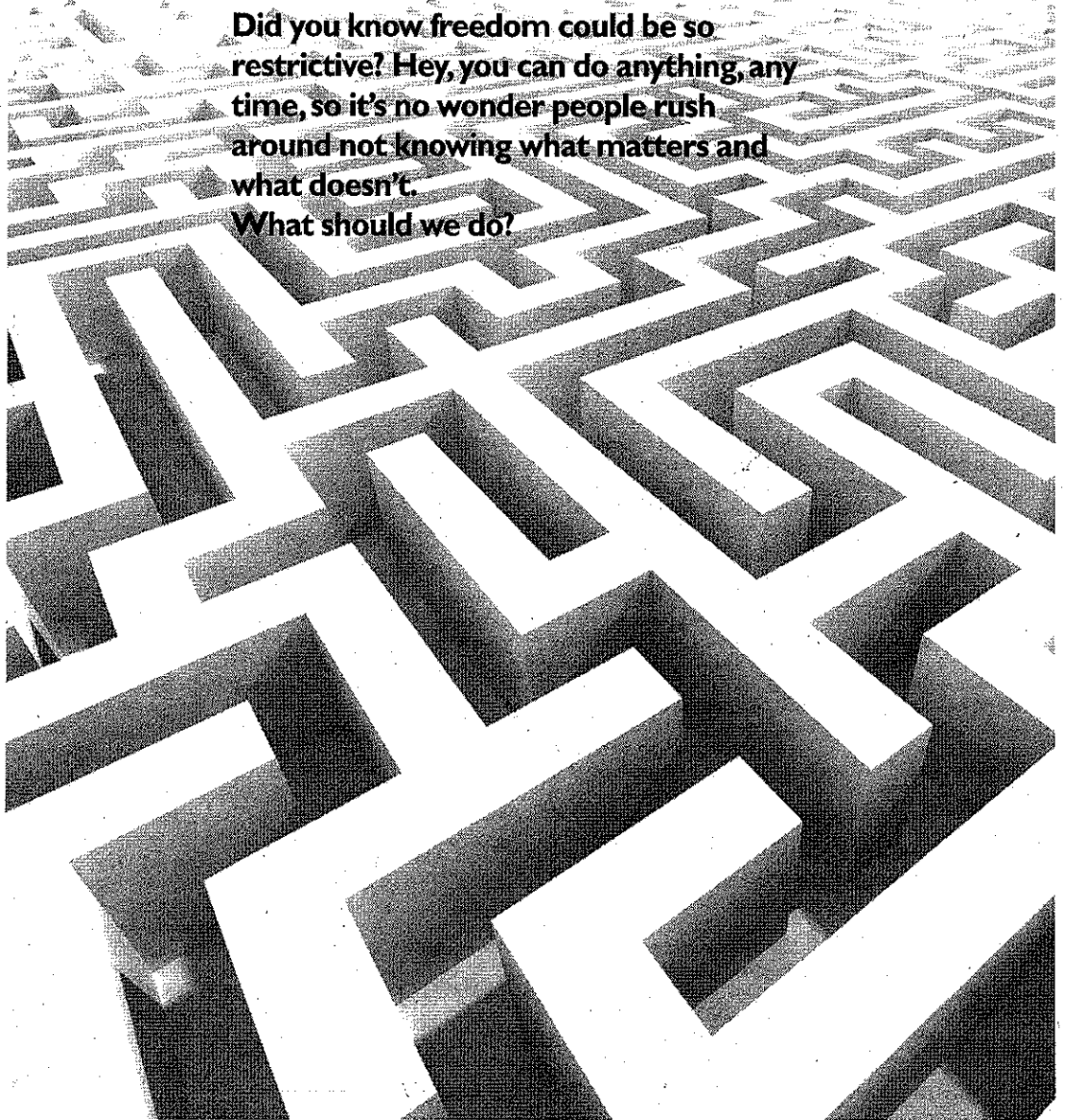


OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, June 21, 2009

Did you know freedom could be so restrictive? Hey, you can do anything, any time, so it's no wonder people rush around not knowing what matters and what doesn't. What should we do?



The burden of choice

"Freedom of choice is essential to self-respect, public participation, mobility and nourishment, but not all choice enhances freedom. Increased choice among goods and services may contribute little or nothing to the kind of freedom that counts. Indeed, it may impair freedom by taking time and energy we'd be better off devoting to other matters."

