

Paradox of Choice in Faith and Service

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The millennial generation is overwhelmingly marked by privilege. It is seemingly more equipped with resources than any other generation was at our age and is criticized for failed stewardship. Having unprecedented access to education, it is still dubbed “unskilled.”¹ Gains are being made in the area of diversity, but millennials are no less racially and socioeconomically divided.² Millennials are praised for having more social networks of connection than have ever existed, yet they are accused of making “we” conversations become “me” conversations.³ It’s no wonder that millennials feel burned by the harsh, sometimes judgmental critiques of other generations.

Among these criticisms, the most compelling is the privilege of *options* that the millennial generation is afforded. It is the curse to the blessing that has gone unnoticed in society, what psychologist Barry Schwartz calls the “paradox of choice.”⁴ This byproduct of consumer culture has become the cadence of our country’s functioning, providing for options at every turn in life. From education to food and work to faith, no aspect of a millennial’s life has gone untouched, and, in Schwartz’s words, this proliferation of choices has made us “not freer but more paralyzed, not happier but more dissatisfied.”⁵ Millennials have been conditioned to move on to bigger and better options when dissatisfied, rather than allowing imperfect conditions to transform us and us them. Because the culture’s response has been to cater to the millennials’ need for options, it has been hard to take issue with this trend, but there is a problem. It is important to address this problem as millennials begin to impact the worlds of faith and philanthropy—and as those worlds seek to understand, invest in and include the members of the millennial generation.

Choice as Privilege

Currently in their early twenties to early thirties, millennials are at a place in life where transitions are commonplace. This goes without saying, but a factor at the core of this state of change is the decision-making process. Millennials are particularly affected by the proposition of *choice*. Now more than ever, millennials are given more options than we can possibly consider. This is no small predicament. Belonging to a modern, affluent Western society has provided us with the blessing of choice, but this *blessing* has become a *burden*. This is the effect of an industrialized, free-market economy where opportunities are many and discernment is crucial. To explain this situation further, Barry Schwartz has studied this phenomena and has shared his findings in his book, *The Paradox of Choice*. He writes, “When we have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As a number of available choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multiple of options begin to appear.

¹ Tencer, Daniel. “Canada’s Millennials Among Most Educated, Not Among Most Skilled: Study.” The Huffington Post Canada. March 14, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/03/14/millennials-skills-canada_n_6865478.html.

² Tepper, Taylor. “Why Millennials Aren’t Lazy, Spoiled or Entitled.” Money. August 11, 2014. <http://time.com/money/3094008/millennials-spoiled-boomers/>.

³ Stein, Joel. “Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation.” Time. May 20, 2013. <http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>.

⁴ Schwartz, Barry. “The Paradox of Choice.” Ted. July 1, 2005. http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice?language=en.

⁵ Schwartz, Barry. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. New York: Ecco, 2004. 2.

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize.”⁶ “Tyrannize” may seem like a strong word for what can look like a “first-world problem” but at further examination one can see how fitting it is.

Many millennials are in college, and college provides for a plethora of choices. After my first year of attending Valparaiso University, I was thankful to have been very satisfied, at peace with, and very happy about my choice of institution. But to dismiss the stress that came with the uncertainty and indecision that preceded my choice to attend Valpo would tell an incomplete story. It is truly a journey to get to the point of committing to a school by May 1st. It is a journey filled with lots of good choices and hard decisions. To those who are unfamiliar, the process begins with a bombardment of material from prospective colleges. This kind of solicitation comes in any and all ways; brochures, pens, pennants, t-shirts, stickers and application waivers—there are few things they haven’t tried. Before making any decision, one has to carefully consider his or her options. So, what is there to consider? One factor is where, geographically, the college is located, how close or far away from home you want to be, (how convenient is it for Dad to make a surprise visit on a Tuesday afternoon), what major you will declare, and what career field you will join and what job is realistic to expect from this study. Also, what financial situation your choice will create, how lucrative that choice is (maybe there is pressure to do something less exciting but more stable), and what lifestyle you can anticipate that choice giving you. What if that does not make you happy, or nothing seems to fit just right, what if there is a light bulb moment yet to come, what if I’m still searching after this year or after four years and I’m stuck? Maybe it’s a trial and error type situation, or maybe I just don’t know yet and that’s okay, but it doesn’t feel okay because the choice is mine and time is ticking. This is the situation that millennials are often in and it is exhausting.

Back to Schwartz. In his research, Schwartz observes that, when given many choices, people tend to react in one of two ways: they either make a decision which they then regret and think how things could have been had they chosen differently, allowing other options to haunt them; or they become paralyzed and choose to delay deciding, because there is always an open possibility for different options that are available. Essentially, the pursuit of perfection leads to *paralysis*. In his own words, “Even if we manage to overcome paralysis and make a choice, we end up less satisfied with the result of the choice; it’s easy to imagine that you could have made a different choice that would have been better.”⁷ Remember the tyranny part? Here he adds, “This imagined alternative induces you to regret your decision which detracts from the satisfaction you get out of the decision you made even if it was a good decision.”⁸ This behavior is more than a product of our environment; it is a particular condition of our technological world. Our attention is split by different stimuli, leaving the outside world fighting for our buy-in. However, is it really harmless for this kind of relationship to continue to be emulated in different fields? It has been observed that millennials have drastically different choices than

⁶ Schwartz 2

⁷ Ibid 2

⁸ Ibid 3

previous generations when it comes to faith. Millennials are questioning and challenging the church as an institution and are scaring older generations into believing the sky is falling!

