consequences" (except that it was hosted by Bob Barker, before he went onto "The Price is Right").

It might have been well-suited to a sermon on honesty.

I do remember "Let's Make a Deal" though, with Winnipeg's own Monty Hall.

People in costume would be invited to trade, say, a thousand dollar bill for "what's behind the curtain."

As I remember it, the climax of the show came when a lucky contestant was invited to choose between "door number one, door number two, and door number three".

The "wrong" choice would win them a gag prize...such as a donkey or a pineapple.

Behind the other doors were shiny new vacuum cleaners, trips to exotic places, or the ultimate prize, a brand new car.

High drama could be found in watching ordinary people, in silly costumes, making decisions under pressure...

Risking it all or playing it safe...

Trying to choose correctly between those tantalizing three doors.

Needless to say, they were making their choices without careful discernment...without quiet reflection or even thoughtful conversation with others.

Their decisions were impulsive, reactive, under stress...based on the desire for immediate gratification...and perhaps not very consequential...

Except when we consider the consequences of the consumer-driven culture promoted by those shows.

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Indeed, even the smallest of human actions have significant impacts.

Every life, and even every day, presents us with opportunities to make choices: choices that take our lives in one direction or another, and profoundly influence the world around us.

Aware, as we are, of the individual freedom we hold, decisions may not come easily to us.

We may want to do "the next right thing"...but with so many competing choices, we might struggle to know what that is.

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The late writer E.B. White, author of "Charlotte's Web" once said, "I awaken in the morning with the desire to both enjoy the world and improve the world. It makes it difficult to plan the day."

And recently I saw a cartoon that pokes fun at the challenging outcomes of some of our personal choices.

A little elf finds himself in a corridor with two doors.

He's about to go through the door marked "Making Toys at the North Pole" when he sees a little gnome, who looks just like him, opening a door marked "Hanging Out in a Garden."

And he says to himself: "I think I chose the wrong major."

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Today I'm reflecting on what might assist us in making sound decisions when decision-making is difficult.

I'll also try to widen the frame a little, to recognize that decision-making may not always be "either-or."

Any one decision may lead to a wide range of possibilities.

As we are called to serve the world in ways available to us, we can hold all our decision-making in the light of love and wholeness.

As you know, I'm offering the service today because Reverend Danielle Webber cannot be here, after recently evacuating their home in West Kelowna, due to the wildfires there.

Much of my sermon today was written before we made the decision to change today's service. I've done my best to adapt it to today's circumstances.

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Last Tuesday, I was writing this sermon, I decided to make a list of the current decisions facing me that day.

It was a pretty "garden-variety" list, no doubt incomplete, and startlingly mundane in light of the tragedies currently unfolding. But here it is, for the record.

Whether or not to reach out to a friend who seemed to be seeking distance in our relationship.

Whether or not to attend an online yoga class, even though it might make me late for a gathering of musicians later that evening.

What song to play, at that gathering of musicians?

Should I prioritize writing this sermon over quite a lot of other desk-work I had to do?

Should I pause in writing this sermon to open an email?

And the perennial, "what should I make for dinner?" which sounds simple, but raised all kinds of questions around the impact of my food choices, both for my own health and that of the planet.

I should say, too, that the choices in front of me that day--like so many in my life--reflected my considerable privilege, freedom and comfort.

I recognize that so many people both close to home and around the world have little choice in many crucial areas of life.

This is certainly true when people are facing immediate and life-changing decisions, such as whether to stay or flee when a disaster is immanent...where to seek shelter...what to carry and what to leave behind.

My hope is that the choices I am able to make, along with the choices of others, may contribute toward a world of greater freedom, equity and justice for all. And I know that's what you hope to do, too.

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Let's pause now for a few moments, to bring to mind some recent or current choices in your own life.

These might be "big" or "little" decisions, consequential or not so much, and some which you may choose--or not!--to share in the chat.

Matt, you can put up the slide of the doors now.

And Adam, if you could add a little music, that would be wonderful.

(Pause, lift up examples.)

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Thank you for sharing these choices that you're considering and simply taking a moment to let some recent decisions come to mind.

Simply by pausing and bringing these options to our awareness, we're holding them to the light of something larger.

We're bearing witness to them, both within ourselves and within our online community today.

As well, as is true when we practice "listening ministry" with one another and in spiritual care...

We invite in the creative Spirit of Life that is working within and beyond us at all times...the Spirit of Life that begins to move, simply when we are in each other's presence.

We may not get an immediate "answer" (and this is an important reminder that we are not called to give advice to anyone here today)...

Yet we can have faith that by welcoming the questions, just as they are in this moment, we are on our way toward living into the answers.

I express my gratitude, of course, to the poet Rilke and to many other teachers for that perennial wisdom.

We saw a beautiful illustration of this idea of emerging co-creation in the story Angela read earlier.

You may have noticed, too, that the word "Road" was capitalized, to signify perhaps that our choice-making path itself is a living presence and something sacred.

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Even the "smallest" of our daily choices can benefit from our mindful presence to them.

Often they may lead to the choice to wait...to "wait for the mud to settle" until the next right action is clear.

And sometimes the most important decisions of our lives can benefit from non-advice-giving listening ears.

A terrific story about this is told in Parker Palmer's book "Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation."

It's all about tuning in to the inner, true self, and sifting out some of the external voices that so often distract us.

Parker Palmer was trying to decide whether or not to accept the invitation to become president of a local college.

He brought his wrestling to what his Quaker community called a "clearness committee."

As is customary in these committees, no advice is given; only open and honest questions are offered.

