

Choices and Changes, Burdens and Blessings

DANA T. GRIFFEN

A well-worn and much-loved poem by Robert Frost introduces the subject. You may know the work, or perhaps you have heard only the oft-quoted last lines:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
[Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken” (1916)]

Each day our literal and figurative feet carry us to places where the roads diverge, and we must choose. Some of the choices are no-brainers, in the current vernacular, while some tax our mental capacities. Some seem to be of little consequence while others appear to hold eternity in the balance and really do make “all the difference.” Because we are here, in part, to learn to make righteous *and right* choices, perhaps none is trivial in the longest view. Contrast the thoughtful and deliberate approach to choices and consequences suggested by Frost’s poem with the sign that Sister Griffen and I saw in Las Vegas. The sign declared, “Wedding Chapel: No Waiting, No Questions, No Thinking!” We had a good laugh at the sign as we recognized the irony in seeing it on our way to a temple wedding. But the sobering reality is that too many—in and out of the Church—think about some choices too little and fail to connect the road they choose with the place to which it leads.

Dana T. Griffen was a professor of geology and associate dean of the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences at BYU when this devotional address was given on 31 May 2005.

The Freedom to Choose

Go with me to a vaguely familiar but not quite remembered place and a time too remote to contemplate, where perhaps time as we understand it had no meaning. There was one who would have denied each of us our moral agency—the freedom to choose for good or ill—in order to exalt himself. There was One, also, who saw through that ruse and declared Himself on the side of agency. The scriptures tell of a war full of casualties, except that physical death was not possible for anyone there. No, the cost—spiritual death—was far more serious. Listen to this, from John the Beloved, writing in Revelation:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,

And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. [Revelation 12:7–9]

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth. [Revelation 12:4; see also D&C 29:36]

This bit of premortal history has been reviewed in countless talks and lessons, and it may pass glibly through the consciousness. One-third of the hosts of heaven were cast out. Think about it. How many people have you seen in your life, including on television and in movies? How many live on earth right now? One-third is an impressive number, and we haven't included in our informal census everyone who has ever lived or will ever live. In that premortal realm, the outcasts had been our brothers and sisters. I wish to elicit no sympathy here. This was serious business, and they would, after all, have betrayed us.

We are still fighting the war of agency, but it is no longer a question of whether we will be allowed to choose, for that is decided once and for all. The battle in the second estate is all about how we *use* our agency. It is still serious business.

You may say, or wish you could, “I will live my life as I see fit and will simply ignore the battle. It need not concern me.” That is not an option.

Daniel Tyler, an early member of the Church, told of the visit he and Isaac Behunnin made to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. The Prophet had recently come from imprisonment in Missouri, and he related to these brethren the persecutions he had endured, many at the hands of apostates. According to Brother Tyler's account, Brother Behunnin exclaimed:

“If I should leave this Church I would not do as those men have done: I would go to some remote place where Mormonism had never been heard of . . . and no one would ever learn that I knew anything about it.”

To that the Prophet Joseph responded:

*“Brother Behunnin, you don't know what you would do. No doubt these men once thought as you do. Before you joined this Church you stood on neutral ground. When the gospel was preached good and evil were set before you. You could choose either or neither. There were two opposite masters inviting you to serve them. When you joined this Church you enlisted to serve God. When you did that you left the neutral ground, and you never can get back on to it. Should you forsake the Master you enlisted to serve it will be by the instigation of the evil one, and you will follow his dictation and be his servant.” [Quoted by Daniel Tyler in “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 16 (15 August 1892): 492]*

You—we—are a people of covenants. We cannot allow our choices to compromise covenants and remain on neutral ground, nor can we *keep* covenants and remain on neutral ground. We have forever left neutral ground, and our willful choices must place us on one side or the other. Fortunately, because Heavenly Father loves us, understands our imperfections, and knows that we will sometimes choose amiss, we need never remain long on the wrong side—but more on that later.

Lehi made the essential elements of agency clear:

Men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. . . .

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. . . .

Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. . . .

. . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. [2 Nephi 2:5, 11, 16, 27]

The concept is simple; the consequences are vast.

The Burden of Agency

Being agents unto ourselves places burdens on us that seem sometimes heavy or uncomfortable.

Jesus . . . said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. [Luke 10:30–35]

Three people, three choices. Each choice was made independently, within the heart and mind of the individual—where all of our most important choices must ultimately be made. And incidentally, the “two pence” given by the Samaritan to the innkeeper amounted to two days’ wages for a workman of that time—not a light commitment!

Thirty years ago, as I sat in a chapel awaiting the beginning of priesthood meeting, a group of young men—priests—sat down on the bench behind me. Outside there poured from the sky a drenching rain.

One of the young men said to another, “Did you see the woman with the flat tire on Canyon Road?”

“Yes,” came the reply, in a voice full of honest concern. “We’d have stopped to help her, but we would have been late for priesthood meeting.”

