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JOYFUL MUSINGS

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Choose Your Own Adventures

My son's favorite books when he was young were those in a series called "Choose Your Own Adventure." These action-packed stories gave the reader numerous opportunities to decide what happens next. You start reading, and at the end of a passage you are given a choice of what you would like to happen next in the story. You would then turn to a specific page depending upon what you had chosen. There were countless possibilities, and you could read the book over and over again creating a different adventure each time. If you chose a particular option and didn't like the way it worked out, you could go back to the previous crossroad and choose the other path.

Ah, if only real life worked like that! Now that I look back at it, maybe running away from home at 16 wasn't such a great plan. Wouldn't it be great to go back and choose "If you want to seek out a wise mentor who can listen without judgment and find a way to get along with your difficult family, turn to page 32." Or perhaps instead of marrying that incredible someone after a whirlwind two-month romance, you could go back and choose "If you want to break up with this loser and go to dinner with a group of friends to celebrate, turn to page 76." We can never know if that road not taken would have resulted in any better outcome, but wouldn't it be nice to have the chance to find out?

But the unfortunate truth is that life just doesn't let you do that. There's rarely a chance to go back for a "do-over." Like your virginity, it's a one-shot deal for most decisions. Some people seem to be blessed with an uncanny knack for thinking things through and making good decisions. They look at an option from all its many possibilities and see all the potential outcomes, and they make a choice based not just on what felt right at the time, but what was a sound long-term decision. Or maybe they were just lucky. Who really knows?

Over the years I've come to realize it's not so much taking the time to foresee all the ramifications of a decision as much as the recognition that with every choice we make, there is a corresponding choice to let something go. Letting go often means saying goodbye to options and alternatives that will no longer be available once we have made our choice. The letting go can be the hardest part.

A friend recently reminded me of Joni Mitchell's similar lament: "Something's lost but something's gained in living every day."

In our youth, all things seem possible, time appears limitless, and we feel invincible. We really only notice what we are choosing and take very little notice of what we are letting go. After all, there's always tomorrow. The real wisdom is in recognizing the difference between an either-or decision and a now-or-later one. Over the years, most of us come to realize there just isn't that much time.

Don't let yourself become frozen by not making any choices. A lifetime spent sitting on the fence is not rewarding either. Reality makes it impossible to have or do all things; we have to select what we want and move always forward, never back. Make your choices wisely and with deliberation. Remember: most of them are for keeps.

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