



Reading

How to Make a Decision Without Making a Decision by Tom Atlee (adapted)

I was trapped with hundreds of my fellow community members in a fertilizer factory in Western Colorado on a wet and rainy day. We were 400 people from all walks of life trying to live together in a tent city that moved 15 miles down the road every day or two. We were the 1986 cross-country Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament and we were getting ready to fall apart.

We were being eaten away by a conflict that just wouldn't stop -- the familiar war between "maintaining an acceptable appearance for the rest of the world," and "expressing our authentic selves." Nearly every community has its own version of this. Ours had been festering for almost two months. Our two polarized camps were as follows:

- 1) "We should march along in orderly rows to impress the media and maintain order in the face of traffic!" and
- 2) "We should move at our own pace in a strung-out line so we can appreciate the natural world and chat with people in homes and schools we pass!"

Each side was ready to leave the march. But today we were drawn together by the rain. We set up a portable speaker system, suggesting that anyone who wished to should take a 2-minute turn speaking into the microphone about our conflict. So we did that, with great passion and messiness.

"How can we talk about peace and then force everyone to march like a military unit?!!" "How do you expect to get disarmament if the media can make fun of us as a raggle-taggle mob of hippies?!!" "No one has a right to dictate to me how I walk!"

It went on for two hours. But as it proceeded, the speakers increasingly took into account what previous people had said. The monologues sounded more and more like dialogue. I was blown away when one speaker after another began saying things that had only occurred to me moments before. I heard my ambivalences and nuances being spoken and wrestled with. I sensed us working our way into what some native peoples call "One Big Mind."

In the end, no decision had been made. No vote was taken. No one checked for consensus. The group just "knew" how we were going to behave as we marched down the streets and highways of America.

Years later I read that Oren Lyons, faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onandaga Iroquois, said of his tribal council tradition: "We just keep talking until there's nothing left but the obvious truth." Once "the obvious truth" has been found, there is no need for a "decision." Such truth sets people free.

Original at <http://www.co-intelligence.org/I-decisionmakingwithout.html>

Sermon

Rudy and Ben looked at each other nervously as the train came to a stop. Since the brothers had been rounded up with the other men in their village and boarded onto box cars going north, Rudy had been trying to keep track of where they were, but he was no longer sure. He did know why they'd been taken and where they were likely to end up. It was 1941. He and Ben and his parents lived in Soviet Ukraine, near the eastern front. The German army was advancing into the Ukraine and the Soviet generals feared that if the Germany army got any further, they would conscript all German speaking male residents into the army. The generals were determined to keep that from happening so as many as possible had been rounded up and were being shipped far away from the battle front to forced labor camps in Siberia.



Conditions on the train gave them a pretty good idea of what they were in for. Though it was winter, the box cars were unheated and there were no blankets. There was standing room only. One bucket served as the toilet for over 40 men. Each received one bowl of soup a day and there was so little water that they took turns licking the frost off the nails inside the box car. It didn't look good.

As the train rolled to a stop, the doors were opened to give the men a chance to dump their buckets and to eat that day's meal. As they stepped off the train, Rudy whispered to his younger brother, "We're not going like cattle to the slaughter. We're not getting back on that train." "We have to," said Ben. "If we don't, they'll shoot us!" "So what if they shoot us? We either die trying to escape or die in the camps. We have nothing to lose."

It was dark and foggy and from within the milling crowds of hungry, cold and disoriented men, Rudy watched the guards closely. When he saw an opportunity, he and Ben quietly melted into the surrounding forest and hid themselves as best as they could, hoping that their disappearance went unnoticed. After what seemed like a horribly long time, the men were ordered back into their cars, the doors were closed, and the train continued on its journey. They were free. But they had no food, no money, and they were 1,000 miles from home.

Most of us are, thankfully, unlikely to find ourselves in situations like this, or in the place of having to make these kinds of choices. This seems so far from the reality of our lives. We live in a democratic part of the world. Most of us are unlikely to experience political repression or to have our freedom simply taken away at a moment's notice. The wars we fight take place in other people's countries. Most of us are very unlikely to experience hunger. So in some ways, this story feels foreign, and maybe not something that we think we should be able to relate to. Few of our choices seem to be so clearly about matters of life and death.

