

CHOICES AND DECISIONS

("What have I given up?")



When you view your life as a journey, you may begin to recognize that there are certain paths presented to you, certain choices available each step of the way. We often make what we feel are the best choices available in a given situation and each choice leaves another choice behind that was not taken. It is as if we are faced with many different intersections in the "road" of life where we stop for a moment, consider the various possibilities down each road and then proceed a particular way. Sometimes our choices are made for us when we have been dependent on another such as in childhood. Other times we make choices because of the sign posts that identify a particular destination. Still other times we make blind choices and take our chances exploring for ourselves where a particular path leads us; or we might make a choice on an intuition or feeling. Whatever path we take at an intersection leaves other paths untaken and it may serve us now to consider some of these paths as unfulfilled possibilities in our lives. In this exercise, you will be reflecting on some of these intersections and considering the various possibilities of paths that were untaken.

There are two ways to consider choices and "paths" we take in life. The first way is based on the actual decisions and actions we choose that lead in a particular direction. A decision to enter a marriage, a decision to enter a career or job or a decision to make a certain financial investment or even a decision to follow a particular "spiritual path" are all examples of "actions" that we take that lead in a particular direction. These are major decisions that typically have a long-term impact on our life. Having made a choice to travel down a particular path has often left other possibilities behind.

Another way of considering the meaning of "paths" we take in life is the decisions that we make about *ourselves*. How we view ourselves, what we tell ourselves, how we feel about ourselves are all decisions that we make, and thereby influence some of our larger life decisions. We often make these kinds of decisions based on certain life experiences that were handed to us. These decisions are typically the ones that we make in early childhood that grew out of our experiences in our family. It is these kinds of decisions that influence our *major* life decisions, the kind of job we take, the person we marry, the quality of our relationships, how much money we make, how successful we are, and so on.

Let's go back to the example of speaking in front of a class for the first time. Let's say I stand up and start speaking and I am laughed at, ridiculed or criticized. As a child, would I ever do that again? Depending on my unique situation and personality I might make the decision that I would *never* do that again. Further, I might tell myself that I am foolish, I am bad and I am worthy of others ridicule. If I haven't worked through these feelings, this simple decision will influence how I feel about myself, which in turn may be a factor that determines a larger life path that I may *never* make—to be a public speaker. Maybe I will choose paths that are "safer" where I don't risk this ever happening to me again. There are many forces that

determine and influence the ultimate decisions that we make about ourselves. If my family atmosphere encouraged me to talk about it or encouraged me to "try again" perhaps I might make another go at it. Or maybe my personality is such that these negative experiences are more of a challenge to me rather than a failure and so I will use this event as a "learning experience." Regardless, depending on how I deal with this experience and the support I have in my life to work it through, will determine later decisions that I make.

It is important to realize that certain decisions I might make about myself are really not "in the past"; they are *on-going* decisions that I affirm to myself over and over *in the present*. When I can realize that my "past decisions" are really current decisions, then I can always choose or decide "once again". And as I decide once again how I feel about myself, this may open up new possibilities for larger life decisions. For example, if I "re-decide" that I am not worthy of others criticism, that I am not a failure or even that it is "OK" to fail or be foolish perhaps this may open up the path to being a public speaker. This is an intersection that I could "revisit" once again and take new steps in that direction. This could represent a potential in me that was never fully realized.

One of the major feelings that are associated with some of our decisions is the emotion of *regret*. We regret certain decisions that we *made* or *didn't make*. Other emotions that may also be associated with our choices are guilt, shame, disappointment, hopelessness and helplessness to name a few. Holding on to these feelings can be paralyzing to our life and so it will be helpful to identify these emotions when we reflect back. This will open up the possibility of releasing these feelings leading to new possibilities for action.

In this exercise you can use the results of the LIFE PATH or THE RELATIONSHIP PATH as you reflect back on any period of your life where you made a major decision and then consider some of the *other* decisions or paths that you "gave up" or didn't take at the time. You will also reflect on how you felt about yourself at the time and see if your self-image (what you decided about yourself) had anything to do with your life decision. Then you will consider some of the emotions that you felt at the time and whether this is an emotion that you continue to hold onto up to this present day.

Take a moment now to review the PATH exercises and choose a period or periods that represent a major intersection of your life.

Now, allow your eyes to close and place yourself back into this period of your life and reflect on the decision or decisions that you made at the time. What path did you choose ... and what paths did you *not* choose, or give up on, in some way?...Did the path or paths you did not choose appear to be important to you in some way?... Did you need to explore this path to find out what was beyond?... What was the condition at the time that contributed to you taking the path you chose?... And how did you feel about yourself at the time?...When you feel ready, allow your eyes to open and begin writing about this particular time in your life...

Some useful questions to ask yourself are:

- What was the major decision or decisions I made during this time period?
- What choices did I have to give up as a result of this decision?
- How did I see myself during this time? How did I feel about myself? What was my “inner conversation” at the time that influenced the choice that I made? How do I feel *now* about the decision that I made?
- When I reflect on the decisions that I *didn't make*, what emotions can I identify?
- What lessons did I learn from the choices that I *did* make? How did I grow from the choices I made.