THE MYTH OF CHOICE
Kent Greenfield
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Most Americans believe that their country is great because it promotes competition and fosters personal responsibility: Free from government interference, individuals get to decide who to vote for, where to live and work, and what to buy.

Acknowledging that freedom of choice beats the alternatives, Kent Greenfield, a professor at Boston College Law School, argues that by "fetishizing" it, we fail to confront profound questions about choices that are "constrained, manipulated and forced upon us" by biology, culture, authority and economics. Informative, lively and provocative, "The Myth of Choice: Personal Responsibility in a World of Limits" has important implications for the decisions we make in our everyday lives.

"The Myth of Choice" challenges readers to see the downside of an exclusive emphasis on individual choice. Singling out the last person to make "a deliberate, intentional choice" for praise or blame, Greenfield writes, allows "choosers upstream" to avoid responsibility. Obesity, he insists, should not be pinned solely on folks who eat french fries, drink soda and don't exercise, as it was in The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, better known as "The Cheeseburger Bill," which declared lawsuits against fast-food companies "harmful to a healthy America" (and commanded a majority in the House of Representatives but not the U.S. Senate in 2004 and 2005).
Like it or not, the decision to eat bad food is affected by ad campaigns that stimulate cravings for fat and sugar, legislation that subsidizes corn but not fresh produce, and schools that serve hot dogs and burgers rather than beans, vegetables and lean meat.

Greenfield makes a compelling case that protecting people from bad choices can be good for them -- and for us. We set speed limits at 55 mph, for example, and prohibit adults from having sex with 6-year-olds. We require motorcycle riders to wear helmets because a decision not to do so is costly -- since our values do not allow us to leave injured people at the side of the road, even when their behavior caused their injuries.

The same reasoning applies to health care. If people are not insured, Greenfield notes, the rest of us are forced to foot their bills (often for emergency room services) or watch them suffer. The individual mandate in The Affordable Care Act of 2010, he concludes, is an appropriate way to make all Americans take personal responsibility for their well being.

Even if we become more aware of the power of irrationalities, habits and cultural context, Greenfield is not optimistic that we will get much better at making choices. Nonetheless, he emphasizes, and he's probably right, that when we recognize that the rhetoric of choice can be misleading (or false), we may be more willing to bind ourselves with enlightened public policies.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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