

Living Ethically Daily: Choices That Make a Difference

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We Make the Road by Walking

You walking, your footprints are

The road, and nothing else;

There is no road, walker,

You make the road by walking.

By walking you make the road,

And when you look backward,

You see the path that you

Never will step again.

Walker, there is no road,

Only windtrails in the sea.

Antonio Machado, tr. Robert Bly, The Soul is Here For Its Own Joy

I'm sure some of you have happened across this poem in your literary travels. Others of you, most likely the activists among you, will be familiar with the phrase, "we make the road by walking" title of a book recording a conversation between the legendary activists and educators, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. My first encounter was through the titling of the Horton/Freire book. I had always thought of its message as being, we make the road to justice and equality, by fixing that goal in our minds eye and starting to move towards it. We do not know exactly how we will get there, only that we need to go. And so by walking towards our goal, we create the path for getting there.

Indeed, this quote from a youthful Myles Horton's diary tends to confirm this interpretation:

I can't sleep, but there are dreams. What you must do is go back, get a simple place, move in and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and you let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own form.

You can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation.

Xxii We Make the Road by Walking.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

I discovered Antonio Machado's poem while researching this talk. I wanted to find the Horton/Freire book on the internet and so I punched in the line, "We make the road by walking," and of course the object of my search did come up, and so did the website of a social justice group, in Bushwick Brooklyn of all places, calling themselves "Make the Road." They attributed their organizational name to Machado's poem. From there it was simple to Google the poem and find the complete version. "Make the Road" translated their one line from the poem a little differently from Robert Bly, "Searcher, there is no road. We make the road by walking."

Although I find the phrase "We Make the Road by Walking," a useful appropriation for activist inspiration, it seems clear to me that Antonio Machado had something different in mind. He is telling us that as much as we would like to have a map, a well-worn road or trail to follow, the course of our lives is our own. Each of us is unique; each of us must construct the road of our lives as we go along. "We Make the Road by Walking." To this, I would like to add my own corollary, "Traveler, or searcher, you are always walking."

This talk is about making the road. It is about dealing with the consequences and responsibilities of being creatures that can make conscious choices and that have some degree of free will. I will come at this subject through a number of different stories and narratives, all of them illuminating some level of making the road through the choices we make. I can't possibly cover all the kinds of choices we face in our daily lives, so I will content myself with demonstrating that we make choices all the time, that the choices we make have consequences and that far too many of us walk without waking. I will conclude this talk by offering some strategies for being present to our walking and road making, and for developing and refining the moral compass we all need to help us at critical moments and junctures.

In early November of 2001, not long after the attack on the World Trade Towers, I wrote a piece for the NYSEC newsletter entitled, "Does Our Faith Stand Up?" In it I recounted a story published in the New York Times about a man from the Middle East who owned a restaurant here in the city. Shortly after the September 11th attacks, a group of youths stormed into his restaurant and, deeming him to be the enemy by proxy, proceeded to tear the restaurant apart. The Police caught the youths the same day and came to the owner to ask him to press charges. Surprisingly, he declined to do so. When asked why, he simply said that he couldn't see how it would make things better.

He couldn't see how it would make things better. That sounds to me like an interesting decision making yardstick. Any action upon the world that I engage in should make things better. Certainly, at a minimum, it should leave the world no worse off. I have remembered this story and thought about it from time to time. It is interesting because the choice is not expected. It is interesting because the chooser demonstrates an attitude towards power and its use that is also unexpected. I wonder if I would have behaved the same in that circumstance. What would each one of you have done? You have been offered the power of the state to have your grievances addressed. You could have pressed charges, forced the parents of the youths to pony up and reimburse you for the damage. This is the legitimate, state sanctioned choice you could have made. Would you have thought, this makes the situation better for me, it will make me whole, so I will do it the state sanctioned way? Would you have thought, this is justice, they should be punished for what they did? Or would you have thought, even though pressing charges

might rightfully punish the offenders, even though pressing charges might ensure that you are compensated for your losses, I just don't see how all our lives would be better, so I won't.

The kicker to this story is that later still that same day, the youths returned to the restaurant, apologized, and spent the night helping the owner clean up. I seem to recall that in the process the youths and the owner got to know one another a little better. One suspects there was a group of parents in the background trying to teach their children about right and wrong, and about responsibility, but would this particular outcome have been possible if the owner had accepted the use of state power to address his grievances?

