

The Tyranny of Choice
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

In the fall and early winter of 1984, we lived in Israel where I had a semester fellowship at a theological institute. Our family lived in a small furnished apartment with cold stone floors. Our then very young three boys needed slippers. So off we went shopping, only to find there was really only one kind of slipper for sale in two colours—blue and red plaid, in sizes ranging from toddler to adult, with a zip-up top, and hard plastic soles; they were very sturdy, warm and functional. So sturdy and functional, that in the neighbourhood and across the city, we saw pensioners and kids alike walking about in their slippers as outdoor and well as indoor wear. This one kind of slipper was everywhere, ubiquitous; so much so, that when our kids watched *Rehov Sumsun*—Israel’s *Sesame Street* broadcast in Hebrew and Arabic—there they were on the feet of “Kippi”—the giant hedgehog character that substituted over there for Big Bird. You can see a picture of Kippi wearing his slippers in the order of service.

Now I know this was over thirty years ago, and we were poor grad students with miniscule purchasing power, but even then, we were used to a wide range of shopping choices in North America, including footwear. The strange thing is, there was something kind of moving about the fact that young and old, fictional TV character and human alike, Arabic and Hebrew speaking Israelis and Yanks, we were all shod in the same footwear as though participating in, being a part of a communal costume and story—as though, in spite of our differences, we were all in *this* together.

Do you remember the old bus shelters here in this town—solid wooden affairs, with good overhang and side protection from the rain, painted in thick brown lacquer—remember them? And how they’ve been replaced with poorly fitted glass ones that let in wind and rain, and how

each now prominently sports life-size illuminated advertizing posters usually with razor-thin, brooding kids modeling big name brand consumer goods? How it seems everywhere you look these days, horizontal and vertical surfaces, civic and private, are plastered over with advertized products pitched to ever increasingly narrow niche consumer markets; how customers, citizens and patients alike—do you notice how we’ve been rebranded as “consumers”?

In 1957, the average grocery store offered 3700 products for sale; it now offers on 48,750 items. Britain’s Tesco stores stock 91 different shampoos, 93 varieties of toothpaste and 115 household cleaners. Growing up, there were two brands of denim jeans: thick, dark blue ones in essentially one style? Now they come in scores of name brands, flared, bootlegged, low-rise, bleach-rinsed, dark-washed, distressed, pre-shredded, sequined and embroidered...

OK I’ll stop with this: When Toronto born Sheena Iyengar was a PhD student at Stanford University, she set up a table in a local supermarket offering samples of Wilkin & Sons jam. Research assistants taking part in this study alternated between offering samples of six and 24 flavours of jam. Every shopper who stopped at the table received a \$1 coupon. Not surprisingly, more people stopped at the table when it was laden with the 24 colourful, varied samples. However, sales of jam went the other way; that is, 30% of shoppers who sampled one of six jams ended up making a purchase, while only 3% of those presented with 24 options actually bought one of the jams. This jam study, and others like it, focusing on choice and decision making, has been replicated throughout North America and Europe and they’ve yielded essentially the same outcomes. Says Professor Iyengar, the study doesn’t say “go to the marketplace and throw out most of your choices.” However, she noted, these studies do “make it salient to people that there really is a cost of constantly adding more and more choices” and things.

In our very short life-times, we've crossed a threshold into a world of "omni-directional saturation advertizing" (George Scialabba) , quantum leaps into a sheer plethora of consumer goods and product choices, and a never-ending cacophony of pitches on air, screen, tablet and phone. There may be a beauty to it—compare the neon-lit colour sensoria of a night time street in Seoul or New York City with the stern, near monochrome cityscape of Moscow as I saw it in 1990; there's a beauty to it, perhaps, *and* the array of choice *and* the freedom to choose among all these things; but there is a burden as well—an indecisive, overwhelming seizing up of the mind and spirit accompanied by an existential funk when presented with a mind-numbing array of choice.

Classic marketing theory, and its omni-directional saturation advertizing sidekick, is based upon a basic assumption about human nature; that theory asserts each of us is a *detached, calculating, autonomous self*. That "self" makes rational decisions by "ranking all available options on a single, uni-dimensional scale of utility or desirability," and this applies to the decisions we make from hues of nail polish to jam, from pension plans to whether or not we have children. In this view, advertisements, no matter how seductively, emotionally packaged, are simply information, and the more information we have, the better—the freer—our choices. Or so this line of argument goes.

I heard a version of this marketing theory, it's called "rational choice," pitched by social scientists and economists in scholars' conferences back in the 80s and 90s to explain religious behaviour. Rational choice theory, with its assumption that we're all calculating, detached individuals, has become so deeply entrenched in business, marketing, public policy, health care, and the academy as to become something like our reigning consensual reality; our de facto ideology. It presumes to assert that we are consumers, not citizens; calculators, not feeling beings; individuals naked in our sovereign singularity, not members richly, complicatedly

enmeshed and enriched in affective relations with family, friends, colleagues, unions, and faith communities—all with histories, rituals, values, commitments, appetites, moral weaknesses and strengths.

But isn't it true?—we can't abstract away these things from ourselves when making judgments or choices, because, when taken together?—*they're us*. Just because some theory and its willing accomplices say the opposite doesn't make it true. Our *selves* don't exist apart from circumstances, accidents, constraints. We are situated beings: fully embodied in our world because we are intersected, interconnected sites—sites of time, stories, emotions, labour, skills, imagination and relations; we are situated, embodied beings—which means that there are limits to the scale and limits to rhythms within which we can flourish.

