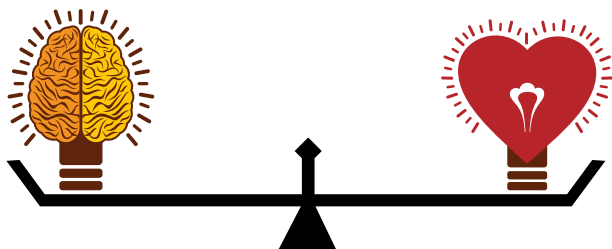


FLORIN BICĂ

CHOOSE TO CHOOSE!



YOUTH  ALIVE



CHOOSE
TO
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YOUTH  ALIVE

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DAILY LITTLE CHOICES

Around the World in Eighty Days is one of the most beloved adventure and travel books of all time. The main character of Jules Verne's novel is Phileas Fogg, a distinguished member of the Reform Club in London. He makes a bet that he can travel around the world in no more, no less than 80 days. Throughout his journey, Fogg encounters unexpected situations and close calls that he clearly had not anticipated. His original plan suffers many setbacks. In his shoes, any reader would have given up. Fogg, however, proves over and over again his ability to make big decisions "on the go", not only for his benefit, but also for that of his companions. Phileas Fogg is the "ideal chooser", rational, deliberate, ready to face any challenge without compromising any of his principles.

Many wish they had Fogg's skill of choosing quickly and efficiently. But isn't Fogg just a fictional work after all? Is it actually possible to choose as wisely in real life? Isn't that just a fantasy?

A human life is the result of all their personal choices. There's of course external choices involved also, but the choices we make contribute tremendously to determining the course of our lives. Today you pick a pair of high heels, tomorrow you lose your balance and break your ankle, and the following day you meet your future-husband at the hospital, Doctor Dreamboat. And just think it all starts with your choice of footwear!

Life is also the result of countless of *missed* choices. We find ourselves at crossroads that leave us simply stumped. We fail to make a decision which is, in itself, a different kind of choice. Our victories and failures, our joys and sorrows, the peaks and falls of our existence are all dictated by our decisions. Everything depends on what we choose - the family life, career success, personal projects, happiness, etc. Even time itself gains more or less meaning following our choices.

When we think of life choices, we tend to picture the "big" ones that influence or even change

our life' trajectory: the school we go to, the career we invest time in, our life partner, religious denomination, etc. In fact, this kind of decisions are few and far between. How many times in your life do you choose to be an atheist or a Christian? Or between going to Med School versus majoring in Philosophy? Or your life partner? (Sure, you could be Henry VIII of England, in which case you've got a serious issue on your hands.) And even if there are situations where we have second thoughts and change our minds about our initial choices, those tend to (or should) be quite rare.

On the other hand, life offers us numerous daily, *little* choices. These tiny choices can seem insignificant but are so pervasive that we often fail to notice them. For instance, will you wear your green or blue shirt to class today? Or will you bike or take the bus? These sort of decisions are usually taken care of by our "autopilot". Some of them are made subconsciously. As if instinctually, your hand reaches out for one object out of several, or you cross the street at a certain pedestrian crossing, without ever stopping to analyze these choices: "There are two crossings - one here, the other one a bit down the road. Which one should I take?" You just simply do things. Life also

“What is freedom?

Freedom is the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternatives of choice. Without the possibility of choice a man is not a man but a member, an instrument, a thing.”

”
**Archibald MacLeish,
American poet (deceased)**

entails a certain amount of detachment or disconnect.

Food, clothing, travelling, work, the way we interact with other people, our social relations, our entertainment - consciously or not, all of these are governed by our choices.

If we could look at life under a microscope, we would be overwhelmed by the amount of daily choices, these tiny cells of human existence.

We don't engage in conscious decision-making and weighing pros and cons every time we make a choice. As David Freemantle writes in his *How to Choose* (2002), “our life is creaking with so many potential choices, but the paradox is that most times we do not even give them a second's thought. We just do things without thinking.” We simply and unthinkingly decide whether to run after the bus or wait for the next one. Whether to order plain bagels or

onion bagels. We are little fishes swimming the Great Ocean of Choices.

If we could rewind our life and watch every single choice we make in one day, we would probably be floored not just by the amount of choices, but also by how undetectable they are. How many of our daily choices are we aware of? Hard to say. Do we actually need to pay attention to every single one of them? Probably not, that would be too exhausting. Although it could be a fruitful exercise to examine just one of our (estimated) 27,375 days on this Earth.

It's a cliché for a reason: you can't turn back time. I'm sure you've wished for it at least once in your life: "If only I could go back to that moment, knowing what I know now...!" It's not just huge decisions that lead to regrets, but also the little ones. You can never go back and re-take a decision, but sometimes you can choose again at a later point (if it's not too late). The little daily choices can sometimes become life's biggest regrets. Neurosurgeon Ben Carson, in one of his books, tells of how he used to chase and jump on trains on his way to school. Until one day, a friend of his fell under the train and lost a leg. A small choice led to huge trouble!