At one point, someone in the circle asks Parker: "What would you enjoy most about being the college president?"

For a long time, he can't come up with an answer, until finally he says in a small voice:

"I'd enjoy having my picture in the paper, with the word 'president' under it."

Hearing that, his kind and thoughtful friend asks, "Can you think of an easier way for you to get your picture in the paper?"¹

In addition to the wisdom of the question, we hear the humble honesty in Parker Palmer's response: an honesty which wouldn't be possible in anything less than a circle of trust:

The kind of circle that we can and do create in congregations like this one.

You'll notice there's no judgment.

Nobody jumps on him for wanting recognition (something he went on to achieve in different ways) but rather there is a gentle inquiry about whether the college position was indeed the "next right thing" for him.

The answer, of course, was "no."

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), 44-45.

Seen through the lens of our cultural measurements, that might have seemed unambitious, disappointing, inconvenient, financially risky...any number of "negatives."

Yet it came from the true place of soul and inner wisdom...and therefore it was a decision that could be trusted.

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It's been said that when faced with any decision, we can ask, does this choice expand me, or does it diminish me?

Another way of viewing choices can be:

Am I making this choice out of love or out of fear?

Or, does this decision *move me in the direction* of love or fear?

Let's think of them again:

Expansion or diminishment? Love or fear?

I find these distinctions meaningful.

They invite me into deeper reflection, even if they may not offer instant answers.

At the same time, I try to hold these distinctions lightly...lest they move me into a rigid "either-or" mindset.

As everyone here has experienced, many decisions in life are not clear-cut, with good/bad, right/wrong, yes/no answers.

Describing them this way can lead to fundamentalist attitudes that harshly judge ourselves and others...

Leading to the kind of anxiety that can prevent us from making any decisions at all.

As well, some decisions may arise from both love *and* fear.

The choices we make in response to the climate crisis may be a mix of these: love for the planet, and fear for our lives and that of our children and grandchildren.

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While some choices do have obvious benefits that are experienced right away--and thank goodness for that!--many others are more nuanced, calling us toward curiosity, patience and hopefully growth.

Life is an ongoing co-creative process. Decisions are not made once and for all.

A choice that is perfectly sound at one point in life can turn into the wrong one down the road.

And what appears to be misfortune at one time can turn out to be one of life's greatest gifts.

The immediate appearances of things may not reveal whether a choice is "right" or not.

Certainly the approval or opinions of others won't reveal that.

As we've seen from examples throughout history, and as we witness in our time through the courageous actions of many environmental activists,

The challenging of social norms and even the breaking of laws can sometimes be "the next right thing" to do...even when it leads to considerable personal challenge.

Judged from the often dualistic perspective of our rational conscious selves, our decisions may have favourable or unfavourable consequences.

Our souls, though, and our larger life story, may have other needs in mind...and our challenge or discomfort or inconvenience may be worth it...in order for that story to play out.

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In order to let some deeper wisdom guide us, we can invite the spiritual listening that comes from trusted friends or something like a "clearness committee."

We can take time for stillness and "listening to life" not only through intentional times of meditation and prayer...but also informally, whenever we take time away from the noise of other people's opinions and our ego's immediate desires.

In this way we "return to the home of our soul"...which can be the place from which our wisest decisions are made.

As we develop our sense of inner wisdom, our connection with the Spirit of Life, our relationship with a Higher Power however we might name that...

We can welcome guidance from that Source...and we can trust that whatever decision we make is in alignment with it.

We can trust that our "Inner GPS" will provide the support we need when we feel lost, or afraid, or when we're making decisions that are perhaps new and difficult for us...

Decisions that may call us away from the life we had, or the things we thought we needed, or the experiences we may have wanted...

Decisions that move us toward actions that heal rather than hurt.

Decisions that allow us to live in the most loving ways we can.

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The Pirke Avot reading we heard earlier calls us into action, then into contemplation and then back into action...

From the outer life to the inner life to the outer once again...

In a circle or a spiral...never a straight line... and certainly not one that is always onward and upward.

As I'm very gradually coming to understand, this spiraling path is not one that is always beautiful, or comfortable, or peaceful, or fully understandable.

What it is, is **meaningful**.

We have received the gift of being placed upon our path, for whatever time we may travel it, and in whatever way we can.

As we face the choices in front of us today, whether they be deciding which worthy causes to support...how to use our financial resources, where to offer our time or talent...

What to read...whom to welcome into conversation...

How to care for ourselves...when to move forward and when to pause...

What words to say...what words not to say...

As we stumble through these and countless other decisions...

May we make our choices in the assurance that we are part of a greater wholeness: an interdependence of Mystery and wonder far beyond our understanding...

And that when we seek help to do the next right thing...
It will be there for us, at every point along the path of life.

Blessings to you, and amen.

Song: "Help Me Do the Next Right Thing"
Lynn Harrison (SOCAN, 2023)

Help me won't you help me do
The next right thing
Help me put my fingers on
The next right string
Every day my list grows long
with songs to sing
Help me do the next right thing

Help me put some pieces back
into their place
I've been looking for the ones
that I misplaced
But when I quiet down my mind
and slow my pace
I can put some pieces back in place

What if everyone could do
the next right thing?
Like the creatures in the blue
and on the wing
What a change might come around,
what brand new spring?
Help me do the next right thing

When I do the thing

that brings me close to you
I can find the theme and
I can follow through
It's an old familiar song,
it's nothing new
The best thing is still
being here with you

Help me, won't you help me do
the next right thing
Help me know what step to take
what gift to bring
It might seem like nothing,
but it's everything
Help me do the next right thing.