We make the road by walking, and we are always walking.

Choices. We are presented with them all the time. The truth is we choose the world we live in every day. Moment by moment, hour by hour, day-by-day, we choose the world we live in. Most of the choices we make are much less poignant than that of the Owner, and we make them unconsciously, or without much thought. It's not surprising. If we stopped to think carefully about every choice we make, I think we would quickly come to a standstill with a huge backlog of choices requiring our research and careful consideration. We save the research, the deep thought, and the consultations with our peers, for the really big choices we have to make. And all the while, we are walking, and making the road.

The problem with this walking without waking is that if we add up the billions upon billions of choices that are made every day, the billions upon billions of roads that are being made, every day, the impact of that walking is staggering. It seems to me that the biggest part of how the human world resides in the daily actions of the billions of people around the planet. All the things we humans do, day in and day out, add up to enormous consequences because there are so many of us. I don't think we can afford to do much more walking without waking.

Of course, there are lots of individuals, groups and organizations that are trying to point out the error of our ways and to provide us with guidance to a better future. There is more awareness of environmental and health issues than ever before, though it seems hardly to have put a dent in our appetite for Big Macs, Mc Mansions, yearly changes of wardrobe, and innumerable other excessive and unhealthy consumptive habits. We Americans are the most consumptive people on the face of the planet. Did you know that we consume more than 20 million barrels of oil a day and that the next most oil consumptive nation is China, with 6 million plus barrels of consumption a day and three to four times the number of people?

We make the road by walking and we are walking all the time.

How many of you know what a carbon footprint is? How many of you have recently calculated your carbon footprint? Well, for those of you who don't know, your carbon footprint is a crude measurement of your consumption as measured by the amount of CO₂ you are responsible for emitting either directly or indirectly into the atmosphere. I'm sure that all of you recycle and do your best to leave a small footprint, ecologically speaking. In fact, simply by choosing to live in a densely populated area with good public transportation and lots of essential services close at hand, you are doing better than most U.S. Citizens. Still, it is instructive to go on line, find a carbon footprint calculator, and run your numbers. They ask you a number of simple lifestyle questions and tell you how

many planets would be needed if everyone consumed the way you do. Turns out that even we city dwellers are consuming at a rate of 2 plus planets, assuming we have relatively small apartments and no weekend home outside of the city. Holly and I have a modest lifestyle up in Beacon. Still, it would take three planets for everyone to have that same lifestyle, even with the changes we have made so far.

Here are some of the things we have done to change our impact on the planet. We purchase, for the most part, only organically grown produce, as much of it as possible locally grown. We eat very little red meat. We bring canvas bags with us to the grocery store. I have decided that all my new clothing will be made of organic, natural fibers. I have hemp shoes, hemp shirts and last weekend I bought hemp milk to drink. Holly is beginning to refer to me as hemp boy. We have begun to phase out plastic from our lives. I carry a stainless steel water bottle filled at home and refilled at work. I pack my lunch in a tiffin, a set of stacking stainless steel vessels that lock together. I am concerned about plastic that leaches into my food and about where the plastic goes when I wear it out. Did you know that every time plastic is recycled it degrades and comes back in a lesser form? All plastic reaches the point where it can no longer be recycled.

Holly and I have also committed ourselves to purchasing nothing newly made for our house unless there is no alternative or the alternative is not energy efficient as with cars and washing machines. We are determined to be off the energy grid by the time we retire. We recycle diligently.

Many of these changes yield a direct benefit to ourselves of course, but not all of them. I am finding the organically produced fabric manufactured into sweat shop free and fair trade clothing is not only hard to find, especially for men, but also expensive. Consequently my closet won't be filled with a ton of clothing options. It is, in my opinion, the right thing to do however, as I help to develop the market for these products and reduce my share of consumption.

The benefits of becoming largely vegetarian are both to myself and society. Vegetarian diets, particularly those based on organic produce, are very healthy. It's a little harder to be sure you are getting the proteins you need but there are well-established vegetarian guidelines and cuisines that effectively supply them. Meat production has long been demonstrated to be an inefficient, labor and energy-intensive supply of protein fuel for humans. And for many of us, there are issues of cruelty to animals even if we accept that killing an animal for food is ok. Mass production of animal protein involves all kinds of horrors that we ignore as a society. Because we don't hunt for the animals we eat, and because we are sold meat that is cut and packaged in ways that have little resemblance to its animal origins, we've lost any kind of connection to, and empathy for, the animal lives that are giving us sustenance.

