

The Blessings of Choice

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We are and will be faced with all types of choices throughout our lives. Each choice we make or action we take carries some type of consequence. The consequence can be positive or negative. A consequence does not always have to be negative; I think we are conditioned to think of consequences as negative. Sometimes consequences appear to be both negative and positive, depending on your point of view.

Sometimes we make choices thinking we are doing good, only to have our good intentions and deeds backfire and make a bad situation worse. Sometimes we immediately regret a decision or choice. Sometimes regret comes later and with someone saying to us, “I told you so.” Other times we may say or do something that we later find out actually inspired or uplifted someone. Sometimes we choose not to make a choice and instead let nature or circumstances unfold as they will. This reminds me of several lines from one of my favorite songs by Rush called “Freewill”:

*If you choose not to decide, you still have made
a choice.*

*You can choose from phantom fears and kindness
that can kill.*

*I will choose a path that’s clear;
I will choose freewill.*

Choosing Your Path

One of the great blessings we enjoy in this life is the blessing of choice—choosing the path our life will take and, maybe more important, the type of person we want to become.

We have a huge number of directions we can steer our lives in. You can allow others to steer for you and guide you on the path. There are plenty of people who will be more than happy to tell you what you should and should not do. They may even let you pay them for their advice. You can also decide to do whatever you fancy—it is your life, after all, and God has blessed you with agency. Or you can let life happen and just roll with the changes. Or maybe, best yet, you can be proactive and make the choices that best suit you and the direction you want your life to take.

Let me caution you that simply making certain decisions does not guarantee that you will end up exactly where you expect to be. The choice I am talking about is the type of person you want to be, regardless of where your life and vocation take you.

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When I was in junior high and high school I was interested in several careers. The first and foremost was to play professional football. The second was to coach football and be a PE teacher. The third and most fleeting was to be a lead singer for an epic hard rock band.

The lead singer career was the first to fade as I realized three facts about myself: (1) I am not a good singer or screamer, (2) I really don't enjoy being on stage in front of people, and (3) I wasn't really ready for the superstar lifestyle and all that comes with it.

My poor singing ability was reconfirmed to me some years ago when my ward choir pleaded for male voices. They said any male voice was welcome. I decided to test how serious they were by sitting right behind the ward choir director during sacrament meeting and singing loud enough for her to hear me. This was my way of trying out for the choir. I did this for three straight weeks. The only response I got was a pained smile as the choir director turned to look and see who was making the strange sounds behind her. I received no personal invitation to join the choir.

I haven't given up singing. I just limit the venues I perform in. My current singing venue is in my old Chevy pickup truck when I crank up the stereo, roll the windows down, and sing along with one of my favorite bands on what you would call the classic rock station.

What happened to my pro football dream? Well, I will be honest: I wasn't really willing to put in the work and make the necessary sacrifices—plus, in reality, I probably wasn't ever as good as I thought I was. I did try coaching and teaching PE, and I enjoyed it, but that wasn't how I would make my living.

All of my vocational dreams fell apart before I left on my mission or soon after I returned from my mission. I didn't realize it at the time, but my life was destined to lead me through several twists and turns before I found a vocation and a career that suited me.

I struggled to find a major that suited me and later a career that would allow me to be the person I wanted to be and still provide for my family. I am very aware of what it feels like to be unemployed, wondering why no one wants to hire you. I am also aware of how it feels to be underemployed, wondering, "Why is this the only place that wants me?" Was I afraid my life would never get any better than it was? Sure, at times I was.

I want to share with you some of what I believe blessed my life and helped me find my way in this world and continues to help me find my way. At the ripe old age of fifty-one I am still finding my way—mostly because I have not achieved perfection yet and don't expect to anytime soon. I am just happy to know I am headed in the right direction.

Those Who Have Enriched and Blessed My Life

First, I must acknowledge my parents. Larry and Catherine were good parents and did their best to teach me all the things they thought I should know: how to share, love, work hard, be honest, love God and my Savior, treat others the way I want to be treated, endure hard things, be optimistic, look forward to marriage and a family of my own, stand up for the underdog, appreciate God's creations, treat a woman, think for myself, serve, clean, cook, do laundry, drive, and not be wasteful—among many other things. My mom was always very good at helping me face consequences. She helped me understand the importance of repenting, apologizing, and asking for forgiveness. She accompanied me to several homes in our neighborhood, where I got to practice repenting.