The dilemmas we face seem so different in comparison. Where am I going to go to college? What courses am I going to take next semester? What kind of community service am I going to do to fill that requirement for my high school diploma? What are we going to eat for dinner? Am I going to the movies tonight or to my friend's party? What am I going to wear tomorrow? What gifts am I buying for my kids this year? Should I sell my car and buy a new one, or keep paying for repairs? Should I refinance my mortgage? Am I staying in this marriage? Should I stay in a job I don't like, or take my chances in this uncertain job market? Where should I invest my money in this crazy economy? When you take these dilemmas and place them beside Rudy and Ben's, we gain a different appreciation for how lucky we are to be able to think about these kinds of choices. It seems like Rudy and Ben's choices were about matters of life and death and it's hard to see choices in our everyday lives as having the same kind of dramatic reality.

But the fact of the matter is, that all of our choices matter. Every choice that every human being makes, matters. Every choice that I make matters. Every choice that you make matters. Every choice that your child makes, matters. Every choice is about affirming life or death because ultimately our choices revolve around the human hunger, that deeply rooted hunger that some call God or the One Big Mind that wants it to be the case that our choices affirm life. That they break through the ordinary into a sacred realm where even the small things we do are part of building the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The seriousness of the choices we make are no less than the choices Rudy and Ben made because every choice is about values. Some values affirm life. And some values diminish life and our choices are about the life long struggle each of us has to identify and to live out the values that affirm life.

For instance, this fall the board of trustees made a big decision to hire a book keeper. We used to be able to take care of our finances with a volunteer treasurer. But we've grown, and even though we've grown we've tried to keep taking care of our finances as if we were small. So we've burned out treasurer after treasurer after treasurer. We're not practicing values that affirm life. We can't burn out any more treasurers. If we're really going to live our values, one of which is to take care of one another, then we have to do something different.

Another example. We have a Ministers Discretionary Fund. This is a fund for friends and members of this church, as well as the larger community, who are in need. It's a pretty small fund and because of what's happening in the economy, the need is growing. So we're looking at doing a monthly collection so that we can care for our people, and maybe even a few more. We are our brothers and sisters keepers and we're trying to make choices that affirm life.



I grew up with the story of Rudy and Ben stealing off into the woods because Rudy was my grandfather. And he would sit at the kitchen table, often with a glass of whisky from the bottle hidden under the sink, and tell this story. And even though we'd heard it many times, we still loved to hear it. And we had two favorite parts. The first part, was when he would talk about the train slowing down, and say to his brother, "We will not go like cattle to the slaughter." I got shivers every time I heard that. Then we'd wait for him to tell us how Ben was afraid that they would be shot. We knew his answer by heart. "We either die trying to escape or die in the camps. We have nothing to lose." What made that part of the story so riveting? Was it just because of the danger factor, because of the possibility that they might die? Well, of course in part. None of us had ever experienced our lives being in danger. But it was much, much bigger than that. I think we loved that part of the story because Rudy and Ben were dramatically living a value that is the moral foundation of human life. They were fighting for their dignity. They were affirming that they had inherent worth and value and that no one was going to take that away from them. Every time he told that story and every time he relived that choice, he was affirming life itself.

The second part of the story takes place as they travel the 1,000 miles back. They've slept by day and walked by night, hopped trains, hidden in trucks and wagons, stolen and begged, evaded the authorities. Food is scarce. Everyone is a potential enemy, and the winter is cold. They get weaker and weaker. And one night, Ben starts to lose it. He is hardly able to put one foot ahead of the other and finally he collapses and tells Rudy that he can't go on. Rudy needs to save himself and return to their family so that their mother has at least one son. At this part in the story, my grandfather often poured himself a bit more whisky, as if he still needed to feel warmth and strength return to him even now. And he would say to us, "You never leave your brother behind." He'd say it again. "You never ever leave your brother behind." And he'd tell us how he picked up his brother and carried him until they reached a village where he found food and a place to sleep. They regained their strength, and continued on.

