

The “Road of Life”: A Simple Strategy for Improving Decision-Making Skill

Andrea M. Williams

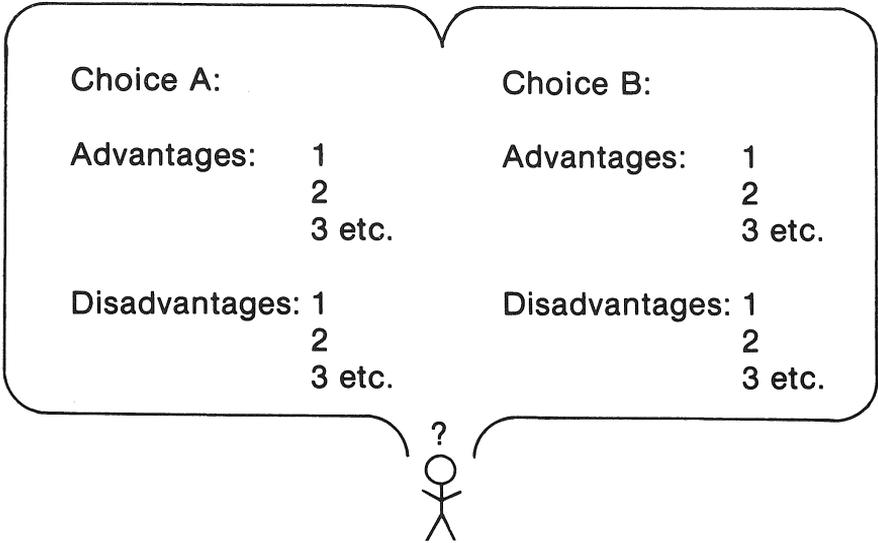
From the time we reach age of reason, each of us has the dilemma of making a decision many times daily. It is the dilemma of knowing *what* to decide, *when* to decide, *how* to decide, even *whether* to decide. If we believe that man is a decision-making being, who must take responsibility for the consequences of his actions, it is clear that the decision-making function is perhaps the most critical of all personal and social skills. If we believe that man learns through his mistakes and must have the courage to be imperfect, it is clear the flexibility in decision-making — that is, the ability to reevaluate alternatives and commitments — is of the utmost importance in mastering the complexities of a changing society. (A leading executive was once asked how he came to be so successful. “By making the right decisions,” he replied. “And how did you learn to make the right decisions?” “Why, by making the wrong decisions, of course!”)

In the process of working with children, adults, and families over the past several years, it has become increasingly apparent to me that a large majority of interpersonal problems may be due to a deficiency in one or more of the following decision-making skills: ability to generate alternatives, ability to value alternatives, willingness to commit to a course of action and/or change it if necessary, willingness to accept the disadvantages of a particular course of action, and — perhaps the most difficult of all — willingness to *give up* the advantages of the course of action *not* taken.

What was needed was a strategy, a device for *manipulating information*, simple enough for children, comprehensive enough to accommodate subtle and complex psychological decisions, effective in placing responsibility solely within the province of the decider, yet enjoyable to work with. The *Road of Life* was designed to be such a strategy.

What does the “Road of Life” look like?

Picture a road that approaches a fork and divides. At the end of each is a wide area or “balloon.” Each “road” represents a choice, and within each balloon are listed *both* the advantages and disadvantages of that choice. The human figure (important to the reality of the diagram) is placed before the fork in a questioning manner, according to the following illustration.



The individual is asked to label each balloon with a legitimate choice, then to list the advantages and disadvantages within each balloon. For children, the words “good” and “bad” may be substituted. It is important for the success of this technique that both choices be valid and acceptable and that the counselor, if used in that setting, maintain a thoroughly nonjudgmental and nonevaluative attitude. The choice belongs to the “decider.” The consequences of that choice belong to the “decider.” In practice, it has been found that the simple listing of favorable and unfavorable alternatives on opposite sides of a piece of paper simply does not have the cognitive impact or clarity of the actual diagram. The listing or speaking of alternatives seems to lead to endless circularity of thought. It appears that by presenting all pertinent aspects of the problem *simultaneously*, the *Road of Life* technique has the ability to fix the decision in time and space, enabling it to be dealt with as a single unit.

How does the “Road of Life” work?

