

Decisions, Decisions.... Rumi and Ruminatlon

A Sermon for Super Bowl Sunday – by Julie Allen

2/5/2012

There are many of you here who made the decision to come to church rather than rest up for Super Bowl Sunday festivities. I hope I can send you out today feeling good about that decision ☺

Just prior to pulling this together, I asked my kids what they thought about decisions. One teenager replied flippantly: They're difficult. Let your parents make them. Of course, she wouldn't dream of implementing this philosophy – just dishing it out!

My second teenager wisely said: The reason decisions are difficult is that if you choose one thing, then you cannot do the other thing.

In that first response, she may be getting at the fact that parents make most of our decisions until we reach adolescence... when we start practicing our own decision making in earnest.

And she may also be suggesting why decisions can be so difficult: there's nothing quite as revealing as making a decision. For a Well Made Decision divulges something very personal about each of us: our values.

When I teach my psychology students about decisions, I roll out the research. It tells us that we can decide through a process of analysis or we can decide by trusting our gut. It turns out that a process that incorporates both is often the most successful. I saw a beautiful illustration of this in a young woman of limited means who needed to replace her car. She looked at loans and down payments and monthly payments. She checked the reliability of the different models in her price range, and she looked into

the reliability of the dealerships near her home. When she was clear on her best options, she went to the lot. Within two weeks, she had a new car. When I asked her later how she decided, she said “Oh Jules, I picked the cute one!”

Of course, there are variations on this theme. For those of you who recognize the Myers-Briggs coding, you’ll know that ISTP’s spend a lot more time in the analysis phase while ENFJ’s may spend quite a bit **less** time in analysis. And certainly this can color our perception of other people’s decision-making: My process might look tedious to one & might feel impulsive to another. This also underscores how difficult it is to accurately judge the decision-making of another person.

Some decisions are easier to make than others. Those decisions that have positive outcomes on both sides are easiest... should I nap in the living room or in the den? And even the choice between two undesirable outcomes is only slightly more difficult: Should I pay the fine or go to court? And the hardest of all are those decisions in which there are positive and negative outcomes in both directions: for example, after a long productive life, do I choose the chemo or opt out of treatment for a terminal cancer? These decisions don’t just suggest our values, they lay them out stark naked.

Rush Kidder writes: “all of us face tough choices. Sometimes we duck them. Sometimes we address them. Even when we address them, however, we don’t always decide to resolve them. Sometimes we simply brood endlessly over possible outcomes or agonize about paths to pursue.”

This brooding, what some call analysis paralysis, is detrimental to our health. As a champion ruminator, I can attest to the exhausting nature of considering endless outcomes and potential paths. I’ve come to understand that rumination **IS** a decision

made out of fear. It's a decision to wallow, to suffer and to do nothing. It's as if I take the bitter seed of a painful decision into my mouth and rather than spitting it right back out, I make a meal of it – turning it over, sucking every bit of poison out of it, thinking over every way making a decision would be impossible or even wrong. In the end, the rumination keeps me anxious and that spares me from deeper – possibly more unpleasant – experiences like loss. Essentially it prevents me from listening to my gut and detaches me from my values!

In my counseling work, I sometimes get to sit with folks who've made fairly rash decisions. I would argue that these impulsive decisions are also not about trusting your gut, but are about reacting before you really listen to that inner intuition. For example, the woman who moves in with a new partner after four weeks of dating – or the couple who decides to divorce because the pain of their arguments is more than each other can bear. Sometimes impulsivity works – sometimes we get a free pass. More often than not, there are casualties of these impulsive decisions. Most notably, the prisoners show up like a headache or a stomach ache – as debt – or worse, as our own guilt and shame. Sometimes there is collateral suffering for our partners, our friends, and even our own children.

Why do we ruminate and react with impulsive decisions? Some tough decisions – like whether or not to end a relationship - present themselves with a flood of negative emotions. When they come, the emotions can be blinding, like a sudden blizzard. We forget ourselves and our body-mind responds with it's most ancient survival strategy: to get us out of our discomfort. Rumi suggests another way in his poem, the Guest House. He says: look at these emotions and welcome them. Trust that they might beckon us into a new perspective and understanding. It takes practice and FAITH! to welcome honorably the depression, the meanness, the crowd of sorrows, the shame. Rumi's wisdom is in knowing that by inviting those feelings, they will

inform us without loitering. For it is quite a different thing to be present than it is to ruminate.

I am learning that in order to trust my gut, I've got to be an expert on consulting with my gut. Deep listening – the kind that listens to the anxious voice in my head and then patiently and curiously waits for the quieter voice. This, I believe is the essence of Rumi's wisdom – he says, slow down (or don't react!) and listen.

Last year, I signed up for a course called Ethical Fitness. Ethical Fitness is the gift that a wonderful Maine organization offers the world, through Rockport's Institute for Global Ethics. As I anticipated the course, I wondered: what does it mean to be ethically fit? (Secretly, yes, I thought – could it improve my appearance?) As the course got underway, I quickly realized that ethical fitness could be translated into “great decision making skills”.

Our first activity was to identify and clarify our values. This, it turns out, is the basis of great decision-making.

Now you'd think this should be easy to do, for again, the research in development tells us that most of us set our values around age 3. This is incredible to me – for it means that an age when I could not read and could barely speak, I had already established my values. As I looked around the room, I guessed that most of us had been living with our values for somewhere between 20 and 60 years. And yet, it took us half a day to identify them.

The serenity prayer advises us to change what we can, to accept what we must, and to gain wisdom enough to know the difference. What if your gut already knew? What if your body and soul already had the wisdom of your values to guide you?

So perhaps the skills we really need are the listening skills. And sure enough, the Institute for Global Ethics came through with some basic tests so that I might know if I'm deciding in alignment with my values. The obvious questions to consider are: is it legal? And if it is legal, would my profession agree it's a good decision? These questions are about my cultural and community values. Then I ask: how would I feel if this was broadcast on the front page of the York County Coast Star? This is where my personal values and the values of my community start to mingle. Next, Think about someone you admire: what would that person think about this decision? This is where I get to consider the values I aspire to. Only the last question addresses my values head on: What would my gut decide? If you tend to ruminate, then you might consider the Rumi test: to welcome and listen to your own feelings. As Rumi writes, this feeling is sent as a guide from beyond... for as we are present and welcoming, the feeling soon moves into the past – and in its shadow lies a value we may have forgotten or overlooked. And when we can anchor ourselves in those precious values – through our feelings, the answers to our dilemmas more easily come.

And what could be more central to your life than to put your values into action through your decision-making?

When I asked my kids about decisions, my third child also responded with characteristic humor and wisdom when he quoted Mahatma Ghandi:

“Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.”