

CHOICES

MAKING RIGHT
DECISIONS
IN A COMPLEX
WORLD

LEWIS B. SMEDES

AUTHOR OF FORGIVE & FORGET

CHOICES

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FORGIVE & FORGET: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve
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WRONG?

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Gratitude & Integrity

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Making Right Decisions
in a Complex World

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HarperSanFrancisco

A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

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FIRST HARPERCOLLINS PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED IN 1991.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smedes, Lewis B.

Choices: making right decisions in a complex world. / Lewis B. Smedes. —1st HarperCollins pbk. ed.

p. cm.

Reprint. Originally published: San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1988.

ISBN 0-06-067411-3 (alk. paper)

1. Conduct of life. I. Title

[BJ1581.2.S55 1991]

170'.44—dc20

90-55781

CIP

98 99 RRD (H) 10

*To My Students
at Fuller Seminary*

CONTENTS

Foreword	11
CHAPTER ONE: What's Good about Being Right?	15
CHAPTER TWO: Sorting out the Categories	22
CHAPTER THREE: Face the Facts	31
CHAPTER FOUR: Respect the Rules	43
CHAPTER FIVE: Consider the Consequences	67
CHAPTER SIX: When You Can't Be Sure, Be Responsible	91
CHAPTER SEVEN: Being Wrong is Not All Bad	115

To the wise men and women of times past and present from
whom I have harvested almost every thought in this volume,

To my friends Richard Mouw, Linda Smith, and Doris Smedes,
who have read and criticized my manuscript,

To my students who have let me share these thoughts with them
from time to time,

To my editors, Linda Mead of L. T. Mead & Associates and Roy
M. Carlisle of Harper & Row San Francisco,

To readers of other books of mine who have lured me into
believing that writing still another might be useful,

To my Lord,

I give my sincere thanks.

Sierra Madre, 1986

Foreword

We all make choices that touch other people's lives, as well as our own, in ways that leave us wondering whether we are really doing the right thing.

A strange inner force now and then trips us into asking ourselves, "But is it right?" This force, this hormone of our conscience, does not let us stifle it for long; it may sleep for a while, but eventually, when doubt lingers on after the act is done, it wakes up and sneaks into our minds as a creeping disquiet, a vexing misgiving that we might have done the wrong thing.

Sooner or later, most of us have a personal rendezvous with a trembling hunch that we have made a wrong choice.

But how do we know what is right and what is wrong?

Is morality all hit and miss? A matter of how you were brought up? How folks felt about things in your part of the world? Does the question of right and wrong always come down in the end to a matter of taste? When it comes to taste, the sage said, there can be no arguments; to each his own. Is morality like that; whatever each of us happens to feel good about or what others of us have no stomach for?

Or is there some real sense to morality?

Can we talk together about morality as reasonable persons, listen to each other, compare our thoughts, and come to some rational conclusions about the choices we make? I think we can. Morality in my view is not something that we can only shout at each other about. We can consider each other's arguments, weigh them, agree and disagree with them, present alternative points of view, and help each other see things more clearly than we did before. We can reason together about moral choices as rationally as we can with any other choices we make.

Some of us feel comfortable only if all the questions we have about right and wrong are settled by an authority. So we trust morality to the experts, to prophets and priests or gurus and savants, who are supposed to really know what is right and what is wrong. We look for somebody to tell us for sure. What we want—especially in our complicated culture where everything

seems up for grabs, where many of our traditional convictions are challenged—is assurance. We don't want discussions, we want declarations.

People who take their morality only from authority figures tend to feel shortchanged if the answer they get is fudged. When they are looking for a clear and undeniable word on a sticky matter and someone bedevils the issue with a bothersome "But on the other hand, have you considered . . .?" they become unsettled and begin to look for another authority, one who really knows. They want it straight and they want it final, so they can know where they stand. What else are authorities for?

But now and then we run into crises that our authorities have no definite answer for. Or if they do have one, their clear answer runs smack against the clear answer of other authorities. Or against life as we live it.

I serve on the ethics committee of a great hospital in southern California where choices made almost every day determine the life and death of very sick people. These are crises that keep serious doctors awake at night wondering whether they are making the right choices. But very often no one has a clear and simple answer.

Is it right to stop expensive treatment of an elderly patient when the machine seems to be keeping a body alive after the person who once lived in it has gone? Is it right not to operate on a newborn baby when all indications are that the baby will exist as a virtual vegetable even if the operation is successful? When we face questions like these in the form of real people about whose lives we are deciding, we need to reason together with utmost respect for each other's ways of looking at each case.

There is no place like a hospital to discover that there is more than one way to look at moral choices.