Within which we can flourish. What does it mean to *flourish*—or as the dictionary defines it: “to grow vigorously and thrive”? Isn't that what we'd hope life is all about—flourishing, thriving? Now, “*thrive*” is an interesting word, isn't it?—it goes back to Middle English and Icelandic roots and means “to clutch, grasp and grip.” So to thrive, to flourish, would mean to get a grip on one's life such that when we act, our world takes on a particular shape; we get a grip upon our measure of it, and in so doing, come to be in right relation of *fitting* to that portion of the world we have *grasped*; and in so doing—to the degree that we can grasp and thus fit—we create the possibility of flourishing.

But what if we're told that our appetites are unbounded, our potential for growth unlimited—which seems to be the message encoded in the unremitting, high octane stream of advertisements and the production of things that constantly assail us; but consider: how can the unbounded, the limitless be grasped? And if it can't be grasped, how on earth can we flourish

and thrive? “There really is”, as Sheena Iyengar stated, “a cost, [a burden] of constantly adding more and more choices,” more and more things....

....Today is the first day of Spring. This day tells us, if it tells us city people anything at all, that winter does not exercise unrivaled sovereignty over the earth. Rather, it exists in relation to and is bounded by the other seasons: Winter gives way to spring as part of the great circling cycle of life. Circles have circumferences, don't they? They have what old land surveyors called “metes and bounds”—that is, boundary lines of land, with terminal points, angles and curves. Circles enclose a determined boundary of space.

Now imagine picking a two dimensional circle off the page; give it three dimensions—and a circle becomes a globe. Increase its size, and we have a planet—our earth. Even something as large as a planet has only so much capacity—a maximum amount that can be contained or produced within it—only so much as can take place, that can be given, received and experienced. It has, what people call a “carrying capacity”—this and only so much; it has a limit; it has metes and bounds.

Now add what's theoretically presumed by classical economics to be unbounded and limitless—human appetites and growth—and we have a dark recipe for breaking down the carrying capacity of our world cycling through its seasons—it's a limit we are ominously trespassing—the very rhythmically cycling circle of the seasons. Due to a fantastic notion about human nature, an ideology of unbounded appetite and limitless notions of choice and growth, we are beginning to violate and disrupt the very carrying capacity of our planet (and thus global warming and climate change).

Add to the “metes and bounds” of a particular human being, the overabundant presumption that she is unbounded, that he has a right to limitless choice and products, informed

by as much seductive advertising as we can throw at him—and the result, is an overstepping of that person’s limits, her capacity to grasp—and thus, his capacity to flourish and thrive, to find a *fit* for herself within this, our world. I think this a huge reason for our restlessness, our homelessness, our keening inability to find a place within the world and the project we call a flourishing, thriving human life....

...Now think of mastering any demanding skill. We stand as before a block of marble and must needs take up hammer and chisel and thus begin to strike one blow after another. What was latent possibility is both revealed and reduced as we chip away; each blow eliminates other possibilities; the stone yields to a sustained, narrowing of focus and intensification of discipline and its outcome. Carpenter, teacher, accountant, caregiver, parent, sculptor—each of us, as beginners, submit to mentors, rules and traditions of a practice in order to acquire familiarity, mastery even, of a practice, a way of life, a profession in order to produce something of value, of beauty.

Here there is no room for absolutely unbounded appetite and restless, unlimited choice. And yet, from the very act of self-limitation, of obedience to the metes and bounds of a craft, a practice, there emerges a vision of possibilities and an increase in freedom of action within that field of creative labour.

Strange then, moving and true, I think, to be rooted in a community of those who preceded you—whether they be parents, masters of a craft, or a profession. Devoted to a discipline *they* embodied, learning from them, applying their knowledge and experience, makes one capable to carry it forward—not in slavish imitation—because each of us brings a unique self, a story and vision to the task, and thus a new viewpoint, a genuine individuality dedicated to achieving something new, something of beauty—whether it be a garden, the written word, a

healthy, resilient child, the building of a bridge, a musical instrument, the mastery within one's profession, a productive, creative presence in a religious community—we see and value this time and time again.

The productive, creative presence of a person, a people embedded in a religious community... Have you noticed how omni-directional saturation advertising, how appeals to an assumed deracinated, autonomous, sovereign human nature governed by limitless choice and appetites, have you noticed how it, and the market, how they don't appeal to ethical, spiritual, communal, and historical commitments and practice?

We're the obnoxious grit in the smooth, efficient, market machinery of limitless choice and unbounded appetite. Daring to mandate things like archaic notions of the limits of sabbath, of rest from one's labour and consumption; daring to presume to speak of how it may be a gift to be simple—to come down where we *ought* to be; we talk and practice liturgies that are about educating and limiting desires; we enjoin attention and cultivation, not of self above all and of presumed sovereign appetites to the exclusion of all else—rather, we stand in solidarity with commitments to children, families, relations, and of sustaining living skills, disciplines and traditions through time and space through the sticky, essential medium of history, practice and community.

We question, we oppose the tyranny of limitless choice and the corrosive presumptions of human nature subservient and prostrate before the unseen, imperious hand of the god of markets, advertizing and commerce; of any gods, for that matter. Not hapless, passive pieces on a chess board to be moved and manipulated at will, may we value the limiting, liberating gifts we acquire as part of our human endowment—gifts of family, relations, skills, story, and of our living religious tradition and community. And may it be so.