

# There Is No Right Decision

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I sometimes get bogged down on major purchases, for months even. If I don't find a printer or pair of runners that feels like the *right* one (for me at least) I usually retreat to go gather more information.

I look up more reviews. I ask the advice of friends who seem less tormented by the prospect of shoe or printer shopping. Mostly I just let time pass.

A couple of years ago, after a month of needing but not buying a printer, I tweeted something like, "So I'm looking to buy a printer, but don't know where to start... any advice?"

Moments later, my good friend Nate responded, with something like, "Here's how to buy a printer: you go to the store and get a printer."

I did that, and I have to admit his strategy worked at least as well as my usual three months of contemplation. I chose one of the printers they had. It prints.

So I did end up getting the right printer, but at the time I felt like I just got lucky. I didn't *know* it was the right choice, I just went ahead with something. It was a measured risk that happened to work out.

Much of the stress and difficulty of life comes down to making decisions, big and small, and they never stop coming. What's the right call? Fix the old car or spring for a new one? Stay with your job or quit and go freelance? Cut your hair short or rearrange what you've got? And how confident do you need to be before choosing?

It sure feels good to get it right. We've all had the sense that we picked the right hotel room, or the right career path, or the right movie for this particular date.

We also know the unmistakable feeling that the wrong choice has been made: law school was a mistake; the "hip and cozy" Airbnb turned out to be a closet overlooking a perpetual traffic jam; the Seahawks passed when they should have run.

Whether a decision was the right one or not, life goes on. If it was the right one, great. If it was the wrong one, at least you learned a few more red flags.

Recently I was exposed to a brilliant idea: there are no right decisions.

There's no right call, and there never has been. All the time we've burned and heartache we've suffered trying to figure out the right response, the right outfit, the right bathroom tile, the right movie—it was all a wild goose chase.

We do make choices, and they do have consequences. But the idea that there's a "correct" one is only ever a story we tell ourselves.

Choices can be well reasoned or poorly reasoned. Their results can be surprisingly beneficial or surprisingly damaging. But there's no such thing as a categorically *right* course of action, just an array of possible ones—and for each, a sprawling, endless web of consequences.

Let's say you choose what you believe is the right name for your new product. On a different day, in a different mood, you could have chosen a different name, also believing it was the right one. Whichever name you chose, perhaps eighteen months later, when you're struggling with sales, you might decide that your choice was actually the *wrong* one. A year after that, when you've sorted out that problem, you believe again that your choice of name was the right one—you just chose the wrong advertising company.

It's only ever a story. There may be generally better and generally worse choices, but there's no right choice.

Yet we still approach many of our dilemmas as though there is, somewhere out there, a right course of action, and we desperately need to identify it. Perhaps we'll only find out what it is the hard way, but the right choice will reveal itself one way or another.

But it never really does. Even after the fact, when we're living with the consequences, we don't know what the right choice was. All we know is whether we like where we are or don't like where we are.

Of course, you can attribute where you are to virtually *any* of the decisions you've ever made—choosing product name A over B, dumping your high school sweetheart, moving to the coast,

hanging with potheads instead of preppies, not getting up early enough these last few years. Which ones were right or wrong exactly? It's a meaningless pronouncement, except perhaps to use later as rhetoric, in blaming ourselves or someone else.

This might seem like a semantic distinction. Okay, there's no "right" choice, but obviously there are still better and worse ones.

But it matters. There's a big difference between trying to make wise, well-informed choices, and trying to make the *right* choices.

Firstly, it means that gathering more information will never reveal the right choice. More information *might* be helpful, but there's no such thing as enough—at some point, a leap is required, and afterward, you still won't know what was best. I could have researched printers for a decade. If I got a dud, I still would have thought of it as the "wrong" choice.

Secondly, the idea of a right choice implies that the consequences of our choices are somehow cleanly connected, and isolated from everything else. You choose option A, and get consequence X.

But choices and consequences aren't paired off one-to-one, like doors in a game show bonus round, each hiding either a prize or a punishment. Every action sets off endlessly rippling consequences, a cascade of effects that are often *both* beneficial and detrimental, both short-term and long-term, both intended and unintended, both known and unknown.

Your choice to work from home leads to freed-up commuting time (decidedly good), more family time (good), but also more tension with your partner (bad), and a harder time getting enough exercise (bad) and who knows what else. Each of these effects influences other parts of your life, in ways seen and unseen, forever.

Yet we tend to think we can look at a single dilemma in isolation, identify the right response, and execute it, as though we're lining up a shot on a billiard table.

Giving up on the idea of right decisions doesn't mean giving up on using our best judgment. But it's a tremendous relief to recognize that getting it *right*, in any meaningful sense, is an impossible goal.

Here's how I think it really works: You'll make a million decisions, and each will shape your life and other people's lives in ways you'll barely know. You will have surprising successes and surprising failures. You'll give yourself too much credit for both. Then you'll die.

Much more important than any decision, or its consequences, is the motivation behind the *sorts* of decisions you *tend* to make. Principles, applied over the years, have consistent, traceable trajectories.

You may or may not make your choices with good intentions. You may or may not learn from your choices. You may or may not get lucky. But you will never get things *right*. So let yourself off the hook.

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