Although I have used this technique informally for several years, it is only recently that I have begun to teach it systematically, as well as to request input into its possible applications and ramifications. Recent experience has shown that it serves the following functions:

1. The *Road of Life* creates an atmosphere in which divergent thinking is encouraged — that is, by placing no immediate value or priority on specific advantages or disadvantages, the individual feels free to generate as many as possible, either alone or with the help of others. I have used the *Road of Life* in a group setting, asking for a problem in which the individual felt he “had no choice, but to . . .” Group discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of *both* choices has had results which were quite dramatic and unexpected. Typical comments were: “I never realized I really did have a choice.” “Now that I see the other side of the coin, I think I made the wrong decision.”

2. The *Road of Life* is able to demonstrate that many decisions are reversible, particularly in the field of interpersonal relationships. The understanding that a decision may be temporary, coupled with the clear presentation of the consequences of an alternate course of action has had the effect of securing commitment from those who are anxious about failure. Decisions are thus seen as “trials,” not as prisons. Furthermore, the disadvantages inherent, and now visible, in any complex choice enable the highly anxious individual to “save face” should he consider backtracking and reconsidering his original decision.

3. It was surprising to discover that the greatest impact of the *Road of Life* technique often occurred in an area which was somewhat unexpected: values clarification. Most individuals find that in the course of freely listing advantages and disadvantages, one or two of them will suddenly and spontaneously “jump out.” Interestingly, it is often one which the individual considers minor and which is put down just to expand the list. This phenomenon can lead to a significant degree of insight and is perceived as something the person has learned on his own. The following real-life example is an illustration of how the *Road of Life* provided a young mother with valuable insight into her true values:

Choice: to work full-time

Advantages: more status
socially stimulating
feeling of competence and
doing a worthwhile job
have the things I want
get help with chores
be better organized with
time

Disadvantages:

not have as much free time
feel tied down
may shirk other responsibilities
worry about welfare of children
need more and better clothes
expenses go up
would be tired

Choice: to stay home

Advantages: I can do anything
I want with my free time
need fewer clothes
expenses go down
be home after school
do things with children
have dinner ready on time
wouldn't be as tired

Disadvantages:

not much money
feel dissatisfied
would not feel I was doing a
worthwhile job
I can't have the things I want
husband can't have the things
he wants
lose feeling of competence



After examining the *Road* for a few moments, the woman suddenly exclaimed, “I see it now. I see what it's all about. Here I've been rationalizing about the children, the clothes, the free time, etc. That wasn't the issue at all.”

She then proceeded to draw a big circle around two statements: "Have the things I want," and "I can do anything I want with my free time." "The issue," she said, "isn't really to work or not to work. It's a choice between *having* what I want and *doing* what I want!"

When can the "Road of Life" be used?

The *Road of Life* is theoretically applicable to virtually any decision, provided the individual is aware of at least one advantage and one disadvantage related to each choice. It has the additional function of indicating when the amount of information is insufficient for a decision to be made at that time. The following examples, many of which have come from actual practice, indicate the possible range of problems to which the technique can be applied:

1. A seventh grader must decide between fighting, which is against his family teachings and scout code, or not fighting and subjecting himself to the teasing of his friends.

2. A child must choose between doing a report on a subject in which he is truly interested but knows little and doing one on a less interesting subject, but on which he is likely to do a better job.

3. A child who has been in a power conflict with his teacher desires to improve his work but feels he will be "giving in" to the teacher if he does as she asks.

4. A young woman has been asked to decide between surgery and chemotherapy for a malignancy. The *Road of Life* enabled her to realize the need for more data before a decision could be made.

5. A middle-aged woman is torn between her lifelong desire to please others by seeking and taking their advice in personal matters and a growing desire to be independent, self-sufficient, and capable of solving her own problems.

6. An engineer is faced with the opportunity of joining a new company with an uncertain future which, if it is successful, could offer greater chance for advancement than his present, more secure, position offers.

7. A teacher is a member of a faculty committee. The committee has made a decision with which she does not agree. She feels she should do what she believes is right, but she also feels she should support the committee.

8. A young man cannot decide whether to take Carla or Judy to the dance Saturday night. It is now Thursday, and he "cannot make up his mind." This is an example of *The Shadow Road*, which is in effect a third *valid* choice.

What is The Shadow Road?