— Barry Schwarz

We march out of the shower and hop one-footed into the day. Makeup is applied while driving. The digital clock hustles children into morning panic.

Where are we going with such speed? My friend Doug tells me they walk fast on the sidewalks in Paris.

Even in the leisurely Okanagan, some of us wake before dawn to fret over the eastern stock exchanges.

Late at night, I hear motorcycles racing. Ambulance lights twinkle across the lake. Some child is trying not to dream about the near-miss at the crosswalk.

We tap our heels in the coffee lineup or rap our fingers while waiting for a webpage to load. Rush, rush, rush. No time to spare.

All the choices in the world, all the power of technology, all the freedom a democratic society can offer — and so much disillusionment.

Why are there 246 kinds of shampoo? Why is buying a toothbrush an act of agony?

Our heart rates rise. Our blood pressure boils. Our caffeinated identities pulse to twice the size. It's no wonder we're stressed out.

We want the best out of life, but selection takes so much effort.

The pace of modernity erases the biological rhythm of life. Did you know that it is summer now? It scarcely registers unless we are forced to stop and take notice.

Look at the June sky. Feel the musty heat. Smell the warm wind.

Do you really need to drive around town looking for the best fit and the cheapest that?

And even when I sit still and try to focus, my mind wanders. Why?

Sit still. Slow down. Take it easy. Step aside. Take a breath. Cool down. Check out. Hold your breath. Listen. Hear. Swallow. Breathe again.

Breathing exercises can help you slow down and experience a quiet mind and body.

I practise breathing all the time, but it's tough to get good at something so seemingly natural. Breathing from deep inside your belly takes skill.

Try taking 10 deep breaths and, if you're anything like me, before you get to the count of five, your mind will go skittering away. I need new tires. The vacuum needs a filter. The line of credit is rising. Our countertops suck.

Why is it so hard to quiet the mind?

Sometimes, my children ask me about the pace of life.

"Dad, why are you always rushing? Why are you so busy?"

I shrug my shoulders. "Well . . . because I have no choice."

Really?

A few years ago, I read a book on discovering one's strengths

and discovered I was a "Maximizer."

That made me feel kind of good. I am one of those people who like to get the best out of my choices. I can't help it.

I've only recently figured out that my strength has its dark side. It turns out that I need help figuring out what choices are worth maximizing and what choices I should just forget about.

Do I really need to spend three hours on the Internet figuring out what all-season tires have the best wear rating to price ratio? How much research on stainless steel rice pots can one person do?

If I'm not careful, I can be an indiscriminate maximizer. If I let myself, I will analyze things that aren't worth the time and effort.

Maybe maximizing is going to kill me. Kryptonite for a maximizer is to discover too many choices. People like me love choices, want choices, but find it hard to admit that choices can sometimes paralyze and turn us into idiots.

If you only knew how much time I spend thinking about tennis racquet string, tennis racquet string tension and tennis racquet string gauge. Do you know I have two types of string in my racquet at two different tensions, each string with a unique gauge, brand and colour?

Do I need hospitalization?

Did you know freedom could be so restrictive? Hey, you can do anything, any time, so it's no wonder people rush around not knowing what matters and what doesn't.

What should we do?

Much maximizing activity is crazy. It's like driving around all day to save two cents a litre on gas. The endless travelling, the endless researching, the endless choosing — it's helping us go nowhere incredibly fast.

Researchers tell us to consciously limit our choices.

New research in behavioural economics, choice architecture and positive psychology is telling us that having more choices doesn't necessarily make you happier.

In fact, you might be better off learning how to constrain your freedom. Make a budget. Give yourself some limits. Make a line you will not cross. Make a choice to limit your choices. Stop sweating the details of the little stuff.

Remember when you were a kid and you went to your mother and begged for something to do?

"Mom, I'm so bored. What can I do? There's nothing to do."

"You have two choices, kid. You can go outside or you can go outside."

"Mom!"

Life was simple in the good old days. The choices were perfect.

What are the odds that all the best friends I had as a kid just happened to be the kid next door? What magical power was intervening for me? Or was it something else?

Limit your choices. Choose the right things to maximize.

Sometimes you don't need the very best. Sometimes good enough is just perfect.

Put down the mouse, flick off the TV, lay down this newspaper, take a deep breath and make your freedom really count.

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