

## **“Happy With What Your Ordered? On Maximizers and Satisficers”**

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

On October 24, 2004

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

Picture this scene: You go out to dine at a restaurant with three other people. You arrive together, you're all seated, and a waitperson brings you all menus.

Seated on your left is Mr. S. He looks over the menu and puts it down, having decided what he's going to order. This is taken him about a minute, during which time Mr. M, seated on your right, has managed to read and consider many of the choices available as appetizers. (I've made them both men – though I could have made them both women -- lest it seem the distinction I'm developing here is necessarily related to one's sex).

By the time the waitperson returns eight minutes later to take orders, Mr. M has finished reading the menu and narrowed his choices down to five. No, six. No, five. He has the rest of you order first, after which his list of possibilities is up to eight, the five he had a minute before and the three meals the rest of you have ordered.

Or maybe not, maybe not Mr. S's choice, which he made so quickly. Mr. M asks Mr. S why he selected as he did, and Mr. S says it was something he had never eaten before, or something he always ordered if it was on the menu, or just something that happened to catch his fancy, something he was sure he'd like just fine.

Mr. M decides he doesn't need to give that choice any further consideration, since Mr. S had made it with so perplexingly little thought. I mean, what's wrong with Mr. S, Mr. M thinks, surely there is something on the menu that Mr. S would have liked better than what he chose; how could Mr. S not take the time to find it.

Instead, Mr. S had spent the time in conversation with you and the fourth person at the table as you two glimpsed through the whole menu and made your choices, taking more time than Mr. S but less than Mr. M, who is still trying to select among seven possibilities.

In the end, of course, Mr. M makes his choice, his carefully-considered attempt to select the very best item on the menu for him. But if a man named Barry Schwartz is right, Mr. M not only missed out on that opening conversation, he is apt to be less happy with his meal than Mr. S. That's because, in Schwartz's language, Mr. M is a maximizer, and Mr. S is a satisficer.

Schwartz writes that a maximizer “will seek and accept only the best.... Maximizers need to be assured that every purchase or decision was the best that could be made....

“The alternative is to be a satisficer,” and surely the weakest part of Schwartz's case is the choice to use that weird word, actually invented by economist Herbert Simon. It even has a verb form: “To satisfice,” he writes, “is to settle for something that is good enough and not worry about the possibility that there might be something better. The satisficer has criteria and standards. She searches until she finds an item that meets those standards, and at that point, she stops.”

And she is apt to be happier with her choice than the maximizer is with his, even if he has selected a superior item. By the time the maximizer makes his choice, he has seen many more also-rans, many of which were almost as good. And his expectations of his choice will probably be unfulfilled at least in some way, because they were so high.

The maximizer's unhappy situation is compounded by the ever-greater number of choices we are called upon to make. As one can easily imagine, Schwartz can provide all sorts of examples of choice overload, at the supermarket, at a consumer electronics store, in catalogs, in college course offerings, on TV, and elsewhere. Choice is a welcome part of our lives – up to a point. But at some point, choice becomes a burden, at least for many, especially a maximizer, though not for all.

“For a maximizer, the overload of choice ... is a nightmare. But for a satisficer, it does not have to be such a burden. In fact, the more options there are, the more likely it is that the satisficer will find one that meets his or her standards. Adding options doesn't necessarily add much work for the satisficer, because the satisficer feels no compulsion to check out all the possibilities before deciding.” [92-3]

Schwartz, a professor at Swarthmore College, presented his views in an article in *Scientific American* in April, about the time his book came out, titled, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. A briefer presentation than the book can be found online as the “Swarthmore Last Collection,” a talk he gave to graduating seniors at commencement there this year. This morning's benediction echoes Schwartz's words on that occasion. [“I wish each of you ... a life governed by reasonable expectations, and filled with love and work that is a calling. A life as part of a community that listens to you just as you listen to it.” May we be such a community. May such a life be yours.]

Schwartz observes, “If there's a supreme value in American society it's freedom.... What we're learning, as the experience of personal freedom continues to grow, is that there can be too much of a good thing – that too much freedom can be bad for well-being. For along with this growth of freedom has come unprecedented unhappiness – clinical depression, suicide, and the use of psychological services and antidepressant drugs in alarming numbers.... More choice can bring less satisfaction....

“A wealth of options creates an opportunity, to be sure, but it also creates a problem that has to be solved. It forces you to put time and effort into decisions, even about trivial things. It causes you to worry, if you choose without exploring all the options, that maybe you've made a mistake. It forces you to make tradeoffs, passing up an option with one attractive feature to select a different option with another attractive feature. It raises your expectations about just how good the things you finally choose will be. And finally, it induces you to blame yourself when the choice you make after lots of hand wringing turns out to be less than perfect. Massive effort in making decisions, passed-up attractive alternatives, disappointing results, and self-blame. This is not a recipe for well-being. Yet it is a recipe that more and more people seem compelled to follow.

“Choice overload is a problem for everyone, but it's a special problem for people who feel that they have to get the best when they make decisions.” [“Swarthmore Last Collection,” 1,2] And we know who he means by that: Mr. M and his fellow maximizers.