What makes this story so powerful? The most powerful stories are powerful because they hold up a life affirming value and we will respond to those values because we feel them inside ourselves and each one of us wants to be the kind of person who lives out values and we need powerful stories to help us do that, to point the way, to provide an example of how powerful those values are and why we should affirm them in the very fabric of our lives.

When all those protesters met in that old fertilizer factory and talked through their differences, what kept them there, even when they heard things that hurt and that they disagreed with? You never leave your brother and sister behind. Why are we hiring a book keeper and building up our discretionary fund? You never leave your sister and brother behind. More and more people who are determined to fill their tables with food produced organically and locally because we know the damage conventional farming does to the land and to farming communities themselves. You never leave your brother and sister behind. More and more people are shopping fair trade because they want to make sure that those who make what they're buying get a decent price for what they've made. You can buy clothes, furniture, coffee, just about anything fair trade. You never leave your brother and sister behind. Most high schools now require their students to do community service so that they're learn that you never leave your brother and sister behind. Why are we collecting for the Circle of Concern food bank every single Sunday of the year? You never leave your brother and sister behind. I'm hoping you get my point. We are brothers and sisters. We are each other's keepers.

Unitarian Universalism as it is practiced now has seven principles. You can find them in the front of the grey hymnal. But really, I think we have two, and the other five are reflections on those three. The first principle is that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The second principle is that we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. These are core values for us. And every decision we make, no matter how small, should be grounded in those values. In fact I'd go even farther. I'd say that deep down, in every decision we make, we are hungering to make those values real in our lives. It's like our lives are a wild prayer of longing, to use a term coined by poet W.H. Auden. Longing for that oneness, longing for God, longing for that deep sense of connection, contentment, passion, creativity, completeness, the One Big Mind. It is that longing that brings many of you here. It is that longing that brings you to covenant groups, committee meetings, worship, religious education, youth group, CON, Madrigal Dinner, Christmas Eve. It is that longing that helps some of us get out of bed in the morning. It is that longing that helps us to find that last drop of energy when our children need us. It is that longing that makes us life long learners, always hungry for a little more of the truth. It is that longing that takes us into the deepest relationships of our lives.

But my question is this. How do you know if the decisions you make are really affirming life? We've all been in places where we've had hard decisions to make, decisions where it wasn't always clear what was affirming life. Decisions that could be like



that balloon, rising off into the distance. Who knows where it's going to land? Who knows which marching strategy would bring those protesters closer to their goals? There was no guarantee that Rudy and Ben were going to make it to the woods, no guarantee that Rudy would survive carrying Ben to the next village. In preparation for this sermon, some of you shared with me some of the difficult decisions you've made in your lives, some of which you regretted. You honestly believed you were doing the right thing, but later regretted your choice. However, those mistakes made you much wiser and you used what you'd learned to make wiser choices for yourself and your family. The older I get, and, hopefully, the wiser I get, it seems like more and more of the decisions I'm asked to make have no one right answer. No guarantee that one choice is going to be better than the other. It seems like many of the choices we make have ramifications we could never predict. Sometimes we make choices that seem so clear, so right, we think we've thought through all the alternatives, mapped out the possible consequences of each choice, and I'm still often puzzled by the choices that work out and the ones that don't. And, it seems like my personal contentment and sense of fulfillment is less connected to the actual choices I make and more connected to how ready I am to respond when they don't quite work out as planned, which is usually! After all, there's a great saying, the best plans are always reshaped when they hit reality. Life is a very risky endeavor.

Do how do you do the right thing? This is a harder question to answer for those wanting clear, concise, black and white guidelines than for those who are willing to sit in places of grey. But really, it comes back to those core values. The affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person. And the truth that we are each others brothers and sisters and that we are to take care of each other. When you try to live these values, even a simple question like: Do I go to the movies with this friend or to a party with that friend, takes on special significance.

By the time Rudy and Ben made it back to Southern Ukraine, the German army had advanced. Somehow they managed to sneak through the Russian lines, and then through the German lines and reunite with their mother. And after many adventures just as harrowing as that one, Rudy and Ben made it to Canada. Rudy died peacefully many years ago. But his brother Ben is still with us. And sometimes he'll look out into the distance and say, "You never leave your brother behind."

May it be so for each one of us. Amen and blessed be.