

Rock Solid

The Responsibility of Choice

BLOG

This month, I am pleased to have Dr. Walt Wright write a guest post for Lead With Your Life. Dr. Wright is a senior fellow at the [Max De Pree Center for Leadership](#) at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where he served as executive director from 2000-2012. He came to this position after twelve years as president and professor of leadership at Regent College in Vancouver. He is an author, professor, mentor, and mountaineer. Over the years, his thinking and writing has had great influence on my understanding of leadership, especially his book [Relational Leadership](#).

The Responsibility of Choice

By Walt Wright

Recently our grandson, Owen, visited us for a long weekend. When each of our grandsons visit we choose to focus all of our attention on him, treating him like he were King. He gets to choose activities, meals, and how we spend our time together. For the eleventh year we give them the ‘choice’ of an all-day activity like Disneyland or Universal Studios. It is his choice; and once there, he gets to choose the rides and/or shows he wants to fit into the limits on time, lines, and show schedules. A lot of choices.

So many choices that Owen pushed back and prompted an interesting conversation about choice over the three days. Choice is hard. He is not sure he wants it. Owen is the youngest of three boys. According to Owen, his brothers always choose, and that is just fine with him—partly because he does not have to bear the responsibility of choice; partly because he usually likes their (older) choices; partly because he is a thoughtful and gracious boy (at least with his grandparents!).

As we talked about choice he noted that it is easier to choose when there is no choice. One option is chosen or rejected. When there is more than one option (Disneyland or Universal Studios) choice includes for and against. One choice is chosen; one choice is rejected. With every choice there is loss to be grieved, an option excluded, a possibility passed.

Choice narrows and blossoms. It focuses energy on one option, eliminating others. But the option chosen includes a bundle of choices opening new pathways forward. Once Owen chooses Universal Studios, he confronts the myriad options flowing from that choice. How will he choose to spend his day at the studio?

Choice also bears responsibility. Choice commits and becomes responsible for a direction

taken. Not everyone wants that responsibility. There are many who prefer to allow others to choose, to free themselves from the risk of wrong choice. Others take on the risk and responsibility. We can blame or credit them for the results of the choice, basking in the rewards, and distancing from the negative outcomes. One of the reasons we have leaders is our need for someone to take on the risk of choice. One of my favorite definitions of leadership is from Peter Drucker, “leadership is the risk of choosing when the alternatives are equal.” If one option is clearly better, no leadership is required. If all options are equally clear or unclear, leadership risks choice that others may follow. Choice is at the heart of leadership.

Leadership is about choice, both the risk of choice among alternatives, and the choice of whether to follow. Leadership does not happen until another person accepts the choice and chooses to follow. Leadership requires followers, and followership happens by choice. As humans we are never free from choice. Even when we delegate (or abdicate) the responsibility of choice to a leader, we are still choosing whom we will follow. Followers determine whether leadership has been exercised. Leadership really rests in the hands of followers, and following is a choice. Leadership is about whom we choose to follow.

And that is what makes us human: choice. God created us with choice; we choose whom we will follow. We are responsible for that choice. And in the power of that choice, we demonstrate a direction that others can follow—leadership. Leading, following, choosing, and being human—a lot more than Owen wanted to talk about.

Owen chose all weekend, and designed a great time for all of us. And he slept well that night from the burden of responsibility!