And just in case there are a few of you who don't really think too much about the environmental consequences of your walking, ponder, for a moment, the idea of a country with more than a billion residents yearning to have your standard of living; a country with nuclear weapons and a large and increasingly sophisticated army. Those of you who are students of history know what happens when resources grow scarce and well armed nations compete for them.

We make the road by walking, and we are walking all the time.

A few years ago, in a letter to the AEU Dialogue on the subject of Wal-Mart, Randy Best wrote the following:

WHERE WOULD GANDHI SHOP?

Four of Gandhi's principles were: Ahimsa (non-violence); Satyagraha (civil disobedience); Swadeshi (self-reliance and supporting the local community); and Saravodaya (social and economic justice).

Gandhi advised every individual to weigh their circumstances in the court of conscience and assess social obligations in the light of truth, non-violence, and justice. For me, Randy wrote, Gandhi's principles of Swadeshi, reliance on the local community, and Saravodaya, acting for social and economic justice, affect my decision not to patronize Wal-Mart.

Randy went on to talk about what he termed, "considerate choices." While acknowledging that it isn't always easy and that the considerate choice won't always be the same choice for everyone, he maintained that we owe it to our communities to choose considerately. I agree.

Let me turn to another way in which we walk without waking, the choices we make that are based on "received wisdom." A few years ago there was an article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine about Justice Blackmun and the Roe v. Wade decision. When I read the article, I was startled to learn that there was very little that I really knew about the specifics of this decision. I grew up with liberal leanings in heady times for liberals. I have, for all these years, just assumed that a woman's right to choose was basic and not to be curtailed.

Now, before anyone gets the wrong idea about where I'm heading, let me immediately say that I have not changed my overall thinking on the issue. However, it was a little unsettling to become aware that my choice to support choice was not based on any real understanding of the issues that were involved. My support for Roe v. Wade was based largely on received wisdom. In reading the article I came to the conclusion that the decision may well be reversed, not just because of a relentless attack from religious conservatives, but because quite possibly it was a flawed decision that won't stand up to the advances of medical science and the need for continuous dialog on a difficult subject.

I began to wonder; on how many other important and controversial issues of our time have I simply endorsed a point of view, or expressed a conviction, because it was part of the milieu of my belief structure? Isn't that what we are always accusing the other side of? I suspect, more than I would want to confess today.

I suppose that one of the good things about my ethical humanism is that it gives me the freedom to doubt and the charge to learn, discuss and debate. But I wonder how many of us actively pursue an understanding of the other point of view, having made our minds up, or had them made up for us, long ago. And how much have we sequestered ourselves in communities of the likeminded where we continuously preach to the converted?

Returning to the subject of abortion, I remember a conversation with a good friend a number of years ago, wherein I came to the realization that she and I did not share the same point of view on the issue. This has happened to me from time to time. I make friends. I enjoy people's company, sometimes for a number of years, and then I discover they have a radically different point of view from mine on a core value issue. Sometimes

the friendship survives, as this one did. Sometimes it doesn't. It depends on the place we each are in. In any case, her way of letting me know her difference of opinion was as simple as saying, "I'm pretty sure that abortion is violence." We didn't speak about it again, content to know each other's place on the issue and knowing that there were many values we did share the same point of view on.

That has stayed with me a long time. She was right you know. Everything about abortion is violence. It's violence to life's inception and flow. It's violence to human spirit. I can speak on this from experience as my former wife and I made the decision to terminate a pregnancy many years ago. It's a decision that haunted our relationship. I still sometimes mourn it, as I do the relationship, the circumstances of which made life affirmation of any kind so difficult. I'm pretty certain it was violence all around.

At this moment I wonder how this experience and my choices fit with Gandhi's principal of Ahimsa (non-violence). Not too well. I can't imagine women not having this right, as clearly, once in the situation of an unwanted pregnancy, violence of some kind is irrevocably present and it then becomes a choice amongst painful alternatives. As a humanist who believes that the preservation of an individual's right to choose is fundamental to the preservation of human dignity, how do I square this one with the principal of Ahimsa? About the only way I can is to understand that sometimes, in the process of laying down the road of our lives, we arrive at places where there are no choices that avoid suffering. At these moments we seek to choose what we hope will be the route of least suffering for all involved.

