

Making Hard Decisions

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on November 6, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

There is a flicker of a flame seen far off,
A distant spark that shines beyond its means,
Lighting a dimly seen path before us.
We travel along this path together,
A shared journey towards healing,
A caravan filled with love and care.
It is to light the path, so that we do not stumble,
As we wander along life's meandering way,
That we ignite this flame today.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Making Hard Decisions

Reverend Michael Walker

Our monthly worship theme is *Changing what we can and living without despair*. I'll speak more in the coming weeks about accepting what we cannot change. Today, we're looking at those things we can change by making a hard decision. Major decisions in life usually tend not to be easy, but become the basis for life lessons. In fact, Mark Twain once said, "*Good decisions come from experience. Experience comes from making bad decisions.*" Well, ain't that the truth!

I would imagine that it is generally true that every one of us has had to make some really hard decisions, at

various points in each of our lives. Difficult decisions could range from trying to figure out just the right gift for that hard-to-shop-for relative at Christmas time, or whether it is important for one to give up eating meat for moral reasons. Other hard decisions could relate to how one navigates the relationships in one's life, or what subject to major in at college, or what work or career one might follow. Perhaps the most difficult decision a person I've known has ever made, as I sat beside him, was whether to continue life support for his mother. As you can see, difficult decisions can span a wide spectrum.

I'm going to explore the making of hard decisions using stories from my own life and family. Let's start with the story of two high school sweethearts from

northern California. Oh, to be young and in love. Well, you know how such things go, and one thing led to another. The first difficult decision for these soon-to-be teen parents was whether or not to have the baby, and whether or not to keep the baby – and that baby happened to be me, by the way. The second difficult decision that my first father and mother made was to get married, and then my father joined the Navy in order to be able to support our family. This was during the Vietnam War, and I think that weighed heavily in the decision-making of young men of that era.

Perhaps not too surprisingly, my parents found out in the first year that they were not a good fit for each other, that they were not destined to stay married. A couple years after they divorced, my mother got

remarried to my second father, who had been my first father's best friend. Following this turn of events, there came another hard decision. My second father felt strongly, having been raised in the **'Strict Father'** **paradigm of morality** that I described in the past, that in order to raise me he needed to adopt me. My first father had just gotten out of the Navy, did not yet have a job, and the story goes that my second father pressured him to either start paying child support or give up his parental rights.

Now, I wasn't there, so I am somewhat limited in telling that part of the story. Both of these men had to make very hard decisions, fraught with a great deal of emotion: love and loss, anger and frustration, self-righteousness and a sense of responsibility. I was three

years old at the time, and really had no idea what was going on. I was not to even learn about these events until I was 19, after I had moved out and was then in college.

In my young adulthood, I spent a lot of time contemplating the decisions made by my fathers and mother. It is quite apparent that these decisions were to affect the rest of my life, but also that it is really difficult for me to sit in judgment some 40-odd years later.

By engaging in a great deal of personal work, I eventually came to realize, even though the course of my life was to be dictated by these decisions, I really could not – and will never – fully understand everything that was going on in the minds and hearts of my parents at that time. I can also say that there is another emotion involved in this story, now, and that is *regret*. There are

regrets on all sides, although everyone in my family has tried to make the best of the situation, now that the hard decisions have long since been made. Like the old saying, *we've made our bed, now we must lie in it*.

Decisions are, by definition, challenging. It seems to me that there are two axes related to a decision-making process. One axis is what I would call the *rational/intellectual* approach and the other is *emotional/intuitive* approach. I long ago learned that I have a tendency to err towards the rational and intellectual approaches to decision-making. My habit, when preparing for any major decision in life, is to do hours upon hours of research, to develop spreadsheets to keep data about all of the things that I learn, even color-coding

it all. I bet you didn't know this about me.

For example, some of you may know that one of the things that I do for self-care and personal satisfaction, is that I play a musical instrument called a Hammered Dulcimer. I first started learning on a lower-end, rental instrument, and later bought a small used dulcimer. But during this time, I was determining whether I really enjoyed learning how to play this instrument. And I was also trying out lots of other dulcimers, at stores, music retreats and festivals, trying to figure out what I liked and didn't like about each of them. At the same time, I was researching all of the custom dulcimer builders out there, luthiers of this fine, old Folk Music instrument. I made notes about the types of wood they used, all of the dimensions, the numbers of strings (because dulcimers

come in different sizes), and the resonant qualities of each kind of dulcimer, as well as the prices, of course. I had a huge, categorized and sorted, color-coded spreadsheet that helped me keep track of all of this information. I finally settled on my top choice, and then I called and interviewed that builder to make sure – emotionally – that I had made the right choice. And so I had a custom-built Hammered Dulcimer made and shipped to me several months later. And I am completely in love with that dulcimer. I made the best possible choice for me; my rational, detail-oriented process worked well for me.

And now, let's look at a different approach. I have sometimes bumped up against the desires of some other

person in my life, to make a difficult decision coming from an emotional and intuitive place within ourselves. For myself, I do try to listen to my intuition and notice my emotional state when I'm making a decision, even though I still tend to give more weight to the rational process that I went through to get there. There are a lot of people in the world who are just the opposite of me. I want to be sure that you understand that I am not making a judgment of one way over the other, because we each search for our own truth (as we say in our UU Principles) in our own ways. The way I approach decision-making works very well for me, and the way others approach decision-making may, very well, work best for them. And that's great!

