

Analysis Paralysis

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? . . .*

*Hamlet
Act III, Scene 1*

Let me take you to April 1984 for a moment - Robin Williams as Vladimir in Moscow on the Hudson. He has just defected from the USSR where everything was scarce and every day there began with waiting in line to see what might be available, waiting in another line to pay for it and then waiting in another distribution line to get it, maybe. Now in New York City, Vladimir is trying to get a ration of coffee. He makes it to the grocery store. He even makes it to the coffee aisle. It is within reach . . . no lines, no officials, no tokens; nothing to stop him, but . . . he can't decide which one, and he falls to the floor mumbling COFFEE, Coffee, coffee.

Indecision is funny when it happens to Vladimir; it is tragic when it happens to Hamlet; and it is an everyday struggle for most people – save for retirement or private school for the kids – accept the transfer or look for a new job – should dad live with us or go to a nursing home – what if I fail – what if it is too late? These answers don't come easily. However, even comparatively simple decisions can be overwhelming.

By definition, analysis is a critical evaluation. It involves breaking the problem down into parts and then describing how the parts relate to the whole. Analysis is good. However, sometimes the cost of continuing to consider all the things that might happen far exceeds any value added. It becomes a burden rather than providing an advantage.

Barry Schwartz, puts it nicely in his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, when he says: "The presumption is, self-determination is a good thing and choice is essential to self-determination . . . but there's a point where all of this choice starts to be not only unproductive, but counterproductive - a source of pain, regret, [and] worry about missed opportunities." His advice is: Choose when to choose; be satisfied with good enough and do something else with your free time, like building close relationships; give generously of yourself to others, and doing meaningful work.

In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell writes: "the task of making sense of ourselves and our behavior requires that we acknowledge there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis." He says that each of us has the ability to find patterns in situations and behaviors based on very narrow slices of experience. Also, that people can learn to "thin slice" a situation by calling on their adaptive unconscious as opposed to consciously considering all available information.

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Another example is “fast and frugal decision-making”. The techniques are a kind of heuristics. Professor Gerd Gigerenzer researches how people learn to live with uncertainty and writes about shortcuts we use to make judgments and solve problems. He takes issue with those who say that ignoring information is irrational and says that “[t]he art is knowing what one doesn’t have to know.” An example he uses is the ‘buy the best ignore the rest’ heuristic that people use to find a quality product, as opposed to fully researching and objectively evaluating each available model, they buy the best.

Heuristic is a funny looking word that shares the same Greek root verb as heureka, which means “to find”. It may be more familiar to us as the interjection, Eureka! We associate it with discovery. As a mediator, my job is to help others, using both intuition and analysis, to discover for themselves the answer to the question: “Should I settle, or risk it?”

The process is simple; the devil is of course in the details:

- First, everyone has to understand the problem.
- Second, everyone has to make a plan.
- Third, everyone has to carry out the plan.
- Finally, everyone has to reflect on the possible solutions found and accept that one of them, although not perfect, is good enough.

Eureka! We’ve discovered resolution.

Think of it as the difference between navigating with a map or a compass. A compass gives you a general sense of direction as you make your own way; a map lays out the known world in great detail so that you can follow a path laid out by others. Whether you need a map or a compass depends upon the circumstances in which you find yourself; sometimes you need both; sometimes neither will help you.

As an example, consider Albert Szent-Györgyi, a WWI field medic who lived to tell the story of a unit of Hungarian soldiers lost in a blizzard in the Swiss Alps. Their Commander feared the worst, but on the third day, the unit made it back to camp on their own. The soldiers told how they had given up and accepted their fate, but then one of them found a map and was able to lead everyone safely out of the mountains. The Commander was amazed and asked to see the soldier. He was even more amazed when he looked at the map because it was a map of the French Pyrenees, not the Swiss Alps.

The stories of Vladimir, the soldier and, although some would disagree, Hamlet are in the end, tales of hope. Hamlet is an ordinary man, certainly flawed, but also genuine and thoughtful. He has the courage to not look away from the Evil in his world; yet has the strength to not give in to it and to not become indifferent to it. He is a hero. These days, we are reminded that joy and sorrow are part of this world in equal measure. This too is a message of hope: Life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death.

Please make your selection now.