



Stepping Stones for the Good Life

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The Beauty of Black-and-White Decisions

From the Desk of Glenda Haskell, *Life Coach*

More than three years ago, I made a significant change in my life that only afterwards did I give a name to: a black-and-white decision¹.

For most of my life I've been what I'll call a sweets junky. I was the person who, when a sheet cake showed up in the conference room at work to celebrate one event or another, I went for the corner piece with extra frosting along both edges *and* the decorative roses on top. I enjoyed it all: brownies, cookies, M&Ms (peanut and plain), almost every candy bar that's been made, and, in my opinion the best of all sweets, luscious dark chocolate. For years I needed to have enough dark chocolate in the house to be sure I wouldn't run out. I didn't eat an inordinate amount of sweets, but they played an important part in my notion of a life well lived. You get the picture.

Then I read several books that led me to give up refined sugar altogether, yes, as in going cold turkey. (If you want to know which books, drop me an email.) Since the only way I could handle this decision was to treat it as an experiment, I committed to being sweets-free for only a month. No refined sugar, which includes brown sugar, honey, maple syrup (next to chocolate, the second hardest thing to let go of), Agave nectar—you name it. Of course, it wasn't easy at first. (Who said change is easy?) But before I knew it, the month was up. Much to my surprise, I had stayed the course.

At that point, I was astounded to find that my sugar craving had vanished. Gone. When a staff person walked by after a meeting ended, carrying a tray of cookies or brownies back to the office kitchen for people to help themselves to, I no longer heard the irresistible flute of the Sugar Pied Piper. Even dark chocolate had lost its grip on me. So what did I do? I decided to turn my experiment into a full-fledged habit, which has been with me ever since.

What were the consequences? For one thing, I lost an easy seven or eight pounds—weight that stays off without effort. (Apparently, those were the “five pounds” that I always felt like I needed to lose, since I haven't had that thought since.) My clothes fit better. I feel much better. Plus, I savor the natural sweetness of whole fruit like never before (perhaps because I no longer have the taste of refined sugar to compare it to). (Please don't interpret my message here as downplaying in any way

¹ I can't claim to have created this term, but I also can't recall the source.

how complicated food issues can be. Such organizations as Overeaters Anonymous are much-needed and crucial resources.)

This decision is but one example in my life of what I call a black-and-white decision. Three other examples that stand out are quitting smoking—thankfully 37 years ago; flossing my teeth *every* night before I go to bed, even while camping in the wilderness; exercising first thing in the morning six days a week, which I’ve been doing for more than 25 years (with rare exceptions); and giving up—for good—my modest Diet Coke habit and the price I paid for drinking it (general agitation and fitful sleep).

What, then, is the beauty of such decisions?

1. A black-and-white decision requires less willpower.

Not long ago I listened to an interview with psychologist Dr. Roy Baumeister, co-author along with science writer John Tierney of the recently-published *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. The authors liken human willpower to a muscle, which, like physical muscle, can only do so much work before it gets tuckered out. The way I see it, I don’t have to spend a shred of willpower on not eating sweets. How sweet is that?

As I mentioned, exercising six mornings a week is another one of my black-and-white decisions. On the occasional day when I get distracted in the morning and put off my exercise routine, I can feel—almost viscerally—how much more willpower I need to spend to get myself moving.

2. Over time, a black-and-white decision becomes second nature, simply part of who you are.

I can’t recall exactly when it happened, but at one point after giving up refined sugar I realized that I was a true “convert,” that I simply cannot imagine myself ever resuming my old habits.

The book *Changing for Good* by James Prochaska et al outlines stages of change based on studies of successful changers. The authors identify a final stage of change they call *termination*, which means the person has completely resolved the issue, with no chance of relapse. (Some people believe that in view of what we know about human behavior, such a stage is impossible to achieve with any sense of finality.) Only time will tell, but my habit of not eating refined sugar feels very much like I’ve reached the termination stage of change. A main factor behind this firm feeling is, I believe, the black-and-white nature of my decision.

Is the black-and-white criterion appropriate for all decisions? Not in the least. Like everyone else, I have my indulgences. Sticking with the food theme, for me eating potato chips is a good example. Can you imagine life without potato chips? I can’t.

So once or twice a month I buy a small bag of them, which I thoroughly enjoy. But by the same account you won't find chips in our kitchen cupboards. I know myself better than that.

When I tell my story about giving up sweets, I'm not standing on a soapbox, thinking you should do the same. When I tell people this story, usually they look at me like I'm crazy. My favorite reaction was from a good friend of mine who shot me a look of amazement and said, "Why ever would you do *that*? You know, you're not going to *be here* all that long!" I laughed out loud.

Still, I thought you might find it worthwhile to mull over the power of making a black-and-white decision and where you might apply it in your life.

Bowl of fresh strawberries anyone (hold the sugar, of course)?