Next I have to thank and acknowledge my wife. Even though I was taught how to behave, it has been my wife—my soul mate, if you will—who has helped refine me the most. It is through our relationship and her patience and support that I have begun to understand

what it means to love someone. I was in love when we first got married—no doubt about that—but now it is so much more. True love and friendship have blossomed through all the struggles we have been through together. I hate to think about where we would be had we quit on each other. When I think of my woman I like to think of a song by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, “Here Comes My Girl”:

And then she looks me in the eye, says, “We gonna last forever.”

*And man, you know I can’t begin to doubt it,
No, because this feels so good and so free and
so right.*

*I know we ain’t never goin’ change our minds
about it.*

Her patience and faith in me have been a great blessing. Having a wife who knows the value of sacrificing wants for what is really important has been key to our family’s well-being.

We were blessed to be able to be involved with our kids through church, school, and sports. My wife had this habit of signing me up to coach when she went to the recreation center to sign the kids up for one of the many sports they played. She signed me up to coach every season, even though I had announced my official retirement from coaching the previous season. She knew better, and now our children are all grown up and I have all these great memories of the extra time I got to spend with my sons and daughters and their friends. I still have young adults stop me occasionally and ask me if I remember them from one of the teams I was able to coach.

I also have to acknowledge my faith and my church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I love being a Mormon. I have learned so much through my association with this faith. It has helped refine me and guide me and has helped me find a purpose bigger than myself that is eternal

in nature. It has taught me to endure to the end and that to love God is to love my fellow beings, that salvation is through the Savior, and that salvation is possible. The plan of salvation, or great plan of happiness, brings me great comfort. I think of all those who have gone on before and who wait on the other side. I love the eternal nature of families. It all comes down to the importance of family. I love my family. They are my greatest inspiration and motivation. I also love how my church has taught me to find strength in the midst of trials and to draw spiritual strength from the trials of our ancestors.

There are many people and experiences that have enriched and blessed my life. Ever since I can remember I have wanted to have an eternal family. I have always instinctively known that the plan of salvation is true doctrine. It is my belief that most people, whether LDS or not, believe they will see their loved ones again after this life. It is my faith and belief in God’s plan of salvation that has helped guide me and will continue to guide my life and the choices I make.

Learning from Life’s Difficult Experiences

I would like to share a few experiences from my early life that helped me develop my testimony and character. When I was about nine years old I suffered from the extreme fear of nothingness. The nothingness I feared was that there is nothing after and outside of this life. I had been taught to pray, so I put prayer into practice. We were living in Crow Agency, Montana, at the time, and it seemed I spent a large part of my time in the back of our family’s Chrysler station wagon (Larry was a Chrysler/Dodge man and loved the big engines in those wagons). In rural Montana a short trip was anywhere between ten and 100 miles. Needless to say, I had lots of time to ponder the great mysteries of life while facing backward in the backseat of the old Safari classic station wagon.

On one particularly dark and ominous night the fear of nothingness got so bad that I felt sick inside. I prayed a silent prayer just to know that God was there and that life after death is real. I felt an almost instant feeling of warmth and assurance that God is there and that His plan of salvation is real. It is hard to describe even now how good I felt then and how good I feel now when I remember that experience.

I grew up on the Crow Indian Reservation and attended a small branch off the reservation in Hardin, Montana. I had always looked forward to becoming a deacon; passing the sacrament seemed like a big deal and a worthy goal. I made it to age twelve and passed off the Articles of Faith, which someone had led me to believe I had to do or I would be stuck in Primary until I did.

I then needed the outfit of a deacon—the white shirt, tie, slacks, and shiny shoes. My parents, especially my mother, were very frugal, and I was growing at rates they found hard to gauge. Often I was outfitted in clothes they predicted I would grow into. So my first Sunday as a deacon I was outfitted in a white shirt with one of my dad’s clip-on ties—Larry loved the convenience of clip-on ties and hadn’t yet had time to teach me to tie a real tie—black shiny shoes, and a pair of black slacks about four sizes too big. I found a belt and strapped those big pants on nice and high, well above my waist, so the cuffs didn’t drag in the snow and ice.