Two roads diverged in a driving rain—one leading to timely arrival at priesthood meeting and one to someone in distress. Were the roads equally fair? I do not suppose that any of the young men sitting behind me lost their eternal reward that day, nor do I suspect that any permanent harm came to the woman with the flat tire. No, the most troubling aspect of this experience for me is that, hearing of the woman’s distress, I did not leave the meeting to help her. Did I figuratively “look and pass by on the other side,” leaving my two pence in

my pocket? It is a question I must ask myself. Perhaps you, too, have hard questions in need of honest examination.

Years later a wise stake president, speaking in a stake conference, made a statement that has been teaching me ever since. He said, “The spirit of the law is most often gained by repeated obedience to the letter of the law.” I repeat, “The spirit of the law is most often gained by repeated obedience to the letter of the law.” The statement brings to mind Brigham Young’s comment: “It matters not whether you or I feel like praying, when the time comes to pray, *pray*. If we do not feel like it, we should pray till we *do*” (*JD* 13:155; emphasis in original). If we are to emulate the Savior, then our choices must repeatedly lead us to Christlike behavior, even when we do not feel like being Christlike. We must continually strive to behave in ways that are unnatural to the natural man, until that Christian conditioning becomes natural and we become more Christlike.

As you may recognize, I am not speaking here of the broad, overarching, and governing decisions of life—baptism, temple covenants, marriage, children, and the like—absolutely crucial as these decisions are. Many of you wear rings bearing the letters CTR for “Choose the Right.” The abundant opportunities to choose the right that confront us in apparently small ways each day provide the choices that I am talking about. These are the choices that mold character and determine who, at the core, we really are. In reality they are not small. Their very importance is the *burden* of choice. But beyond the burden lies the blessing, because as we learn to make the seemingly little decisions properly, the broad, overarching, and governing decisions of life become clearer, and we make them with purer motives and greater commitment.

The Choice to Change

Recall Frost’s lines, “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.” Sometimes, though, it is necessary to come back. All roads are not created equal, and you can turn around. Inevitably, some of our choices will be poor ones, made with too little data or too much haste, too little restraint or too much fear, too little prayer or too much doubt. The good news is that there is almost no poor choice that cannot be corrected with timely action.

Amulek taught:

This life is the time for [us] to prepare to meet God. . . .

. . . Behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. [Alma 34:32, 33]

A careful reading of that scripture in the context of surrounding verses and footnote references reveals that the night of darkness for the unrepentant to whom Amulek refers is beyond the veil. The key to avoiding that night of darkness is timely action on this side of the veil. Helaman assured us that it *is* possible to wait too long to make important changes in our lives:

But behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure; yea, for ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head. [Helaman 13:38; emphasis added]

The warning is clearly serious. Nevertheless I suspect that it is “everlastingly too late” for none of you. For the present, time is on your side, and you have the choice to change.

Some time past I received an unusual package in the mail. It contained a small crystal and a letter. The letter said something like this:

I was a student in your mineralogy class a few years ago. I saw this crystal in the lab and wanted it. It seemed that there were other, similar specimens and that this one wouldn't be needed or missed, so I took it.

The letter went on to describe the burden of remorse that had grown over those years. In my mind's eye a desk drawer is opened at home, and a BYU graduate shrinks from this innocuous little crystal. It is moved to a less frequently accessed drawer, but weeks or months later, the same thing happens, almost unexpectedly. Finally, so much of self-worth and self-respect seems to ride on a nearly worthless little piece of inorganic stuff that this intrinsically good person *must* return the crystal.

I felt a little emotional as I read the letter and imagined this person carrying the weight of senseless guilt for so long. Then, as I recognized what I was feeling, words of scripture came to mind: "And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!" (D&C 18:13). Truly His yoke is easy and His burden is light. My former student made a choice to change. That choice is open to every one of us; only the specific nature of the change varies.

A word about the meaning of *change* may be in order. In the heyday of lightbulb jokes, there was one that went about the Church:

How many bishops does it take to change a lightbulb?

The answer: Just one, but the lightbulb really has to *want* to change.

I don't know whether one can speak of a "true" joke, but that one comes close.

The prophet Mormon, recording in his own short book the carnage of a final struggle between two godless foes, wrote of the mourning that overcame his people as they sensed

impending destruction. He became optimistic about their apparent repentance and rejoiced in the possibility that the Lord would once again save them from themselves. Then he wrote:

But behold this my joy was vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin. [Mormon 2:13]

The message of Mormon's observation is that repentance, while it generally *involves* a change in behavior, is more than a mere change in behavior. "The Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). It really is the heart that counts. Would I advise people to change bad behavior for the wrong reason? Change bad behavior for *any* reason and perhaps real repentance will eventually follow. But in the end God looks on what I, in others, cannot. He "looketh on the heart." When our actions fall short but our hearts are right in His sight, then the Atonement of His Only Begotten Son provides compensation for our deficiencies.

