

Decisions, decisions: Choices can be tough

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By Eve Glicksman

So, do I take the charming, rundown apartment with a great deck and closet space, or the smaller, nondescript place closer to everything, with dishwasher and air conditioning?

Ten years ago, I would have selected the former with nary a care about the rug stains. Today, a bit more world-worn, I've learned that a poorly maintained hallway can mean an unresponsive landlord, and that convenience is sometimes worth paying for.

My search for the consummate suburban nest after 13 years of city life begins to assume the proportions of a grand epiphany. Something about there being no easy choices in life

Ending a job or a marriage sometimes can be easier than picking the right apartment.

and taking responsibility for one's actions. Moreover, can I live with my mother pointing out all the shortcomings of whatever apartment I choose for the next five years?

Playwright Wendy Wasserstein has said the essence of any drama is personal choices. Or perhaps it is merely the lot of a writer to make things more complicated than they are, seeing more shades of gray than Crayola invented.

I once read, for instance, that creative people may not score well on standardized multiple choice tests because they see possibilities in all of the answers. I guess this is like my having to look at the apartment without the washer and dryer, even though I want one "with."

And while I wallow in the implications of neighborhood demographics and how much "utilities included" is worth, my car gets broken into. This is a reminder that: 1) a decision to flee urban woes requires prompt follow-through for best results, and 2) it's only an apartment, stupid.

Part of the difficulty in making decisions is the reluctance to let go of a dream, an ideal. For every choice, there is a trade-off. The sporty car vs. the more durable. The stock that's stable, or the one with huge growth potential. The show-stopper dress, or the more practical one. As Robert Frost once quipped, "I'm not confused, I'm just well-mixed."

Further, our options have multiplied. We've been lured into thinking there's something better around the corner — that perfection is ours for the having. We think little these days of shucking a job or marriage, or re-contouring our body. But we discover belatedly that choices give us merely the illusion of control. The alternatives are invariably fraught with flaws, too.

Some choices, of course, have more consequences than others. One can only imagine the pressure the O.J. Simpson jurors must feel to render the right verdict, much less one that will be accepted by the public. Making an informed medical decision is often cloudy and complicated, not to mention the split-second, lives-on-the-line judgments required of air traffic controllers.

Some, like actor Hugh Grant, confess to knowing and choosing "the bad thing." Other choices are true gambles: Do you go for the low premium, high deductible on your car or health insurance, or glumly assume the worst?

The distressing part is that being more knowledgeable can actually make decisions harder. Ask Waffler-in-Chief Bill Clinton. Or short of foreign policy quandaries, try sorting through the minutiae of Consumer Reports when buying a cordless phone or breakfast cereal — a case where the more you know, the less you want it.

Some make decisions by not making one. I had a boyfriend — an engineer if this explains it — who used a complex point system to determine whether we should marry (some factors were of higher point value than others). The man remained in limbo for 2½ years, blaming it on "not enough information" ... until I made the choice and moved on.

Despite the anxiety of it all, I'm decidedly pro-choice. When the choices don't matter anymore, life has lost its zing. If we make a bad decision, we can usually pick up the pieces and amble on a little wiser. Or as a friend struggling with an inner conflict once consoled herself, "How can you lose when you're fighting on both sides?"

What's interesting is that children today are being encouraged to make more decisions than when I was a kid. A good thing too perhaps, if picking out your own clothes at age 5 will make it easier to choose an apartment a few decades later.

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