

# “Choosing to Choose”

a Sermon by Rev. Doug Inhofe  
given at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos  
Taos, New Mexico

August 6, 2023

*Opening Words: “Transcendental Etude,” by Adrienne Rich (Hymnal 665)*

*Reading: “Exchanging Hats,” by Elizabeth Bishop (attached—see last page)*

*Closing Words: “Song of the Open Road,” by Walt Whitman (Hymnal 645)*

*Blurb in the Newsletter:*

When philosophers mention existentialism, they often prescribe, for living an authentic life, the necessity of making choices. If you delegate your choice, or if you don’t choose at all, you’ve acted in bad faith to yourself. But as free agents, open to the possibilities we create with our choosing to choose, we develop our own test bed for good decision-making, assess responsibility and risk, confront fortune obliquely, and, in all, search for the door to our dreams. One way or the other, it’s an escape from a too-buttoned-down world. No existentialism required.

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*Consider Harry Potter.* In the second book, *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry is talking with Dumbledore, the wise sage who leads Hogwarts school. Harry is puzzled. He tells Dumbledore that the Sorting Hat—the talking hat that had assigned new students to one of the four

houses—that the Hat knew Harry had the *ability* to be in Slytherin.

Harry could, after all, speak parceltongue—he could speak intelligibly to snakes! But Harry had told the Sorting Hat that he *wanted* to be in Gryffindor instead, and the Hat had given him what he wanted. Talking to Dumbledore, Harry now wonders if he’s messed up his life, if he should have followed his ability. Dumbledore know the answer, and he tells Harry straight out, “Life is not an ability, it’s a choice.”

Was he right? We’ll see.

*Consider the carrot.* And what’s *it* got in it—what’s its name, what *its* ability, what makes it what it is? Carotene! . . . Case closed. But what’s in *us*, what’s the force that makes us alive? And will naming it matter if it can’t be tested for, rendered pure, measured? Or is aspiring to identify its name a bit audacious, if we don’t first identify what it means to be alive? There are lots of options, today is about some of them.

We have heard the names rolled out through history—soul, spirit, energy, *élan vital*, the European darling—vitalism [“Vitalis” for your hair, anyone?], electricity, animal spirits, even—to come full circle—the force of life. Hmmm, the very thing we’re trying to corner. Well, may the force be with you—as it was with Luke Skywalker. He, too, like Harry, had been counseled, and so *then* he too knew what he wanted!

Are you more alive if you follow the siren song of spontaneity, if you’re impetuous and wild, or are you more alive if you’re dedicated to mastery and control, to a systematized, managed life?

The pursuit of vitality, of what makes us alive, has been a continual, and continually frustrating, human effort: is it something *universal*, for all of us, or is there simply the way your own personal *self* acts when you feel most alive? Long ago, curious physicians would weigh a person, twice, just before and just after death, to see if there was a difference—to see if there was something that *made* us alive. They got nothing.

But that's not the end. Deeper thinkers came up with this: you always act in context, so knowing what you're doing and how you feel about it, when feeling your best, suggests that learning how we live will give us a theory on what lies behind a life . . . what's running deep inside, pushing us around, in the offing, inside the careenium of our minds? Can we learn to know our creative potential, or own life force? Is Adam Smith's "invisible hand" doing the work, or is it John Maynard Keynes' "animal spirits" [it's how Keynes, during the great depression, described the roots of capitalism in each of us], or is it Alan Greenspan's "irrational exuberance"?

Let me be more concrete.

When I was in my early fifties, and wondering still what life was all about, I talked to a lot of people to see what they thought. I needed some context. I too was seeking counsel. I talked to the minister at All Souls, in Tulsa, and one of the things he said really stuck with me. It was this: ministry is possibly one of the few remaining authentic ways

of making a living. Feeling better about it all, I headed off to divinity school, where I continued to work on what he had said and what it really meant for me. [I should've just called him . . . at least to see what it meant *for him!*]

Ultimately, I concluded this. To live an authentic life means to do the right things for the right reasons. It was just that simple. I would've said then that I could parse this prescription into four parts. They are, *first*, we are free to craft our lives, within the circumstances in which we are immersed; *second*, in making our choices about our lives, we should take the position of someone down on the field, and not be a spectator; *third*, while we're down on the field, we should recognize that commitment, responsibility, and risk are inescapable; and *fourth*, we should live out our choices . . . authentically.

