

Choices
Sermon: November 2, 2008
First Unitarian Church of Baltimore
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“Life is a series of choices.”

A friend said this to me many years ago, about a year and a half after I realized I had married the wrong man, had a tiny baby, and was stuck in a foreign country halfway around the world. “Thanks,” I said, “That makes me feel just great!” What the heck am I to do?

“Don’t worry,” she chided. “Be happy.” “Make lemonade out of lemons.” “You are there for a while, in a fascinating place, with a houseful of servants, no cooking, no cleaning, no laundry, a beautiful healthy baby to love and play with. I’d probably sell my own husband to be in your place. Want to trade places with me, stuck back here in Iowa with three kids, no household help, much less a cook or a nanny? Figure it out Lyn, good grief.”

Well, it took a little while, and after I figured it out, I stayed married to my husband for another 22 years. It wasn’t the happiest marriage, but boy-o-boy did I ever have a good time traveling and living in exotic parts of the world, with time to read, play lots of tennis, actually enjoy the parties I hosted, and to spend lots of time with both my delightful children. Those were magic days. We all made friends we still keep up with. We occasionally have reunions. Our eyes opened and rarely shut.

We learned how blessed we were. How fortunate we were. How comfortable we were. Our children did things we could never have afforded in the United States: rode horseback, skied in Kashmir, camped in tiger sanctuaries, toured lion forests, rode elephants.

All because I bit the bullet, and made a lot of lemonade. And it turned out to be delicious. Sweeter and tangier than anyone could have imagined.

And of course, there is an ironic twist. Some time after we were divorced, I got to spend some time with Mr. Right, and discovered that he was no longer Mr. Right. I had outgrown him -- because I’d kept my eyes wide open and made all that lemonade.

And I'm glad I did, even though it was sometimes very challenging.

Have any of you ever made a bad choice and later found out that making the best of what seemed to be a difficult situation had helped you to grow and made you a better person? Tell us.

Life is a series of choices, and sometimes we just need to get a grip and make lemonade. Well, let me tell you that I have been making lemonade for the last eight years, and it hasn't made me a better person. It has made me more indignant, more self-righteous, more angry, more determined to do something to change the governance of our country.

Are any of you undecided about Tuesday's election? If you are, come see me after the service and I'll provide you with a little spiritual guidance!

And if you don't agree with my ideas about what we need in our country, that's ok. Just be sure to exercise your right to vote and to be heard. You have choices and you have a right to choose your candidate, and to participate in the process. The worst thing any of us could do is to stay home and to fail to exercise our right to choose.

Sometimes we do feel stuck. I spent a lot of time teaching for the University of Maryland University College in Japan, on Okinawa and on Guam. My students were members of the armed services, and we met late afternoons and evenings after they had already put in a long day taking care of aircraft, manning signal stations, and practicing their very precise job skills. Sometimes they complained that they didn't have a choice about being assigned there, or what their jobs were, or how long they had to stay there. I don't know if I was successful, but I tried awfully hard to help them to see that even if they still had another 250 days to spend in a place they'd rather not be, they could choose how they would spend that time, and how they would go through the process. There were places to explore, books to read, things to learn. I tried to emphasize that they had already taken an important step to gaining control over their lives, simply by enrolling in an educational program that would broaden their worldview, augment their intellectual skills, and expand their bases of knowledge so that they would be more employable when they separated from the service. When you are part of an authoritarian system, as all military people must be, it

is all too easy to become passive, and to relinquish control of your life. To forget that you have choices.

There are few feelings worse than feeling hopeless, helpless, stuck and powerless. That is why people came to this country, to get away from authoritarian religions, to take control of their lives and their finances, to create a better life for themselves. And they worked hard to ensure that most people had choices. We have expanded that population to include women and African-Americans so that they could participate in the political process. We've made it possible for persons with handicaps to participate in the social process and in politics. We've made it possible for children born with debilitating and limiting diseases to develop their potential, and to live more productive and joyful lives. All these were choices, choices made with a lot of dialogue and determination, choices to make the world a better place for everyone. Now in some states, the political process has made the choice to validate same-sex marriages. And women are still fighting to defend their right to choose whether to complete an unwanted pregnancy. Choices.

I say we have plenty of them, no matter how stuck we may feel. Because we still live in a democratic society. Our government makes a lot of dumb choices, some of which benefit only a few at the expense of many. But we can choose to change that. Are you going to vote on Tuesday? It's your choice. Stay home and grumble, or choose to exercise your power of citizenship.

We have choices about the way we live our lives – honestly, truthfully, fairly, lovingly.

Sometimes our personal choices are the most difficult. We choose not to share our dilemmas with friends, family and folks who might help us to see our dilemma from a different perspective. When our dilemmas are about our private personal lives, they may be even more difficult to share. We don't want others to know. "I'd just as soon not be pregnant." "I did poorly on an exam." We are embarrassed that we have been rejected when we wanted to be included. We drove away from an accident when we should have stayed as a witness. We may feel shame about our lack of success at work. Or we don't

know how to deal with a difficult boss. We aren't getting the recognition we feel we've earned. Much less that raise.

And then, somehow you gathered yourself and chose to take a journey. In the words of Mary Oliver:

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,

and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

The only life you could save. Your own. Your choice. Your challenge. Can you save your life? Yes, you can. But then, after a while, death comes. Listen to what Mary Oliver has to say about that:

When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn
when death comes
and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower,
as common as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

And, yet another,

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean--

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention,

how to fall down □into the grass,

how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed,

how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last,

and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

May you make happy, thoughtful choices!

Amen.