

CHOICES

LOURDES V. LAPUZ, M.D.

Medical City
Pasig City

What makes life today complicated and difficult as well as challenging and interesting is the opportunity to make choices. In ancient or tribal cultures, there was hardly any choice except with the very basic sets of right versus wrong; good versus evil; life or death. Life was much simpler then; decisions and choices were dictated by rigid guidelines. Civilization and the renaissance opened the minds of men to heretofore unexplored aspects of his existence. *Cogito ergo sum* pointed out the primacy of the use of one's mind. Since then the use of the mind has created the never-ending process of change. Choices bring about change usually in the name of progress. Individuals have chosen progress in their personal and environmental lives. The twentieth century, from the year it began to its closing in seven years, is a virtual turn-about from ancient times. Life is now a continuous series of events requiring changing previous choices and making new ones, reconciling modernity and tradition or facilitating degrees of breakaway from the latter.

Human beings living in contemporary times, to keep in step with life around them, need to respond to change around them, as well as the issues raised by change, whether these affect them directly or not. Chances are they will be. They are told also that if not them, then the generation coming after them will be. If they retreat to noninvolvement, they risk becoming irrelevant, deviants, eccentrics or psychologically impaired beings. By refusing to accommodate change, they risk unhealthy psychological consequences.

What does making choice entail? Some choices are easy, simple and effortlessly made. Others may require some reflection but can stand postponement for some time, involve little risk for a possible costly mistake or cause only minimal psychological pain. In short, they are not important and are not likely to cause any insomnia or mood aberration.

Choices which are the most difficult to make are those which put ourselves on the line, which endanger our self-esteem and appear to violate our sense of identity. They raise doubts as to who we are and what we believe in. Such choices resoundingly hit home, namely our inner selves, and assume the form of psychological conflict and personal pain.

Psychic economy demands that a choice be made, otherwise a toll is paid by the individuals' psychological well-being which they may ill afford. Conflict resulting in indecision or paralysis of action needs resolution; otherwise prolonging the state brings people nearer to impaired health. There is little to surpass the pain of a self divided, of inability to make a choice because one is pulled with equal force in opposite directions. Behavioral aberrations soon follow (For example, one of the cardinal symptoms of schizophrenia, a malignant disorder, is precisely such a state; individuals allow such opposite forces to co-exist by removing their emotional components).

Forced to make a choice, individuals with their own unique repertoire of coping behavior, summon the proper rationalization to accompany their choice and their subsequent behavior. Healthy rationalization guards one's sanity, premised on the assumption that one is well aware of the conflict, has considered alternative resolutions and has made the choice. The reason may not be the reason, but nonetheless, a good enough reason (e.g., a man resigns from his job for reasons of personal health, etc.). Painful though the choice might be, it is one the person can live with; his self-respect and self-esteem are intact. Any psychological damage is repairable. He remains whole.

What portends psychological disaster is when individuals, to minimize the pain and expedite relief, deceive themselves and go on as if no conflict exists. Not only do they employ denial and self-deception, but they also unwittingly sacrifice, by avoiding self-confrontation, their psychological integrity, or their wholeness.

By pushing the conflict out of awareness, they hide, as it were, a loaded gun in the bottom drawer. They flee from painful consideration of alternatives. They choose to bury their heads in the sand. Denial does not get rid of the pain; they still pay the price of going around it. They curtail their freedom of choice, become inflexible and stiffen up, as those who have perceived a grave threat, and posture to shield themselves from battle. They control any damage to their ego by becoming even more rigid than they already are. The more they bristle, the more brittle they become. Aspects of their lives, which may have been pleasurable or humanizing, are sacrificed lest these make them more vulnerable. They move about tense and guarded, narrow down their relationships, are extra-careful not to arouse any hostility within themselves or without. They are overly sensitive and they increase their guard about any possible doubt that they are reacting in the right way. They have in a sense reduced themselves to robots.

Such persons who deny conflict, who try to get away from dealing with painful choices, become dysfunctional as persons. Within their relationships, they continue to deny feelings and guard against confrontation.