Aha! I saw, you see, just four things to do here. At one level it sounded direct, and thus appealing: all I ever needed to do was to take into consideration all possible outcomes, and all the values bearing on

them . . . and then decide to decide . . . and then to act. And then to be satisfied, if not jubilant, about it all.

Or was this reduction into words, into discrete pieces, so mechanistic as to be laughable? And, to make matters worse, there at the end was the word “authentic”—the word I was trying to divine in the first place. What was to be done?

Well, there’s poetry. You heard Adrienne Rich this morning, in my invocation, willing to leap into transcendence . . . and to lament that no one ever told us we had to study our lives. Yet, still, we must live them from the start nonetheless, we must decide, and to choose, and we can see that not choosing—or delegating our choice—is to act in fad faith to ourselves. This idea has crystallized over time in a literary tradition beginning with Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, in the middle of the nineteenth century, running through Camus’s *The Stranger* and Jean Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* in the middle of the twentieth. In all of them, the protagonists are terribly disillusioned, so much so that, in the first two,

they commit terrible crimes. They are not evil but devices, who, in moving so far afield as even to contemplate their crimes, test severely what “choosing” means . . . and in that sense, although their cases stand as guardrails, they also dramatize the existential trauma of facing squarely our capacity to choose.

Camus, I should add, later published his four principles to happiness: love someone, live in the open, forsake ambition, and do something creative.

But to use these prescriptions, one’s frame of mind must be of a certain kind. We need to look into how we actually experience the world—what’s *out there* that can help us, *inside*, to live our lives? Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian and Swiss poet, tries to answer this question in his “On Art”—this is, he says, how our free will can really take off:

Not any self-control or self-limitation  
for the sake of specific ends,  
but rather a carefree letting go of oneself:

not caution, but rather a wise blindness;  
not working to acquire silent,  
slowly increasing possessions, but rather  
a continuous squandering of all perishable values.

–Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), “Über Kunst”; shown at  
p. 70 of Daniel Dennett’s *Elbow Room*

Rilke has taken our four-part idea and tucked it in a bit. But what is a carefree letting go, what is a wise blindness, what values are perishable? If I told you to “be cool,” you might ask, what does “cool” mean? Once it meant dignity and self-control, but it might also mean a way of being instinctual and primitive, or artful and sophisticated.

Only our experience with how things actually work—which choices have been good ones, which bad, can inform the process inside us for making authentic choices. We need to practice making choices, and thus a value transcending our four-part idea would be one that cultivated the process itself. This meta-value tells us to give children and young adults chances to make their own choices, so they can have their own authentic history.



To put it another way, if all twenty-year-olds conducted their lives as seventy-year-olds would conduct them, then nothing new would ever happen in the world. No one would ever get far enough from the shore to discover new lands. [Gide] It's not *what* our children [grandchildren] are doing that matters so much as *how* they're doing it. *The freedom to be free gives people the palpable sense of imminent good fortune that, in itself, helps them to lead lives of dedication, conviction, with verve, flair, style, élan, and even sometimes faith.*

And so it is of greater importance for us to think for ourselves than it is to know, precisely, what to think. There is a huge middle-ground in there, but in the beginning it's often a very dialectical world, all yin or all yang, not much down the center. The freedom to be expressive, without fear, is like the computer's operating system. It comes first. The content will ultimately be shaped by the freedom to choose the experience that follows. The essential ingredient of one's first solo is confidence. If there's a content problem, well, that's what the rest of our lives are for.

Being in thrall to freedom is, of course, not enough by itself. At some point we must be filled with responsibility and truth. What happens is that as *we* grow our *sense of freedom* evolves, we step back from our youthful exuberance and we begin to *have our freedom*, instead of *it having us*. When we were young, and we had chores, then our responsibilities had *us*. We grow into our responsibilities. Now we have *them*.

Now I'm seventy-seven, and I've got some experience and some content and have made some choices. I've been doing my best to be authentic. And then I read in *Younger Next Year* that at my age I should just say "yes" to chances to do something, to go somewhere, to take a drive. I take this to mean that it's still important to be down on the field, as a participant. And perhaps there's a related insight, that I should be willing to choose, to take a chance, despite my uncertainty about any particular venture.

Recently I bought a lottery ticket. The odds are staggering, I know. So why'd I buy? I had a list of explanations—to see what the

ticket looked like, to follow the drawing, and so forth. I put the ticket in a pocket where it wouldn't fall out. It had become an icon of sorts. I was amazed I could feel a sense of possibility, and this, I told myself, is the joy of being free. [With a couple of bucks I spent on the ticket, my joy was definitely available at bargain-basement rates!]