Some of those “go with the gut” folks do amazing

things in their lives, having gotten to that point in ways that I can scarcely imagine. Sometimes, I'm a little envious. I've learned to think on my feet, and I'm sometimes called upon to make a decision based on my gut, rather than having the time to think it through and plan out my strategy. Sometimes this intuitive or emotional process goes well for me, but other times it turns out horribly! I've had occasions over the course of my life to be upset by being pressured into an emotional decision, usually because the other person operates that way, and have it turn into something negative. And then, I think it's my fault for making the decision in that way.

My strategy to deal with this has usually been to try and hold-off a decision for a short time, giving everyone involved some time to do research, consult with

others, contemplate all sides of the issue, and thereby allowing all involved to finally reach a rational decision. I have learned though, that go-with-the-gut types, intuitive decision-makers are not always very patient with such a process. There is a balance that I'm still trying to find.

It was my Dad (my second father who adopted me) who reminded me a couple years ago that we just have to do the best we can, one day at a time, one foot in front of the other. That sounds like Dad advice, right? That no matter what life sends our way, there is a solution to be found. Or, in the words of Flora Whittemore, *"The doors we open and close each day decide the lives we live."*

One lesson I've learned about the need for striking

a balance, is between the desire to *"go with the flow"* and *"being in control"* of what happens in my life. They are polar opposites, and as in all things, it is usually unwise to spend all of one's time in one extreme or the other. I'm not saying that it is easy to find the balance, because it has not been easy for me. The ramifications of going with the flow can be that events can quickly reach a state of no return, and the place you ended up may not be one that you want. I call that the *'tsunami effect'* of what happens at the extreme end of *"going with the flow."*

On the other hand, trying to rigidly maintain total control is unrealistic, and is likely to only make me and everyone around me unhappy. The extreme of *"being in control"* is an autocratic approach, such as I consciously left behind in the military, wishing to not have that in my

life anymore. Seeking a balance is the key, and sometimes that means making some hard decisions.

To better understand that balance, a few years ago, I went looking for a model to help in making those hard decisions. I'd like to share it with you, now. The model I'm working with actually comes from the corporate world, but let's keep an open mind! The motivational speaker and coach, Brian Tracy, has developed what he calls *Zero-Based Thinking*.¹ Start from zero, with every decision. Try to let go of the baggage from past decisions, even related to the same issue. Go back to the beginning, and look at it with fresh eyes. Here are the six steps in Zero-Based Thinking.

¹ See www.wikihow.com/Use-'Zero-Based-Thinking'-When-Making-Hard-Decisions; also, www.briantracy.com.

First, *face up to those hard decisions*. Whatever the issue is, face it head-on. Or, if you are reviewing a past decision, if you knew then what you know now, would you make the same decision? I'll use my parents as an example, again. Hopefully, they won't mind! Mom and Dad owned a music store for many years. Their business model never quite worked-out how they had hoped it would. There were many contributing factors, including the economy, the location of the store, what kinds of musical instruments they carried and services they offered, and even their personal styles of doing business. About a year ago, they faced up to the fact that it was no longer working and they need to make a decision.

The second step in Zero-Based Thinking is, *know*

when something isn't quite right. If something isn't working for you, notice it and consider whether that thing is still serving you well in your life. Oftentimes, indicators of something not working well for us show up physiologically, in the form of stomach aches, headaches, frequent illness, or other outward signs of stress. In the case of my folks and their music store, they stressed over it for years.

Third in the Zero-Based Thinking model is, *make a decision to stop.* If whatever decision-to-be-made is causing you such stress that you are feeling it physically, just stop doing it. Take time out to go back and reconsider whether or not this is really what is best. It does not matter if you have done it that same way for years – if it no longer works well, consider a different

way. Dad and Mom decided to stop operating the store. They had hoped that by now, they would have employees running the place and they would be mostly retired. That hasn't been the case and so they decided to close up shop. And that takes us to the next step in the model.

Fourth, *learn how to cut your losses.* I did say that this came from a corporate model, but it still applies. If you knew then what you know now, would you have made the same decision. If the answer is no, maybe it is time to cut your losses and move onto something else. My parents liquidated most of their inventory and moved out of their commercial storefront.

The fifth step in Zero-Based Thinking is, *study the opportunity cost.* This is a term from economics, but we might apply it to our lives by asking ourselves, *what*

other opportunities am I missing, by focusing on this other thing that isn't really working for me, anyway?

Dad and Mom talked about this a lot. They missed doing the things that originally brought them into the business. For both, that was playing music. For Mom, that also meant teaching lessons, and for Dad, that meant instrument building and repair. But the demands of retail business left too little time to do any of that.

The sixth and final step in Zero-Based Thinking is, *sum up your understanding and start over*. Each of us continues to learn and evolve over the courses of lives. If it comes time to cut bait and go, do so having learned from your successes and your mistakes, and seek a new path based on what you now know. In the example of my folks, retirement seems to have given them back their

time to pursue those interests that they had missed.

In closing, I encourage you to not be over-critical of past decisions – that doesn't seem to help. Being able to change course, when needed, does. If one doesn't already do this, I suggest making some process, such as zero-based thinking, into a spiritual practice. Whether one is intuitive or analytical in your process, go with what works for you. Also, recall what Mark Twain said, *“Good decisions come from experience. Experience comes from making bad decisions.”* So, go easy on yourself if you find you need to make a change.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

We arrive in the world, full of expectations,
dreams and desires.

Along the way, these have been tempered
by hard realities.

Sometimes it was a wise person in our lives,
someone we had grown to trust,

Who showed us that life is hard,
but we can make it,

Decisions we need to make may feel risky,
but we will survive.

Let us take this lesson learned out into our lives,
and share them widely.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!