Schwartz believes that maximizing is different from perfectionism, and not just because he wants to sell books and there are already lots of books on perfectionism. He writes, “While maximizers and perfectionists both have very high standards, I think that

perfectionists have very high standards that they don't expect to meet, whereas maximizers have very high standards that they do expect to meet.

"Which may explain why [in our studies] we found that those who score high on perfectionism, unlike maximizers, are not depressed, regretful, or unhappy." [90-1]

It needs to be noted that nearly no one is always a maximizer or a satisficer. Schwartz includes a set of thirteen statements in the book that enable you to place yourself somewhere on the continuum, depending upon whether you agree with them or not. I end up being somewhat on the satisficer side of things, which figures. I do find it easy to find something on the menu I'll probably like just fine. But number 10 among the 13 statements is, "I find that writing is very difficult, even when it's just writing a letter to a friend, because it's so hard to get the words just right. I often do several drafts of even simple things." Well, I do write emails and then not send them until I've reread them and edited them several times later.

Schwartz himself is further toward the satisficer end, though "Nonetheless," he writes, "like practically everyone else, I have my own select areas in which I tend to maximize. When I go into one of those fancy stores that sells elegantly prepared takeout foods or to a social gathering that offers a buffet that looks like it was prepared for *Gourmet* magazine, I look at the wide variety of delicious foods and I want them all. I can imagine what they all taste like, and I want to experience each one. So I find myself reluctant to make a decision. As a maximizer in this regard, I experience many of the problems I've been talking about.... When I finally make a choice, I think about the items I've passed up. I second-guess myself, and I often regret my decision, not because it turns out badly, but because I suspect that a different decision might have turned out better. In restaurants, I have difficulty ordering, and then I look at food being brought out to the other diners, and not infrequently conclude that they ordered more wisely than I did. All of which clearly diminishes the satisfaction I get from the choices I actually make." [91-92]

He goes on to cite other areas of decision-making, where a person might become a maximizer in selecting the best stereo equipment, or car, or investment. Some of us become very demanding when trying to find the very cheapest airline tickets, or when balancing the checkbook. "...Maximizing and satisficing tend to be 'domain specific,' he writes. Nobody is a maximizer in every decision, and probably everybody is in some.... This is good news, because what it means is that most of us have the capacity to be satisficers. The task, then, for someone who feels overwhelmed by choices, is to apply the satisficing strategy more often, letting go of the expectation that 'the best' is attainable." [92]

It's hard to imagine applying that strategy to the World Series. And I am not going to suggest how it might apply in personal relations or the upcoming election. I'm satisfied to let you do that yourself, if you want.

But a little example of the strategy comes to mind, something I heard Bill Schulz say to some seminarians once. Bill was then the president of the UUA, and famed for his great use of stories in his sermons and addresses. Partly, this resulted from his having people passing good stories on to him. But when asked for his secret, Bill said it was to avoid believing there was a perfect story to be found. He said, you look until you have two or three good ones, and then you stop. Otherwise, you use up time you could be spending on the rest of the sermon.

And time is one of the issues, the amount of time that goes into making all these choices we have, especially if your standards are higher than they need to be. This is time that could be spent developing relationships, which turns out to be the real road to greater happiness.

Schwartz has some advice to offer, in case he's convinced us that maximizing is the other road, the one that leads to misery, or at least not toward happiness. For example, he believes in expertise. He thinks we're overly given to relativism, to an attitude that because perfect truth is unknowable, what's left is a bunch of opinions, one about as good as another. But we will drown in the sea of choices we have to make unless we work at identifying people and institutions we can trust to make some of those choices for us.

In his final chapter, Schwartz offers eleven bits of advice on how to deal with the overabundance of choice, which a helpful online site reduced to four:

1. "Learn to accept 'good enough.' Settle for a choice that meets your core requirements rather than searching for the elusive 'best.' Then stop thinking about it."
2. "Don't worry about what you're missing. Consciously limit how much you ponder the seemingly attractive features of options you reject. Teach yourself to focus on the positive parts of the selections you make."
3. "Control expectations. 'Don't expect too much and you won't be disappointed' is a cliché. But that advice is sensible if you want to be more satisfied with life."
4. "Choose when to choose. We can decide to restrict our options when the decision is not crucial." [Innovation Network, "Does Choice Make Us Happy?", 2]

Choose when to choose. As Schwartz writes, "we must decide which choices in our lives really matter and focus our time and energy there, letting many other opportunities pass us by." [222] We can even give ourselves leave to maximize over a matter or two.

For me, there is an underlying religious aspect to Schwartz's presentation. Religion can be viewed in a number of ways, and I have done so myself, but among the ways I long have favored are, (1) religion is a matter of perspective, of knowing what matters and what does not; (2) religion is a matter of intention, of choosing to live one's life by some considered set of values; (3) religion is an attempt to live one's life with greater meaning, purpose, and ... joy; and (4) religion is an appreciation of life's blessings and mercies, a matter of praise.

I close with another little story, one I was told by my colleague and long-time friend Bob Schaibly. Bob visited a 103-year-old woman in the Midwest recently, a woman of remarkable good spirits. He asked her, "How's your health?" And she replied, "Good enough for me."

May we all aspire to be able to be as game, as satisfied, whatever our struggles, whatever our age.