

## Chapter 01

### **Let's Celebrate Choices**

**C is for choices—determinates of our destiny.**

BY ALLAN R. HANDYSIDES

Some 100 years ago two team leaders adopted the same goal: they both sought to be the first to lead an expedition to the South Pole.

Once made, the decision presented them with countless choices: selecting the clothing to wear, the food to eat, and, most important, the mode of transport to use.

Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer, gleaned from Inuit methodology the best type of equipment and clothing to use. He chose dogs to pull the sleds. He placed his supplies and foodstuffs strategically along the early part of the proposed route before the main expedition set off, thereby lessening the loads his dogs would have to pull. He carefully considered every detail, and from his informed base he made decisions as to how to proceed.

Robert Falcon Scott, however, a British naval officer, chose to use ponies and “modern” motorized sledges. He was a brave and daring man, but apparently did not pay the same attention to Inuit methodology as did Amundsen. His motorized sleds ceased functioning after a few days, and the poor ponies could not stand the frigid conditions. By the time he and his team reached the Transantarctic Mountains, the ponies were in such poor condition they had to be killed. Scott arrived at the South Pole to find that Amundsen had beaten him to the goal.

The outcome for one team was triumph; for the other, death and disaster. The diaries of Scott's heroic team chronicled a story of frostbite, starvation, and eventual death on the return journey from the pole.

Decisions by Amundsen and Scott represented choices. Some were made very consciously and intentionally; others were possibly influenced by emotion, personality, culture, or whim. Brave and courageous though Scott and his men were, they suffered the consequences of their choices and decisions, perhaps made in ignorance, but nevertheless lethal in outcome.<sup>1</sup>

### **Choices—the Cradle of Destiny**

Choices often determine our destiny. To a large extent even our health can be determined by the choices we make on how we live, the risks we take, and the balance we seek in life. We each come into the world with an endowment for health that may vary from that of others, but how we care for the gift of our health influences the expression of our genetic capacities.

The intricacies of handmade Asian rugs are remarkable and often represent hundreds of thousands and sometimes even millions of individual choices. For those rugs 800 hand-tied knots per square inch, the maker has to select a colored thread to create the pattern 800 times. In the overall pattern, the subtle variety in the shapes making up the whole speaks to the individuality of each knot.

Our lives are patterned in a similar way. Every day we make countless seemingly insignificant decisions, the sum of which determines the overall fabric of our lives.

## **Intentionality Is Key**

Intentionality in decision-making brings direction and order to our lives. Successful people generally set goals and objectives; highly successful individuals make evidence-based decisions that move them deliberately toward those goals.

Unfortunately, some decisions made in youth—as a result of ignorance, rebellion, or stubbornness—can have lifelong repercussions. Similarly, poor parenting practices can encumber children with a lifetime of consequences. In many cases the current epidemic of obesity in children in the Western world reflects parental resignation to allowing too much electronic entertainment at the expense of physical activity. Fast and convenient foods replace simple, unrefined, natural foods. The immediate gratification of fast, oily, and high-calorie foods pleases both parents and children, but the consequences of such choices may last a lifetime. Once formed, fat cells persist for years, awaiting excess calories to be stored as fat. Chubby children are obese adults-in-waiting. The fat baby carries a legacy for life that perhaps reflects the parental inability or unwillingness to control caloric intake. Conscious intentionality is an important part of making such choices.

## **Choice and Freedom**

Choice and freedom are closely linked. Many correctional services seek to discipline by limiting available choices. In most societies even the greatest of freedoms permits only the choices that do not negatively impact others, because freedom to choose does not permit the freedom to harm others and escape consequences.

We have “free will” to choose, provided previous choices have not enslaved or—as it were—imprisoned us. Choices, however, are not always easy to make, yet avoidance of

choice is still a choice that also will carry consequences. These choices cover every aspect of life, from health and lifestyle issues to those involving integrity, spirituality, and relationships.

### **Basis for Informed Choices**

It's tempting to make choices based on personal bias rather than on evidence and high-quality studies. We need to recognize that there are differences in the quality, consistency, numbers, importance, and generalizability of studies. Such awareness can temper our rigidity, help us to weigh the evidence, and ultimately influence our choices.

In 2010 the Dietary Guideline Advisory Committee of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services recommended that studies be classified by the body of evidence supporting their conclusions. They designated as *strong* those studies in which the quality, consistency, numbers, importance, and generalizability were of the highest order; *moderate* where such factors were less conclusive, and *limited* for those of weak design. Such choices and practices based on this type of information are called "evidence-based."

Living in conformity with cultural traditions of forebears often has gone on for centuries, with the reasons for certain behaviors and beliefs hidden in the mists of time. Many practices have absolutely no basis in fact. It's not difficult to debunk the benefits of practices such as applying cattle dung to a newborn's umbilicus, but possibly harder to argue convincingly with a cultural belief that a woman should not bathe for a month after giving birth.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, “health reformers” developed a litany of health laws based on scant evidence. Fortunately, today a wealth of evidence can guide us in making choices. Principles of balance and moderation, with the avoidance of harmful substances, will pay dividends in the health of temperate and informed people.