How about compromise? It is a key word these days whenever choices are complicated or difficult. "Life is nothing but a series of trade-offs," as one woman in her 50s opined, to explain her being spouseless and childless. The problem with compromise is that it is seldom fully acceptable; it is a cover-up or worse, a sell-out. Some regret lingers or some lowering of one's self-respect occurs, with

self-recriminations. It is comparable to a draw, shaking hands with your adversary after a bloody fight. You keep remembering how you could have fought more effectively, how victory could have been more decisive. And the pain recurs, even more so when your adversary is yourself.

How do private and personal choices participate in social and national change? Asia, it is now conceded, is critically different from the West (U.S., Britain) because it places importance of the society over the individual, with the one recognized exception of the Philippines. Asian leaders have at one time or another pointed to the lack of progress in the Philippines, its cellar position among Asian nations as traceable to its adoption of western democracy with its emphasis on individuals grafted upon an Asian nature which is group-oriented.

The result is one of indecision, confusion and resorting to improvisation as a solution to crisis situations. The individuals compete with society for their own ends. The choices are made at the individual level and do not find their way upwards toward the policymakers. Conversely, ideals and values at the leadership level hardly have relevance at the level of the individual. Media are on the side of the individual; they go by ratings or number of satisfied customers.

The critical choice to be made by individuals is whether or not they will whittle down or shelve aside individual illusions and concentrate on the common good. The forces which are anti-social are well organized: organized crime, organized dissent against the establishment, organized corruption. The forces battling them need to be even better organized to gain any success. The battlefield continues to be the individual psyche.

The choices of the individuals do not emerge as such in resultant group or social activity. As we know, a mob, a group, a community, a nation, each attains a dynamic of its own. Individuals may start out with a noble motive; the mob may turn this into savage revenge. People may feel guilt initially, and in contrition seek to help redress wrongs, only to end up punishing and controlling others. Invested with patriotism, people may end up with less lofty motives. Such is the complex and contradictory nature of human emotion and behavior.

It is no surprise that the person taking a stand on any issue can no longer be guided by true-blue ideals. Reality has to be plugged into the equation. And the standard reply to the question of "Which side are you on?" is the catch-all "It all depends." From this point on, the criteria get blurred. Depends on what? To assess potential leaders, what do we look for? If they smoked marijuana in high school? That they garnered more votes in the elections than their accusers? That the people being judged are speaking against revered tradition? The logic becomes tortuous, truth becomes elusive and may even be the first casualty.

Individuals, in self-examination, return to their conscience and ultimately to their "gut" feelings. "To thine own self be true" is still a valid axiom for mental health. Otherwise, they may find themselves in a corner, burnt-out or alienated, feeling betrayed or at the very least, confused.

If the signals sent by society are confusing, what must this mean to the very young adults waiting in the wings? They will soon be making the choices of their lives. On many issues pressing on their minds, the jury is still out and cannot help them make a decision. They do not have the luxury of time.

At this point, people look to their leaders for help in clarifying the choices. How the leadership is perceived may leave people still confused, indifferent or at least may set them thinking. No matter how convincing or credible leadership is, the individuals may still deviate from the side leadership is on. For example, is the condom campaign successful? Violence still reigns in media.

Which brings us full circle back to the individuals and their own psyche. To make a rational choice with full understanding of what it means, to exercise autonomy over themselves in making such a choice, to be unwavering in their conviction that no matter how lonely their voices are in the crowd, they can still make a difference as human beings. Such is the mandate for each of us.

SYMPOSIUM VII

Symposium Title :	Choices
Moderator :	Academician Solita F. Camara-Besa
Rapporteur :	Academician Lourdes J. Cruz
Speaker :	Dr. Lourdes Vera-Lapuz

SUMMARY

The Filipino is unique among Asians in not placing the importance of society over the individual. The lack of progress in the country may be traceable to its adoption of western democracy with its emphasis on individuals, grafted upon the group-oriented Asian nature. The conflict between the individual good and the social common good leads to compromise, which oftentimes is not satisfactory. The individual in making a choice must return to his conscience and be true to himself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The individual must: 1) make a rational choice with full understanding of the alternatives; 2) exercise his autonomy over his own self in making such a choice; 3) be unwavering in his conviction that no matter how lonely his voice is in the crowd, he can still make a difference as a human being.