As I was marching up to take my place on the bench in front of the sacrament table, several different members of the branch made jokes about my attire, especially the size of my slacks. By the time I reached the deacon bench, I had lost most of my self-confidence and desire to pass the sacrament. I soldiered up anyway and self-consciously did my deacon duty and passed the sacrament. After sacrament meeting I had just about decided to quit and not come back the next Sunday.

What happened next is not miraculous. (And I eventually grew into the pants.) I decided that I couldn’t and wouldn’t let what other people think and say about me keep me from doing what is right for me. I also learned I needed to be a little less sensitive. I know the jokesters who had made fun of me and my big, oversized pants probably thought they were funny and did not mean any harm and would have felt bad had they known how their comments affected me. Now when there is something I know I should do or want to do, I think of that kid in the oversized pants, and I hike my pants up and move ahead.

I probably spent more time as an undergraduate student than I needed to. My wife was very patient with my academic endeavors. I changed my major at least twice before I found something I truly excelled at. I remember that as I was closing in on graduation I was informed that if I wanted to graduate that coming April, I needed to complete a basic math class that was worth zero credits. I had avoided math as much as possible and had thought I was done with it. But I signed up for the class my final semester as an undergraduate at BYU.

I knew I was in trouble as soon as I picked up the textbook at the Bookstore. This class turned out to be one of the most academically challenging experiences I have ever had. I spent many hours in the math lab trying to learn algebra. I wore out one poor tutor. She must have thought there was something seriously wrong with my memory. I faithfully worked with her every week up until the final exam. She was very kind and patient.

I remember leaving the math lab for the last time and heading to the testing center before I lost the knowledge I had gained that day. Amazingly, I did pass the final test and the class. I had such a feeling of relief and jubilation erupt in me that I could hardly stand it. I was going to graduate! I was so grateful I did not have to go home and disappoint my wife.

Instead we got to celebrate this achievement together. My grade in the class was not good, but I am probably as proud of that grade as I am of any I have ever earned because I truly earned it.

These experiences are far from the most difficult of my life; however, from these experiences I have learned whom I can trust and lean on when I have difficult situations to endure. I know I can always rely on my Heavenly Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the influence of the Comforter. I have learned that if you work hard and have faith, God puts people in your life (like a math tutor) to help you accomplish what may seem improbable. I also have learned that it is important to forgive and be grateful and that when things are tough, I can hike up my pants and move forward, whether I look good doing it or not.

Deciding Who You Will Be

I began my remarks talking about choices. As important as choices are—such as what to major in, what career path to take, where to live, and where to send the kids to school—the choices you make regarding the type of person you want to be are, in my opinion, more important and will help you make those very important decisions regarding the direction you choose for your life and your family. As you stay close to the Lord, it may at times seem that as much as you want one path, you will feel inspired and guided—pushed—in another direction.

If you would like, you can take some time and think about the type of person you want to be from now through eternity. Deciding what kind of person you want to be does not eliminate difficult decisions or make you perfect, but I believe it will help you to make better choices and find peace of mind. What characteristics and attributes are important to you? Personal integrity, honesty, time with family, kindness, patience, perseverance, work ethic, frugality, service, respect for others, charity?

Anything good or worthwhile takes time, practice, and perseverance. The temptation to be less than you know you can be is always lurking and ready to present itself to you as an opportunity for personal gain or pleasure. Walking away from temptation—even when no one would know—and being true to yourself and God is a test passed. You and I will continue to take on many tests of our character and resolve. Often the pressure to be less will come from unexpected sources, such as desperate friends and family unwilling to accept consequences. Failing a test is not the end of the world. Failing to learn from that test could be.

When I am dealing with things that are physically, mentally, or spiritually hard, I like to recite scriptures in my mind to help remind me that God is mindful of me. Here are three of my favorite scriptures that I like to recite during difficult or challenging times:

And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God. [D&C 14:7]

Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me. [Mosiah 26:30]

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. [Philippians 4:13]

Our ability to endure and continue to repent and improve is a blessing that is within each of our abilities and our grasp. We have so many great promises from God in the scriptures—promises we can count on if we are willing to reach out to God. I hope we can all be happy with who we are and who we are becoming. I like “me,” and I hope to like myself even better as I become a better version of me.

Life is a journey, and I hope you enjoy it. May God bless you in all you do. God does live, and He is mindful of each of us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.