

# KILROY CAFÉ

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# The Burden of Choice

*More options aren't necessarily a good thing.*

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Choice is good—or so we are told. 500 channels are better than five. 30 flavors are better than three. In theory, the more choices you have, the more ways you can solve your problems.

In practice, though, too much choice can be a burden and often leads to bad results. The more choices people have, the more opportunity they have to screw themselves up, especially with choices they are not qualified to make.

“Get out and vote!” the public is urged, but this advice only draws uninformed voters to the polls who don’t have a clue who they are voting for, so we end up with inept public officials. Likewise, when people have too much choice about their investments, health or nutrition, they are likely to make poor choices that are statistically worse than making no choice at all.

The healthiest diet is usually one where someone sets a meal down in front of you and says, “Eat this!”, but that’s not the way most of us do it. In the commercial world, we are bombarded by choices—a glorious buffet of them!—and the more we have, the more likely we are to eat poorly and far too much.

In general, it is best to preserve your future options whenever possible. You shouldn’t choose for a whole lifetime if you have the option to choose for a year then choose again later. On the other hand, every choice is stressful and uses up resources in itself.

If you have 500 channels to choose from, then you have to take time to go through all those options and evaluate them. This wasn’t the case when there were only a handful channels: You always knew what was on, and your

relative lack of control was a natural limit on how much you watched.

Unlimited choice is a delusion. Instead of 5 channels of crap, you now have 500, so the healthy choices, if any, are buried in the noise.

It is the natural aim of marketers to create new choices based on increasing trivial criteria. Why buy an ordinary laundry detergent when you can get one with blue freshness crystals? Modern commerce gives you endless choices, but it also extenuates and deadens your ability to choose. If you are spending too much energy on the trivial choices like laundry detergent, then you can’t be paying enough attention to the big and important ones.

But choice isn’t necessarily a panacea for the big decisions either. At every crossroads, it is good to dwell on your future direction. Huge amounts of energy can be saved by choosing a wise path at an early stage rather than enduring the long-term defects of a badly chosen route. Yet, at some point you have to accept the path you are on and work with it.

For better or worse, each of us has already made a number of choices that are difficult to change. While it is a fallacy to say you have “no choice”, you are probably going to stick with your current path unless there’s a reason to alter it. Breaking an established route takes courage and effort, and it may not always be wise.

Choosing the right path is only part of the journey. The other part is traveling the path you have chosen. You aren’t going to get anywhere unless you actually start walking, committing yourself to resolving whatever obstacles you encounter along the way.

It is a mistake to call it an absolute commitment, one you will never break, but it is okay to turn choice off for a while. You can say to yourself, “I’m going to climb this mountain,” and once you have made a route selection, you don’t have to revisit it every hour. You just accept the path and get on with it.

The balance here is between freedom and structure. If you have too much freedom, you won’t know what to do with yourself, and you’ll make uninformed decisions based on superficial criteria. If you have too much structure, then you won’t have the ability to change paths should a better one come up.

Choice is expensive! It soaks up your time and energy, and the lure of it is often irresistible. How many of us can go into a sumptuous buffet and choose only the healthy items and portions? Most of us will gorge ourselves because we aren’t truly qualified to handle all that choice.

So what’s the solution? You don’t go into the buffet! Likewise, you can avoid the burden of 500 channels by simply not subscribing to the service. If you treat small choices as a package, you can be more detached about the decision and whether it is good for your health. Then you are less burdened with the micro-choices within the big one.

Instead of choosing all the time, you can manage yourself as you would a child, presenting to him only the choices he can handle. It sounds silly, but it works! If unhealthy choices aren’t available, then they aren’t a temptation.

Sometimes, the greatest wisdom is knowing when you are unqualified to choose and limiting yourself accordingly.

—G.C.

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