Choosing to Be

We have considered the gift of agency, some of the burdens of agency, and choosing to change for the better. If you have spent any significant time on this planet, or have even gone to kindergarten, you understand that no one gets to choose in everything. Life thrusts upon all of us circumstances that are not of our choosing. We deal with the loss of loved ones, personal illness, and many other situations we would not have chosen for ourselves. It is not capricious chance or even personal trials but conscious choices that "prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25). That is why we are here. Our afflictions and challenges may not always be entirely within our control, but the most important parts of us—our minds and our

hearts—are, or can be. If you doubt that, read. Start with Natan Sharansky or Elie Wiesel—or Joseph Smith.

Life for most of us is a recursive exercise—that is, we make choices that result in consequences, and what we thus learn helps us to make better choices. As we repeat this process, we learn to make choices that produce positive consequences—or at least consequences we can live with. This recursive procedure generally results in eventually being faced with fewer choices between good and evil and more between good and good, especially for those whose lives are significantly influenced by the Light of Christ.

We are presented with so many apparently worthy activities on which to spend our time and energy that it may seem as if we can hardly go wrong. Be cautious here. We can choose to be so involved in *good* things that we exclude from our lives the *essential* things. Others have referred to the pitfalls of becoming engaged in the thick of thin things. In all of our lives there are things we *must* do and time we *must* spend doing them, and other things that we *choose* to do with our discretionary time. May I suggest a question that should inform every decision about how we will spend substantial discretionary time? It is this: “Will this choice lead me toward what I want to be (not just what I want to *do* but what I want to *be*)?” In reality, our most important choices are not about what we will do but about what we will be.

Two examples will illustrate what I mean. On a 1997 flight across the Atlantic to attend a scientific conference in Aberdeen, Scotland, I sat immediately behind two women. At some point during the long flight they began conversing in good English, tinged with some sort of European accent I couldn’t quite place. Their conversation was rather loud because of the jet engines, and although I should have done my best not to listen in, I confess that they caught my attention, and what they said still does.

They spoke critically of Americans for lack of depth in their relationships with people.

One said, “The first thing that an American wants to know about a person who has just been introduced is what the person does for a living.”

“Yes,” concurred the other, “that seems to form their basis for personal judgments. They aren’t interested in who a person really is beyond his occupation.”

As I pondered their evaluation, I found myself realizing, uncomfortably, that they might be more right than I wanted to admit. For much of the remainder of the flight I pondered these two questions: (1) Beyond those aspects of my life that are connected with my work at BYU, who am I? and (2) Isn’t what I am more than merely what I do? The intellectual answers to those questions are easy. The operational answers can be challenging.

A second illustration comes from Elder Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve:

Once in a stake meeting, I noticed a larger than usual number of older members, most of them widows. I mentioned to the stake president how impressive they were.

The president replied, “Yes, but they are not active in the Church,” meaning they did not serve as leaders or teachers. He spoke as though they were a burden.

I repeated his words, “Not active in the Church?” and asked, “Are they active in the gospel?” He did not quite understand the difference at first.

*Like many of us, he concentrated so much on what people do that he overlooked what they are. [“The Golden Years,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 82; emphasis in original]*

Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve has put it this way:

It is important to know who you are and who you may become. It is more important than what

you do, vital as your work is. You pursue an education to prepare for life's work, but you also need to prepare for life—eternal life. I emphasize this because some people on life's journey forget who they really are and what is really important. Without sure identity and priority, blessings that matter most are at the mercy of things that matter least. ["Identity, Priority, and Blessings," Ensign, August 2001, 6]

So I invite you, once again, to examine your choices and ask, "Will this choice lead me toward what I want to be—not just to *do* but to *be*?" A few minutes ago I said that the abundant opportunities to choose the right that confront us in apparently small ways each day provide the choices that mold character and determine who, at the core, we really are. Do you understand how important it is that you not just do something but that you be someone? In the long run, who you really are will matter more than what you have done. Those are not entirely unrelated, of course, but who we are, in the end, is more than a mere list of accomplishments captured on a résumé. Might that be what the Savior meant when He said:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. [Matthew 7:22–23]

Perhaps you now are expecting a convenient checklist of criteria that will lead you to the right choices in your lives. Although I can offer a listening ear and my own fallible advice, I cannot make your choices for you, nor can I dictate how you should make them. That, you will recall, was someone else's plan. Repeatedly throughout your days, two roads—appearing equally fair—will diverge in a yellow wood or in a driving rain or in whatever your circumstances happen to be at the time, and you will have to choose.

Experience suggests that almost always, not far down the road, you will know whether your choice was right. Furthermore, very few of life's poor choices cannot be rectified; you can turn around, though doing so takes resolve and may be painful. If you strive to repeatedly make choices that lead you to become what our Father in Heaven wants you to be (not just to do but to be), then the words of the Apostle John describe your destiny:

Beloved, now are we the [children] of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him. [1 John 3:2]

As you choose your roads, may you make agency your ally, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.