Newfound Loyalties in Faith

Millennials are perceived as not belonging to any faith background. Authenticity seems to be very important to this generation. Millennials have applied approaches to choosing their faith communities similar to those they use to choose their products and the end result is a lack of commitment or loyalty to any particular community. For example, if you don't like the pastor, or the music, or the ambiance then just find a new church! Even more interesting, the response of the church has been to follow suit and adapt to this trend. Churches do this by branding their church style and selling an experience. However good, this approach becomes problematic when the new focus is not authentic to their style and comfort. The issue is that churches cannot seek to appease people just as the markets do, because what they are selling is not a temporary hype that is meant to be replaced in a few months. Adapting to the times can be harmless until it's not. And that "not" is when the demand no longer matches the supply and the church's most basic mission is no longer at the center of it all.

What do we do when we are surrounded by those who are careless with their decision making, especially knowing that it does have the potential to impact living in community? Today there is death all around us. Daily we experience martyrdom bred from intolerance, reckless abuse of power and position, and blatant disregard for the sacredness of life. Our earthly bodies can only take so much from the disaster that has become of our sinful nature. Amidst this devastation, mourning, and misery we are told that hope is here. What should Christians' response be as representatives of Christ on earth, broken and wounded? They need to make the best out of their situations whether those situations are a result of their choosing or not. The Bible is full of commendable characters who made decisions with this in mind and are known today for those choice-worthy steps. The book of Esther contains one such character, a young woman who is thrown into a situation few would choose.

The story of Esther parallels our times. Esther was a young Jewish woman chosen to be queen. In this position of influence, it could have seemed that hope was lost when a law decreed that all Jews be killed at the hands of the powerful King Xerxes I, her king. Conflicted about the impending execution of her people, she turned to her uncle Mordecai. As it is recorded in the Bible, Mordecai shared these timely words, "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"⁹ Unlike the young people of our time, Esther was not given many choices. Forced into a position of influence, she was faced with the choice of sitting comfortable in the role expected of her as queen or to act on her convictions. Sometimes we are put in positions that we are not comfortable with. We shy

⁹ Est 4:14 NIV

Bridge/Work: Action, Ideas and the Meaningful Life- Volume 1- Spring 2016

away from this power of choice for fear of controversy, being ashamed that we don't know enough, and we become indifferent. We don't feel like we fit the image of a powerful person of faith, and so we never use the power that is available for us. The story of Esther reminds us that relying on God is not about behavior modification, it's about soul transformation. Had Esther not taken steps to reflect on her position and her privilege, she would not have discovered her purpose. It was through Esther's discomfort that God saved an entire people.

The New Necessity of Service

Service, as it is widely done by millennials, is trending towards a similar pattern of fleeting commitments. Students are increasingly choosing short-term service experiences and one or two year service programs designed for the postgraduate experience. As I thought about why these service opportunities are so appealing, I learned that these full-immersion service trips are about much more than service on the surface level. Choosing to take time off from a "traditional track" after graduation as a "gap year" or a program, millennials are being intentional in choosing to serve. Why is this? What this tells us is the following: 1. It is important to note that these are "distinctly temporary situations" 2. It is more apparent than ever that by the time graduates are walking across the stage, they are *exhausted*. Millennials are still seeking to be *inspired*. Nobody wants to enter the "real world" uninspired, like a robot that's been trained to do a task. Service provides this experience to be removed, to be rejuvenated, and to be in reflection. As one of the pastors at Valparaiso University's Chapel of the Resurrection, Pastor Charlene Cox put it so eloquently, through these experiences you are "being filled up by being emptied out in service."¹⁰ For these reasons programs that focus on service in this way combat the paradox of choice in that they are not just increasingly popular, but they are increasingly *necessary*.

Like Esther, young adults of the millennial generation are looking for places where their values align with their faith and in many cases are searching for their own beliefs, beliefs that are authentic to them. Millennials belong to many affiliations, so to ask them to commit to one God, one belief system and one faith can come off as restricting, especially if there has not been a life-transforming experience. For the millennial generation, life is a quest to figure out and define our own values; to not be further informed or completely conformed, but truly *transformed*. For everyone else, the job is simple, to provide and encourage places and spaces that break the trend of shallow catering to young people, catering that keeps their attention about as long as any other entertainment source. We are not trying to keep them, we are trying to reach them—their whole being, heart and soul. Once reached, no matter where life takes them on their journey of transition, they know *who* they are and *whose* they are. No matter what choices they've made and regretted or have yet to make, they need to know that they are *chosen*. And that's a choice they can be sure of.

¹⁰ Rev. Charlene Rachuy Cox. Interview by author, May 2015.

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