We make the road by walking, and sometimes the walking is hard and the road we lay down is more a wound in the landscape and a testament to our capacity to endure.

So, to review, the central themes of this talk are as follows:

- We are creatures that have some degree of free will, and as such, we have the capacity to choose the world we live in.
- We are choosing all the time.
- Every one of our choices changes the world in which we live to varying degrees of better and worse.
- We all spend a lot of time "walking without waking." In doing so, we fail to take responsibility for the consequences of our choices.

This last theme is the actionable one, and it has at least four causal factors that I can identify:

- The first is fear. As much as we like to think of ourselves as creatures with free will, we are also fearful creatures that enjoy the comfort and safety of our habits and, as a result, we frequently become tyrannized by them. Even more unfortunately, we often tyrannize others with them.
- The second is lack of time. The director Peter Brook put it this way as he was being interviewed on the Brian Leher Show:

All of us live all day long in a set of quick clichés. We can't do otherwise. We haven't time really to think. But we all have underlying deep questions, which we never really have time to explore.

- The third is what I like to call Plato's Cave syndrome. We are so immersed in our limited realities that we don't realize that we don't know or aren't awake. In her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd writes about her journey out from the milieu of her Christian belief system and back again. She describes how she is so completely immersed in it, even enjoying a successful career as an inspirational speaker about it, that she fails to notice how little room there is for an authentic and validating feminine spiritual experience within it.

- The fourth is that we become vested in the choices we make, the road we are laying down. Our whole identity becomes entangled in those choices. To question those choices and the values they represent becomes a suicide of sorts. As a result, it can often take a very significant shock to even start to wake us up. Here is Sue Monk Kidd's description of the event that initiated her awakening:

It was autumn, and everything was turning loose. I was running errands that afternoon. Rain had fallen earlier, but now the sun was out, shining on the tiny beads of water that clung to trees and sidewalks. The whole world seemed red and yellow and rinsed with light. I parked in front of the drugstore where my daughter, Ann, fourteen, had an after-school job. Leaping a puddle, I went inside.

I spotted her right away kneeling on the floor in the toothpaste section, stocking a bottom shelf. I was about to walk over and say hello when I noticed two middle-aged men walking along the aisle toward her. They looked like everybody's father. They had moussed hair, and they wore knit sport shirts the color of Easter eggs, the kind of shirts with tiny alligators sewn at the chest. It was a detail I would remember later as having ironic symbolism.

My daughter did not see them coming. Kneeling on the floor, she was intent on getting the boxes of Crest lined up evenly. The men stopped, peering down at her. One man nudged the other. He said, "Now that's how I like to see a woman-on her knees."

The other man laughed.

Standing in the next aisle, I froze. I watched the expression that crept into my daughter's eyes as she looked up. I watched her chin drop and her hair fall across her face.

Seeing her kneel at these men's feet while they laughed at her subordinate posture pierced me through.

So, how do we become, as Randy Best suggests, more considerate in our daily choices? I would like to suggest five action goals. That is, goals that we should set ourselves walking towards.

- First, we have to make sure we are conscious of our value and belief structure and actively work on its evolution and refinement.

- Second, we have to do whatever it takes to overcome our fears and lift ourselves out of the confines of our social and belief milieu to a vantage point that allows an honest critique of it.

- Third, a corollary to the second, we must always be willing to entertain doubt about our values and belief structure.

- Fourth, we have to be open to honest dialog and tolerant enough of different points of view that we are able to listen.
- And fifth, we have to find ways of being continuously present to our choices.

Let me suggest a few strategies for achieving these action goals.

To become present to your value structure and daily decision-making, I'm going to suggest something that is built on a tiny little self-help book I was given years ago. I wasn't able to lay my hands on the book in my library to properly attribute it, so if it sounds familiar to anyone, please speak up:

First, sit down and make a list of the basic principles you want to live by. Use the Gandhi principles that Randy Best identified if they seem a good fit. Use the "does it make things better principle" I mentioned at the beginning. Use Ethical Culture's own bring out the best principle. I think you will probably need a set of principles, not just one.

