

CHAPTER 9

Freedom to Make Decisions

Each one of us is free. However, this freedom is limited by who we are. We are born into a particular family and grow up in a particular society with particular values. Whether we were born to Eskimos, in New York or Moscow, or on a farm will greatly affect our lives. The opportunities we would have and the decisions we could make would be different. We cannot dissociate ourselves from our background. It is important to realize that where we came from affects who we are and the values we live by. It deeply influences the way we live.

At the same time, although there are many things that limit our options in life, such as instinct, genetic heritage, history, education or experience, we are not completely bound by them. Unlike other living creatures, human beings can consider their options and choose among them. We have creativity and imagination which enable us to respond to situations in different ways. And each decision we make changes us. If we face an obstacle and give up, we may develop a habit of giving up when facing some kind of difficulty. The feeling of being a victim can come to dominate our experience. On the other hand if we learn to rise up to challenges, we develop a strong character and will. Life becomes exciting as we actively shape our own future. A mature person recognizes this and can honestly say, "I am who I am today, not because of my circumstances, but because of the choices I made in my life."



Every decision we make has consequences. We are responsible for the consequences of our decisions and how they impact our character. Freedom and responsibility are not opposing forces but go hand in hand. Freedom is not doing whatever I please without regard to the consequences. Actually, this kind of behavior leads to loss of freedom. Not only that, but in all societies any person who wants to 'be free' must consider how his actions will affect others—and how the actions of others will affect him. Without these considerations freedom becomes a sham.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, recognizes the close connection between rights and duties, freedoms and responsibilities, in human life. Only by respecting others can people respect themselves. The Declaration states:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards each other in a spirit of brotherhood.

In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society."

So, real freedom:

- ✗ is always accompanied by responsibility
- ✗ always pursues actual results (not fantasy)
- ✗ always seeks to make others happy
- ✗ always results in goodness
- ✗ always results in more freedom



Despite the fact that most people would agree that we are responsible for our own decisions and behavior, many of us are surprisingly careless in deciding what to do and how to act.

Every day of our lives we are making decisions. Some are trivial while others are of vital importance. How do we come to the right decision? Is there always a right or a best decision? What do we do if we realize we have made a mistake?

Decisions, decisions

Take a moment to think back about some of the more important decisions you made in the past year. Write down about five or six decisions, and then rank them in order of importance from the most to the least. Next, think about how you made those decisions. Do you recognize any of the approaches listed below?

- ✗ A **logical** decision. I collected, checked and sorted out all the information available and then decided what would be best based on the facts.



- ✗ An **impulsive** decision. I didn't think about it much. The main thing was to make the decision and get on with more important things.
 - ✗ An **emotional** decision. It was based on my feeling; what I wanted and what I felt attracted to.
 - ✗ An **intuitive** decision. It was hard to explain, but it just felt inside that it was the right and appropriate thing to do.
 - ✗ An **emergency** decision. It was very important to get it right, but there was no time to agonize over it.
 - ✗ A **representative** decision. I knew that many others would be affected and influenced by my decision, so I thought it through very carefully.
 - ✗ A **bitter** decision. I knew someone would be hurt, but it couldn't be avoided.
 - ✗ A **responsive** decision. I was concerned about other people's opinions, so I listened to what they had to say and took account of their advice and suggestions.
 - ✗ A **prayerful** decision. I didn't know what to do, so I just prayed and asked God for his guidance.
 - ✗ A **guided** decision. I felt it was out of my depth so I asked my parents/mentors for advice.
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- ✗ A **group** decision. I felt that we all needed to be involved and take responsibility for the outcome.
 - ✗ A **rash** decision. I knew at the time that it was probably a mistake, but I neither had the time nor the inclination to think seriously about the consequences.
 - ✗ A **delayed** decision. I didn't rush into deciding. Rather, I put off the decision for as long as possible. At the time I felt it was going to be an impossible choice. In the process I went through much agony.
 - ✗ A **default** decision. I did nothing and matters took their own course.

Questions for Discussion



1. Are some of these approaches better or worse than others? If so, why?
2. Arrange these types of decisions into categories (for instance, decisions that are made independently, on time, are well grounded, etc.)
3. For each of these categories, discuss:
 - a) a situation where that type of decision is appropriate
 - b) another situation where that same type of decision is inappropriate
4. Which type of decision making might be best for the following?
 - Deciding whether to go to college or get a job
 - Deciding which university to attend
 - Deciding on a career
 - Deciding whether to report a friend for stealing
 - Deciding whether to have sex before marriage
 - Deciding whether to continue an unmarried pregnancy or get an abortion
 - Deciding whether to marry a certain person
 - A friend calls to tell you she is about to commit suicide
 - You are offered drugs at school and your friends urge you to try

For Your Journal



Have there been any decisions you regret having made? Are they irreversible?

Now think about three really important decisions that you may have to make in the next ten years. Which is the most important for you? Will you use the same decision making process in each case? Why or why not?

How much will these decisions depend on external circumstances and how much on your own will? What does freedom to decide mean for you?

The Hike

Alex, Sergei and Oleg loved nothing better than to go hiking. One day, as they were hiking in the countryside, it began to get dark. They hurried to get back to the campsite.

"Let's go this way!" said Alex, as they came to a steep ravine.

"It looks dangerous to me," said Oleg, peering over the edge.

"Why don't we go back the same way we came?"

"Because it will take an hour longer and get dark before we get back, dummy!" said Alex. "Anyway, we'll be fine. What do you think, Sergei?"

Sergei was silent. Actually he thought it was a pretty stupid idea. But all afternoon Alex had been teasing him about being overcautious, calling him chicken and a baby. It was time to take a stand.

"Looks okay to me," he said, and without delay they set off down the steep slope. Almost as soon as they had begun, Alex, who was the most experienced, knew they had made a mistake. Still, he decided to carry on because he didn't want to face the scorn his companions would pour on him if he admitted his mistake. Then, suddenly Oleg, who was in the lead, slipped on a loose stone and tumbled to the rocks below,

Scared, his companions made their way down as quickly as they could. They saw that Oleg had a deep cut in his leg and was in great pain. Alex and Sergei exchanged glances.

"We'll have to carry him down to the campsite," Alex said grimly. "We should be able to get help there."

They made their way as quickly as possible, but progress was slow. By the time they arrived everything was closed. By this time Oleg was almost unconscious.

"What about that?" Sergei said, pointing to the cafeteria, now closed for the night. "They must have a phone! I know it's locked, but..." He looked to Alex for support. "We could always break a window and force ourselves in."

"We can't do that," said Alex. "It's a crime. We'd be arrested."



Something to think about



- What do you think of the nature of the relationships among Alex, Sergei and Oleg? Are they real friends?
- What can you tell about the character of each of them?
- What types of decisions did they make according to the list in the text of the chapter?
- How 'free' were they in their decision-making? How responsible?

The Prophet

by Alexander Pushkin

The following extract is from a poem written by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in remembrance of those who were executed after the failed Decembrist uprising in 1825 in St. Petersburg. It is a reminder to us of the price paid by those in history who made courageous decisions in the cause for freedom. The true source of freedom and happiness lies in our inner self if we do not compromise our conscience. No external power can take this away from us.

...Then, swiftly drawing
His shining sword, he cleaved my breast,
Plucked out my quivering heart, and, somber
And grim of aspect, coolly thrust
Into the gaping hole an ember
That ran with flame... I lay there, dead,
And God, God spake, and this He said,
"Arise, o sage, my summons hearing,
Do as I bid, by naught deterred;
Stride o'er the earth, a prophet, searing
The hearts of men with righteous word."