One of the early classic studies on lifestyle and health was published in 1972. Drs. Nedra Belloc and Lester Breslow, from the U. S. Department of Public Health in Berkeley, California, were among the first researchers to present convincing answers on lifestyle habits that promote longevity. In their study of 6,928 adult residents of Alameda County, California, they found that some lifestyle habits influenced longevity:<sup>2</sup>

1. Adequate sleep (7 to 8 hours per night)
2. No eating between meals
3. A nutritious daily breakfast
4. The maintenance of the recommended weight for one’s height, bone structure, and age (BMI, or Body Mass Index)
5. Regular physical activity
6. The nonuse of tobacco
7. A reduction in the use of alcoholic beverages (the GC Health Department advocates abstinence)

In a nine-year follow-up they showed that the more of these seven habits a person regularly followed, the greater their chance of longevity. Of the group following all seven habits, only 5.5 percent of men and 5.3 percent of women died before the end of the nine-year period; whereas in the group that followed only three of the seven habits, 20 percent of the men and 12.3 percent of the women died.<sup>3</sup>

Even when clearly intentional, freely made, and informed, choices and decisions are not always easy to make, particularly when trying to maintain objectivity. So keep in mind the following:

1. Get the facts and weigh them on the scale of common sense.
2. When possible, don't make choices in the midst of highly stressful situations, when it's more difficult to think clearly.
3. Watch out for the distortion your emotional state can bring to decision-making. Anger, depression, and elation can influence decisions.
4. Don't assume things. Just because sugar tastes good, it doesn't mean it's good for you. Similarly, something that tastes bad isn't necessarily improving your health.
5. Beware of wishful thinking. Don't overlook that lump because you wish it would go away. Don't think you can walk a mile to get rid of the calories in a piece of coconut cream pie.
6. Be careful where you get your health advice. Quackery is still thriving in a multitude of guises.
7. Trust in intelligence; choose the smart over the unwise, the good over the bad. Also beware of the dead-end path that takes you nowhere.
8. Choose to do what you can do, not what you want to do. Our wants are often beyond us, and they are so many.

## **A Gift From God**

Adventists see good health as a gift from our Creator God. The proper “preventive maintenance” reduces risk and leads to a happier, healthier, and longer life. No one lives forever, though, and even the best maintenance cannot guarantee a disease-free life.

Recent scientific studies also indicate the importance of spirituality to mental health. With anxiety disorders being the most prevalent of the emotional disorders, spiritual exercises such as Bible reading and meditation on the life of Christ can bring great peace—one of the ingredients of mental health.

For some, the quality of life is more important than its duration. I have known chronically ill people who are happy and content, because they intentionally have chosen to make the best of their situation. Similarly, many who are perfectly healthy physically may nurture a negative mind-set that destroys their equanimity. People *choose* their “attitude,” and this affects the way they relate to triumphs or disasters—and many situations in between.

One area of choice, of course, is what we believe. Science does not illuminate all aspects of life, and so people live in or by a system of beliefs. Some call this “faith.” Many—including me, as the writer—have chosen to believe in God as our Creator and heavenly Father, even though we cannot see or touch Him. Having chosen to believe, a huge amount of supportive “evidence” may be amassed to support this belief. At its core, however, it’s a choice—the most important choice any person can make, because it’s only by developing and maintaining a close walk with our Lord that we will truly obtain optimal whole health and know the joy of living well, both here and throughout eternity.

## Life Application Questions:

### Chapter 1 Choices

1. What choices am I making, consciously or unconsciously, that are not based on evidence? How do these choices affect my use of time; my health; my relationships at work, at home, or with God? What are my reasons for making these choices? In what ways are they influenced by my culture or my emotions? Is it because I wish to please myself? Or am I being careless? Do I accept as evidence anything and everything I read on the Internet? Does just one anecdote convince me of the right thing to do?
2. What negative choices have other people made that influenced the trajectory of my life? How have I reacted to those circumstances? What freedoms do I enjoy that allow me to choose to change the direction in which I am heading? How can I choose to improve my attitude even under less-than-ideal circumstances?
3. How many of the seven habits that influence longevity am I practicing regularly? Am I getting sufficient sleep, exercising regularly, avoiding tobacco and alcohol, eating a good breakfast and nothing in between meals? Is my Body Mass Index (BMI) within recommended limits? (See [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi) for a handy calculator.) Which ones will I choose to introduce into my lifestyle today? Could I improve on any of the seven?
4. Chris went out to a business dinner after a long day at work. Before leaving he was accused of something he had not done. He later tells a friend that after a few drinks he relaxed and decided to resign his job, move to a different city, and look for work there. What influenced his hasty decision? What did he forget to do? How would I have acted in a similar situation?
5. Remembering the most recent poor choices I've made and considering the pressures I was under at the time, do I feel that I was stressed, angry, or depressed? Did I make the decision late at night or after a heavy meal or a long day of work? How can I remind myself to avoid making choices when in those type of emotional states? Did I remember to ask for divine guidance? What time of day suits me best for decision-making? What can I do when confronted with a small choice that will help me to make a wise decision? What things would help me when making a big decision?



6. What choices do I have to make regarding my relationship with my Creator, who graciously gives me the freedom to choose? How can I increase my awareness of His love and His interest in my choices? Do I need to spend more time learning about Him in His Word or in nature? Do I have to cultivate my conversation with Him in prayer? How can I continue to build supportive evidence for my faith?

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth—Scott and Amundsen's Race to the South Pole* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999).

<sup>2</sup> N.B. Belloc, L. Breslow, "Relationship of physical health status and health practices," *Preventive Medicine*, August 1972, 1 (3):409-421.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*