Next, make a list of what you want for yourself. It doesn't have to be exhaustive, but it should cover the spectrum of your wants. Take time with this. Include material wants, success wants, relationship wants, for your family wants. Avoid the world peace wants, this isn't a beauty pageant. State your wants simply. One or two sentences at most. Your list of wants should not be more than a page or two.

When you have completed your list of wants, review each item on the list and ask yourself these three questions:

- How does this want square with the principles I want to live by?
- If my want were to be fulfilled, what would be the consequences for myself, for my community, and for the planet?
- What would happen if everyone had this same want and had it fulfilled? What would be the consequences for myself, for my community and for the planet?

Review each want on your list in this way, and as you do, consider removing, or at least adjusting any want that does not square with the principles you want to live by or that, if fulfilled, does not have positive consequences for the rest of us.

You will then have a list of wants that will have mostly positive consequences if fulfilled. Keep this list with you at all times, read it at least once a day preferably two or three times a day. Feel free to adjust it as life teaches you. This will help with your unconscious daily choosing as you will tend to choose towards the wants you are continually reminding yourself of.

Next, let me suggest that it won't be possible to make significant progress on these action goals without being part of a community of considerate people. This is what any good faith house and congregation should provide you with, a community of considerate people with whom you walk and among them, some capable leaders. A congregational and organizational whole, that you can depend on to support you in your efforts to be wakeful and to help you tease out good choices by asking good questions, engaging in honest dialogue and making good information available. That we are gathered here today

is a clear indication that we all know this on some level. At the same time I challenge you, as I challenge myself, because we know that we are not everything we could be and that we have to continue to work to make this Ethical Culture faith house and congregation an increasingly compelling choice. And those of you who are visiting today, clearly you understand the need for community in this endeavor too. Let me invite you to get to know us better and join us if it seems a good fit.

Next, I suggest we all need to find ways to be reminded of the big picture, how everything is connected to everything and to find ways to address our questions about the meaning of our existence. In my talk, “What’s Your Story and Is It Big Enough,” which many of you have heard as I have given it more than once here, I tell the story of a remarkable 450 million year dance between the Nautilus and the moon and suggested that when we can embrace a story big enough to hold this dance in its grasp, we are getting somewhere.

When Al Gore gave his presentation on global warming here at the Society a few years ago, he started with the iconic photograph “earth rise” taken by Apollo astronauts on one of their trips to the moon. He credited that one photograph as being a seminal moment in the environmental movement, as it helped so many people to understand that it’s just this little blue marble hanging out there in space.

Connect yourself to this bigger picture. Set aside regular time to visit the most naturally beautiful spot near you. When you leave today, make a little time for a walk in Central Park. Visit the Museum of Natural History. It is chalk full of really big picture inspiration. If you get out of the city now and again, spend a little time looking up at the night sky. When I’m near a pond or a lake, I like to row out into the middle on a really calm night and stare up. It’s as close as I can get to floating out there in the midst of it all.

Next, I suggest we could all use experiences outside of our immediate communities and ideological frameworks. Travel outside of your community from time to time. Manhattanites, get yourself out to Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island once in a while. Walk the hoods. Meet the people. Traveling to foreign lands, like Oklahoma and Kansas, is good too. Keep that sphere of contact growing.

If you are a liberal who only reads or watches liberal news media, expand your horizons. There are well written conservative publications that you should visit once in a while. And the same message goes, in reverse of course, for any conservative who might be amongst you today.

If there is an issue you’ve been a steadfast supporter of for a long time, take a step back and re-educate yourself on the issue. Times change, more information becomes available. Make sure you look at all sides of the issue. You won’t necessarily change your mind, but you will at least refresh your reasons for believing and acting as you do, and if you have really understood the other side’s point of view, you will be prepared for dialog when it comes your way.

Finally, dare to have a positive dream of the future. I know it looks bleak sometimes, polar ice caps collapsing, a billion Chinese angling to have cars, a radically conservative religious right threatening everything you believe in. But keep this in mind, there can’t be a positive outcome if there isn’t a positive dream.

We make the road by walking, and we are walking all the time.

May your road be a long and beautiful one and may you be present to your walking the whole way.

Thank you

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR
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