

The Most Basic Choice

by Roland Foster

I hope you'll indulge me as I ramble for a bit along three separate threads of thought. I believe I can tie them together at the end.

Being Happy

I like to write about someone who has found a way to enjoy life, often in spite of difficult, even desperate or disastrous, circumstances. Such victory over life's large supply of negatives is, it seems to me, more often than not, largely a matter of choice.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." So said Henry David Thoreau in his classic memoir, *Walden*. Of course, Thoreau was a bit of an oddball who spent a lot of time off by himself, so maybe he didn't have as good a handle on "the mass of men" as he thought he did. Nevertheless, there's an element of truth in his words. Life can certainly be lived in desperation, whatever our circumstances. We know of people who are desperately poor; others who are desperately ill. I know one woman who longs desperately for a husband, and has consequently been involved in several unprofitable relationships. I know a man who is desperately unhappy and unfulfilled, though he is wealthy.

Why are so many people living desperate lives? Without being too simplistic, I think it's safe to say that many people don't know how to be happy. In this context ignorance is not bliss, it's misery.

Abraham Lincoln said, probably on more than one occasion, "Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." Song writer Roger Miller (one of my two favorite philosophers) said it a little less succinctly: "You can't roller skate in a buffalo herd, but you can be happy if you've a mind to." Both men expressed an idea that is simple, but not intuitive: happiness is, by and large, a choice.

Our natural tendency is to look to the future and expect to be happy when some goal is achieved, some milestone is passed, or some longed-for event takes place. "I'll be happy ...

- ... when I finish school and get a job
- ... when I find that right person and get married
- ... when I can finally afford that Mercedes I've always wanted
- ... when my divorce is final
- ... when my team wins the Super Bowl
- ... when I can retire from this rat race."

We persist in these fantasies, even though experience should teach us that the happiness thus gained is short-lived, and soon gives way to the desire for the next thing or event that will "make us happy." We keep on expecting to become happy "someday," rather than choosing to be happy right now, today.

Behaving Well

Not only do we postpone our happiness, but we also make choices that result in painful consequences. The smoker dying of cancer, the promiscuous person who contracts AIDS, the addict who sacrifices everything to satisfy his craving for drugs, alcohol, gambling, or sex — not only do we hear about these unfortunates from the news and other sources, but many of them are our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, our family members. These are a few extreme examples of the widespread phenomenon of bad choices.

I had a pen pal who was in prison. David's original sentence was for six years, but his bad attitude, bad temper, and unruly behavior earned him additional jail time, and eventually landed him in our state's maximum security prison.

About a year after we started corresponding, I began to notice a change in David's attitude. He quit trying to con me about being innocent and about getting his sentence reduced. Instead he began to write about behaving himself and earning "good time." One day when I was visiting him, he told me that he had finally figured out what his problem was. "My problem," he said, "is me. My bad temper, my bad attitude. I'm my own worst enemy."

I suppose this could have been another con, but it wasn't. David did a complete turnaround. He stopped treating the guards and the warden as his bitter enemies, and instead began to cooperate with them and make their jobs a little easier. Where he formerly erupted violently at the slightest insult from a guard or a fellow inmate, he now walked away from fights.

After a while he was transferred out of maximum security to a regular state prison. He became a diligent worker in the cafeteria and then the infirmary, and was given a series of increasingly responsible jobs, as he proved that he could be trusted to do them. When he was finally released, after serving nearly nine years, one of the guards helped him get a job.

David's choices since he got out have not all been wise ones, but he has managed for two and a half years now to keep his job, stay away from alcohol (which was a big contributing factor in his original offense), and stay out of jail.

Who is to Blame?

With tongue slightly in cheek, I'm going to blame everything on Darwin and Freud, though of course they have had a lot of helpers.

Charles Darwin proposed his theories of evolution in the late 1850s to early 1870s, and God was put on the shelf and forgotten about. Since we all evolved from the primordial sludge, by way of various animal and semi-human intermediaries, obviously there was no "creation," and therefore who needs a Creator? This opened the door for all sorts of subsequent societal adjustments, most notably in the area of moral values. After all, if there's no God to make the rules, then anything goes.

Sigmund Freud founded the discipline of psychoanalysis in the 1890s to 1920s, complete with its own set of theories. For example, we are all governed by our

unconscious sex urges, and that's why we hate our mothers — or something like that. He also taught us that, whatever is wrong with us mentally, everything will be fine if we can just determine where to pin the blame.

What these two men accomplished, along with their myriad disciples and other helpers, was jointly to promote the ridiculous philosophy that anyone may do anything he or she feels like doing as long as it does not hurt anyone (at least not anyone who counts), or as long as it is not illegal, or as long as he or she doesn't get caught. And if he or she does get caught, then he or she is not to blame, because a parent, a traumatizer, or society at large obviously caused the behavior.

Okay, I'm over-simplifying — but not by much.

The Bottom Line

These three threads are tied together, of course, in a concept known as personal responsibility — the most basic choice we can make.

Logic and experience both say that I am responsible for my own happiness; I don't need to depend on others to "make me happy." I can choose to be happy today, and I can find lots of reasons to be thankful and to praise the Lord; or I can wallow in whatever misery is on hand — there is always a plentiful supply available on any given day, as Jesus once remarked.

Common sense says that I am also responsible for my own attitude and actions. If I choose to behave in ways that are productive and helpful, I'll probably get along better than if I'm constantly rebellious. This is true whether the environment is home, school, workplace, prison, or the mall. Even in an adversarial situation, if I behave appropriately I can expect better results than if I behave inappropriately. The Golden Rule is worth considering. And if I'm not smart enough to know how to behave well, I can ask the Lord for wisdom. He has promised to provide it to anyone who asks.

Finally, whatever wisdom I possess tells me that I must accept responsibility for my own life. Very little is gained by simply finding a likely direction in which to point an indignant accusatory finger. If my situation is not good, I am the one who must try to do something to make it better. It may be interesting and instructive for me to find out how I got so messed up, but the really important question is, now that I'm so messed up, what am I going to do about it? In psychology this concept has been known as "responsibility therapy."

So, if you want to be happy, go ahead. If you want to avoid painful consequences, avoid the actions that lead to those consequences. If you want something in your life to get better, do what you can, and trust God.

May your joy be complete.