Now and then we all get into situations that seem to tell us that we are "damned if we do and damned if we don't." Other occasions seem to tell us that there simply is no right or wrong thing to do about them, but only a somewhat better thing, or a less bad thing. These are times when we feel as if we are thrown on our own, and we may end up wondering whether *anyone* can know for sure that he or she has made a right choice.

We need to think about *how* we can know, maybe not for sure, but at least with good reasons to support our decisions.

I invite you to carry on a discussion with me, and with yourself, about making right choices. About how to evaluate our choices, how to tell right ones from wrong ones, better ones from worse ones. About how to challenge conventional wisdom and popular notions. About how to make up your own mind on what is right.

If you want to be preached to about what is wrong with this, that, and the other thing, you have the wrong book in your hands. This one doesn't do that. It is about how to judge for yourself, in a rational and responsible way, about the moral choices you make.

Of course, wiser people than either of us have been thinking about morality for a long time. There is a long history of thought behind this little book; mostly I am just a conduit for great ideas of greater minds than mine. But I did not write the book to teach you what the teachers tell us. Instead, I want to help you to work through the process for yourself.

Everyone who thinks about moral choices looks at life with his or her own slant. We all have a faith, a way of seeing things, a point of view. My own faith is Christian; you will notice that sooner or later.

I am personally thankful, however, that we live together in a large moral house even if we do not drink at the same fountain of faith. The world we experience together is one world, God's world, and our world, and the problems we share are common human problems. So we can talk together, try to understand each other, and help each other.

In short, this book is about how anyone at all can know whether he or she is making right choices in a confusing world where there always seems to be at least one other way of looking at any problem.

So join me and let's reason together, one step at a time, about the choices we make, especially the choices that sometimes leave us wondering, "Did I do the right thing?"

What's Good about Being Right?

It feels good. But is it right?
It looks good. But is it right?
It pays well. But is it right?

One question weaves its pesky way through everything we do. It tags behind us. It nags inside us. It sneaks into our consciousness, usually uninvited and often unwanted, and it will not quit its dogged pursuit of our best and truest selves. The question is: Are we doing the *right* thing?

We ask it when we want to be sure about a decision we must make tomorrow. We ask it when we feel a remnant of trembling doubt about a choice we made yesterday.

It bothers us, it annoys us; we often wish we could shake it off and do whatever we want whenever the mood is on us—double our pleasure or double our money—and away with the nagging question of right or wrong. But we cannot walk away from it. Not the way we can walk away from the newspaper and the TV set. For it echoes from the abyss of our being. It is the voice of our most real self.

Of course, we are talking about a special kind of right and wrong; and we may as well label it with the proper word, that indelicate word, that nuisance word, that unsociable word, *moral*.

We all twit each other about the right and wrong of almost everything people do, but mostly we are talking about something that has nothing at all to do with morality.

Take a few examples. You could be wearing clashing colors; your choice of colors is *aesthetically* wrong. But only an idiot

would suggest that you are morally wrong because your colors are wrong. You may invest in a losing mutual fund; your choice is *economically* wrong. But you are not morally wrong for making a bad investment. You could drive sixty miles an hour in a forty-mile zone when taking your spouse to the hospital; you would be *legally* wrong. But nobody in his or her right mind will tell you that you are being morally wrong for breaking a traffic law when you think your spouse's life could be in the balance. So, you can do any number of things that are wrong in other ways and still be home free in the moral world.

The same sorts of differences filter through the word "right." We can wear the right clothes to a party, buy the right stock, go to the right therapist, attend the right church, have a smashing sex life, and still, on the moral stage, hobble like a ballet dancer on crutches.

If you filmed a single scene from ordinary life, and showed it to a bunch of ordinary people, you might get a flock of different slants on the right or wrong of what was going on, each of them coming from a legitimate vantage point, yet all of them missing the moral factor.

Take this little story, for instance.

Two people are waiting for a bus. The first person in line is a slight little lady, maybe ninety pounds or so, about sixty-five years old, carrying her dignity along with a bag full of groceries. The second person is a young man, about eighteen, a big chunk of a fellow, maybe two hundred pounds. The little lady climbs aboard the bus first. She struggles down the aisle and gets about halfway to the back of the bus before she notices that there is only one empty seat in the bus, and it is the center seat in the rear row. The strapping young man spots the empty seat too, and he bolts for it. He muscles past the elderly lady, elbows her to one side, sends her sprawling over a couple of persons' laps, lettuce and potatoes rolling down the aisle. She is shocked and breathless, but not seriously injured. The young man sits down in the empty seat and looks straight ahead.

Their fellow passengers are watching. They all find fault with what the young man did, and a few of them grumble their complaints.