Being free to make choices is a door to regretting ones already made—if you feel the thrill of freedom inside, you might look there too when things go wrong. One rather time-worn way out of this box—of being both free and yet responsible—is to subscribe to a certain brand of scientific materialism, and, through it, to return to an earlier world where fate and destiny held sway. This form of determinism [a sort of excuse, really] says to us, “look, don't feel so bad, science tells us that we're trapped by the physics of our existence. You're not as independent as you think, there's not as much choice leeway as you think. It's a much more deterministic universe—perhaps, when you made that choice (the one you now regret), you really could *not have done otherwise*, no matter what you thought at the time.” [Think of all the choices you've

made—did you ever *do otherwise*? No, you always did exactly what you did.] But you *did* choose! The “did you ever do otherwise” gambit proves too much, it’s there as a make weight but nothing more.

Choosing happens.

And so this brings me back to the new devotional practice of buying that lottery ticket, back—perhaps—to a world of quantum randomness where nothing is certain, where everything is probabilistic.

*Chance*, you see, sets you free from a world of systematic control.

Now, to be sure, chance is not a thorough-going philosophy, it’s not one for all of one’s life, but to many it has the appeal of an elixir. Chance creates an even newer world for adults, young and old, a world where everything is *not* already fixed. Turning one’s back on tradition—taking a chance—is a way of stepping outside of today’s contemporary world, a way of slipping through a portal of possibility and escaping a too-rationalistic, a too-utilitarian, a too-controlled world. By giving up the drive for a perfect mastery of the future (of our fate, as it were), taking a chance recognizes that the pursuit of happiness invariably defies our

attempts to organize it.

The idea is set forth forcibly by Jackson Lears [once the *Raritan* editor] in an article entitled, “Gambling for Grace.” Like artists, he says, people who take a chance, who cut against the grain, “implicitly acknowledge that Fortune is best courted obliquely rather than confronted directly, and that the willingness to experience chance creates the possibility of grace.” William James once said something similar, telling us that chance was a kind of gift, “something on which we have no claim,” and that it stood squarely against the Victorian ideal of a systematically controlled life, that it betokened the flair and verve required to make our souls soar

I would say that many Unitarians would be sympathetic to William James’ insights—ones subsumed, strangely enough, in a philosophy generally described as pragmatic. With our gift of free will, by being open to the possibilities it creates for us, we can confront Fortune obliquely, we can experience the possibility of grace, and we can, at the same time, keep ourselves open to our dreams. This openness, this

capacity for hope, this passion, can be our motive force. It can be the fuel for our lives, springing out of our sense of personal freedom, out of our palpable sense of imminent good fortune, out of our now-evolving sense of responsibility, and, in itself, it can give us a sense of triumph that will help us weather the difficulties that are surely ahead. Our responsibilities are still there, but we will have our jobs, they won't have us! We might never be rich, but he will never be weary.

We cannot make all our dreams come true, but we can live in a way that, by itself, makes us feel that we are in control of our lives. We have used our gift of free will, we have made a choice to choose, for ourselves, and in doing so we have gained, for ourselves, the same palpable, touchable sense of imminent good fortune that has fueled all the dreams of all the people who have ever dreamed.

Amen.

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Exchanging Hats, by Elizabeth Bishop (published in 1956, mid-way through her career in the then male-dominated field of poetry)

Unfunny uncles who insist  
in trying on a lady's hat,  
--oh, even if the joke falls flat,  
we share your slight transvestite twist

in spite of our embarrassment.  
Costume and custom are complex.  
The headgear of the other sex  
inspires us to experiment.

Anandrous aunts, who, at the beach  
with paper plates upon your laps,  
keep putting on the yachtsmen's caps  
with exhibitionistic screech,

the visors hanging o'er the ear  
so that the golden anchors drag,  
--the tides of fashion never lag.  
Such caps may not be worn next year.

Or you who don the paper plate  
itself, and put some grapes upon it,  
or sport the Indian's feather bonnet,  
--perversities may aggravate

the natural madness of the hatter.  
And if the opera hats collapse  
and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps,  
he thinks what might a miter matter?

Unfunny uncle, you who wore a  
hat too big, or one too many,  
tell us, can't you, are there any  
stars inside your black fedora?

Aunt exemplary and slim,  
with avernal eyes, we wonder  
what slow changes they see under  
their vast, shady, turned-down brim.