One of my favourite stories as a child was that

of Uncle Scrooge, the famous character of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Old Scrooge had made many bad choices in his life, and these had all led him to become a lonely, stingy, money-obsessed old man. Fortunately for him, he is visited by three ghosts in a kind of dream, hallucination or vision - the ghosts of his past, present, and dreary future. It is especially this vision of his future that terrifies him into *choosing* to change his life. The story of Uncle Scrooge is however just fiction. No ghost will visit us in reality, and no-one will show us what our future will look like. The only "help" we have is our daily little choices. They *only* influence our life and future. We all have to wake up to this reality and help each other too.

Benjamin Franklin was once asked by a friend for help in making a decision. Franklin replied that, while he didn't know what the right choice was for him, he could give him some advice about *how* to choose. The purpose of this booklet is not to present you with Benjamin Franklin's *how to*, although I will be including some tips from professionals on how to make the best choices. The purpose is to ring the alarm: "Attention, the doors are closing." Getting on or off? You choose.

ACTIVITY

What do you think are the most important things we have to choose in life? Rank the following list from 1-10 (1 for the most important item on the list). Try not to think of what you're expected to choose or what you know you should choose; instead, rank it according to your daily choices.

FRIENDS
CLOTHES
LIFE PARTNER
RELIGION
WORKPLACE
ENTERTAINMENT
HOUSING
FOOD
CAR
EDUCATION

If possible, talk to your friends about each other's rankings. It doesn't matter if your choices don't overlap. The goal is to learn as much as possible about yourself, and about those around you.

Some of the choices we have to make are determined or influenced by previous decisions. “Should I get my ulcer operated at hospital X or Y?” How did you end up in this situation anyway? If you go back in time enough, you can see how previous lifestyle choices have led to your present predicament. Choices lead to more choices. One leads to another. If you choose to lie in a certain situation, you will probably find yourself having to lie more and more, in order to cover your original lie. Life is a sequence of choices.

There’s also a multitude of external circumstances to consider. A young person chooses to study Law in order to please their family, even though they would have preferred a musical career. A mother chooses to abandon her own profession, so she can take care of the children. A young man decides to break up with his girlfriend, so he can dedicate himself to his work, in order to take care of his poor family. These are just a few examples. There’s similar cases everywhere you look. Life doesn’t often allow us to make “free” choices. Most often, whether we like it or not, the decisions we make are motivated by a constellation of external and internal constraints: the expectations of those around us, the expectations

we have of ourselves, peer-pressure, and so on. It's a wonder we manage to get anything done at all!

Our choices depend on the family we grew up in, on our education, our entourage, the stimuli we receive daily. Take the example of marriage - almost all teenagers and young people, even the most modest, find themselves daydreaming about romantic relationships. But courting and marriage differ throughout history and among societies. In the old days, marriage was arranged by the parents. They would be the ones to choose the life partner for their child and they would also have veto-power if they disapproved of their child's choice. The Bible has a story like that. Old patriarch Abraham sends a servant thousands of miles away from home to find a wife for his son, Isaac. The scary part is that Abraham doesn't give many instructions about what kind of girl the servant should find. The only thing the servant knows is to find a girl with the same religious beliefs as Abraham and Isaac. Surprisingly enough, Isaac does fall in love with Rebekah, the girl the servant brings home. Later on, however, the relations between the two spouses sour. Problems arise between them and all we know for sure is that it's not because of the mother-in-law.

But what about our present times?

“Honey, I found you the perfect boy - handsome and smart!”

“Mom, do you think we live in the Middle Ages?!”

“Dear, this boy is not just handsome, he also goes to Med school! He’s going to be a doctor!”

“Give me a break!!”

That tends to be a typical conversation between parent and child nowadays. The “child” (a young adult, in fact) believes it is their right to choose their life partner. But in other societies around the world (like in some parts of India), the parents continue to be the ones making this choice. Sometimes the die is cast as early as toddler-age. And still, the bride and groom don’t seem to have any problems with their exclusion from the decision-making process. This example is to show that choice itself is understood and practiced differently, based on our environment. It’s a custom. People choose differently (meaning, the decision-making process itself is different) in different social, cultural and geographic settings .¹

1. For more on this subject, read Sheena Iyengar’s *The Art of Choosing*.

Sheena Iyengar, who has done extensive research in how we choose, explained in a TED talk that *individual* choice is more important in the West than in other parts of the world. Everyone believes they have the right to choose for themselves. The focus is on “I” and the choices I make for “myself”. But Iyengar emphasizes that’s not the case everywhere else. In other societies, decisions are the result of a collective process. People choose together – parents together with children, siblings collectively, spouses together, etc. Of course, it’s nobody’s fault that we were born in certain sociocultural environments and that we learned from a very young age how to make choices. We are all the products of our environments and of the countless circumstances that model us. But there is still value in carefully observing the differences between us. Not just to understand them, but also to be able to compare different ways of being in the world, and thus to understand the pros and cons of individual vs. collective choices. Sometimes we can spend our entire lives in one town or state, but we can still learn about and borrow useful customs from others.

Our preferences and tastes also influence our choices. Someone likes blue, another likes red. One