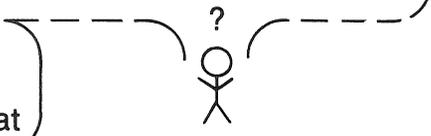
The Shadow Road is used in special cases of decision-making difficulty. Many decisions involve either (a) choosing between behaviors of which both

(or all) forms are presently being exhibited, e.g., fighting or not fighting; or (b) choosing to move into a new state of being vs. remaining in one's present state — e.g., making no effort to find a new job is in effect a *decision* to remain in one's present position; not asking for a raise is in effect a *decision* to accept one's present salary. But a significant number of decisions involve choosing between or among several states of being, none of which is presently being displayed — e.g., choosing the VW or the Datsun, planting flowers or vegetables, marrying Jim or Bruce, adopting a boy or a girl. It is these kinds of decisions, whether trivial or crucial, which seem to cause the greatest amount of personal discomfort. Nevertheless, these too lend themselves to analysis using the *Road of Life* technique, with interesting results. To illustrate, let us use the example of the young man in quest of a date:

Choice: call Carla
Advantages:
pretty
good dancer
popular
Disadvantages:
a little overweight
does not dress well

Choice: call Judy
Advantages:
sharp dresser
good conversationalist
makes a guy feel comfortable
Disadvantages:
not at all pretty
an O.K. dancer, not great

Choice: call neither
Advantages:
avoid the responsibility of making a commitment
no anxiety about having made the wrong choice
Disadvantages:
will not receive the advantages of being with Carla
will not receive the advantages of being with Judy



That the relief which comes of avoiding commitment and responsibility is a valid and worthwhile choice is a fact well known to those who regularly take *The Shadow Road*. But another fact is not so well known. A substantial proportion of those who avoid making decisions are not those who fear being wrong or being made accountable. It consists of those who want it *all*, those who want to have their cake and eat it too. They cannot bear to give up the advantages of either choice. As you can see, the irony of this position is made highly visible in *The Shadow Road*, for those who want the most are the very ones who get the least! And the "inability to decide" is seen for what it often is: the inability to relinquish what one wants.

Summary

The *Road of Life* is essentially a diagram used to manipulate information. By changing information into a state suitable for visual analysis, external logic and memory can be maintained. It is able to give order, cohesion, and coordination to a situation so that its complexity can be more easily managed and easily perceived. Through the diagram, one can explore a variety of new relationships, as well as see these relationships from a new or unusual perspective. The *Road of Life* derives its main justification from two concepts: (a) that any decision is at least dual — that is, it contains within it an additional decision (usually covert) to reject other alternatives; and (b) that virtually any interpersonal decision contains within it both significant advantages and significant disadvantages. These are made visible *simultaneously* by the *Road of Life* technique.

It is hoped that the *Road of Life* will lead to: a perception of increased clarity of alternatives, increased ability to identify and clarify values, increased willingness to commit to a course of action, increased confidence in future decision-making ability, and increased enjoyment of the decision-making process.

The *Road of Life* technique is being used widely in Adlerian-oriented study groups and college-level classes. I am developing it as a research tool to be used in my doctoral dissertation at the University of Maryland during the academic year 1977-78. It would be most helpful to have comments of any kind regarding the technique itself or its application. I am particularly interested in uses or functions which have not yet been identified, special situations, problems in its use, or modifications in the diagram. All usable material will be greatly appreciated and will be acknowledged in the thesis.

Kindly send comments to the following address:

Ms. Andrea M. Williams
10800 Wheeler Drive
Silver Spring, Maryland 20901

References

- Clarke, R., Gelatt, H. B., & Levine, L. A decision-making paradigm for local guidance research. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, September 1965, **44**, 40-51.
- Gelatt, H. B. Decision-making: A conceptual frame of reference for counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, March 1962, **9**(3), 240-45.
- Houtz, J. R., Ringenbach, S., & Feldhusen, J. E. Relationship of problem solving to other cognitive variables. *Psychological Reports*, 1973, **33**, 389-90.
- McEver, C. *Strategy notebook: Tools for change*. Berkeley, California: Interaction Associates, 1962.
- Stuffelbeam, D. I., *Educational evaluation and decision making*. Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock, Inc., 1971.
- Tiedeman, D. V. Decision and vocational development: A paradigm and its implications. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, September 1961, **40**, 15-20.
- A laboratory in educational dynamics. Report of the Faculty of the Training Laboratory in Group Development, Bethel, Maine, June 16 to July 4, 1947. *School and Society*, December 20, 1947, **66**, 475-77.