

Choose Your Own Adventure: Sermon Edition

This is going to be a little different than what you might be used to.

This sermon is going to be in the style of a Choose Your Own Adventure novel. Which means that as I go through the sermon, I will give you options of where you want the sermon to go and you will be asked to vote on where you want me to talk about next. In the event of a vote that is too close to call, I will make the decision myself.

Is everyone clear on that?

Ok, here we go

Welcome, my friends, to a one-of-a-kind experience. A sermon in which YOU are the star! The choices you make will impact what you get out of today's worship experience. Remember – you cannot go back once a choice is made! So, are you paying attention? Here we go.

We're about to make the first choice.

If you're sitting there, wondering what a Choose Your Own Adventure Novel is, select option A.

If you'd like to hear about MY experiences with Choose Your Own Adventure books, select option B.

(Option B)

I have vivid memories of my first Choose Your Own Adventure Book. It was this one, *The Third Planet From Altair*. I don't know how it came into my life, but I remember holding it in my little hands – the cover showing a space ship, three crew members, and over on the side was the main character (YOU – or in this case ME), a blonde person of indeterminate gender in a space suit getting attacked by what appears to be a very large plant. Which is pretty much how I imagined my life would be when I got older.

And the very top of the book it says "You're the Star of the Story! Choose from 38 possible endings!"

THIRTY-EIGHT!!! In a book that was only 117 pages long to begin with.

Now, let me explain a little bit what a Choose Your Own Adventure book is.

(What, you didn't think I'd actually leave those of you who voted for an explanation of this genre wondering through the whole sermon, did you? I've got you!)

Choose Your Own Adventure books were popular in the 80s and 90s and are written in the second person. So, YOU are the star of the story. At the end of each page, you are forced to make a decision and that decision determines what happens in the book. For example, on page twelve at the bottom it says “If you decide to follow the captain’s orders, turn to page 24. If you decide to challenge the captain, turn to page 25.”

The concept came from a man named Edward Packard, who allegedly came up with the idea when he was telling his daughter a bedtime story. He was a very creative man, but one night he was just too tired, so he asked his daughters what the story should go, and the idea for an interactive book was born.

Choose Your Own Adventure books came in all kinds of genres, from science fiction (my personal favorite) to fantasy, from historical fiction to mysteries. There was something for everyone.

Ok, it’s decision time again.

If you like to hear about why I think Choose Your Own Adventure Books are so compelling, vote for option A.

If you’d like to hear about my “Theology of Choose Your Own Adventure Books,” vote for option B.

(Option B)

So, I somehow got this idea in my head as a child that there was a way to *win* these books. I felt that if I just made the right decisions I would get to the best ending. And how would I know that? I would just *know*, or it would be the last page, or SOMETHING.

But it felt like every time I picked up *The Third Planet from Altair*. I got a bad ending.

Now, I decided to go through the book and see what exactly that meant. I looked at all 38 different endings. And not because I followed the book correctly. I cheated. And I found that, based on my criteria 20 of the 38 endings were bad endings – and I’m talking really bad. Like, you die, or the spaceship explodes, or you become enslaved by an alien race. That’s over half! And then the rest of them, the other 18, are sort of neutral. You meet the aliens but you “can’t complete the mission,” for one reason or another, or you don’t die, but the atmosphere on the planet isn’t great, end up in an alternate universe, the planet you are reaching for is really just a mirror image of earth.

There was no “good” ending. There was no “final” ending. There was no happy ending. I didn’t find anything that was satisfying.

So, I, of course, figured this all out as an adult. As a kid, I kept reading these books, trying to find my happy ending, trying to find my good ending.

Aren't we always looking for a good ending. A happy ending.

Early Universalism in the United States was in some respects a response to Calvinism. And if this is a repeat of UU history that you've heard far too often – blame those who voted for the sermon to go in this direction. But early Universalism really grew in prominence against the beliefs of the early Puritans of Calvinism which was that people were pre-destined for heaven or hell before they were born, and that their actions in this life had no impact on whether or not they were “saved” in the next life – whether or not they went into heaven.

A happy ending for some. Definitely not a Choose Your Own Adventure.

Universalists, as you may well know, believed in Universal salvation, or the belief that Christ died so that ALL people could go to heaven, not only Christians. Not only those who were pre-selected. Everyone.

A happy ending for everyone. Not a Choose Your Own Adventure, either.

Of course, among the early Universalists there was debate. Hosea Ballou, one of our most famous Universalist ancestors believed in something called “ultra-Universalism” which meant that everyone went to heaven immediately. But this was not so for everyone. Some were resotrationists, believing that your actions in this life determined whether or not you spend some time in purgatory before ultimately getting saved.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that this idea of getting a “happy” ending to our story goes beyond fairy tales and Choose Your Own Adventure Books, to the afterlife.

But Unitarian Universalists today are fond of saying that it's what we do in this life that matters. That we are focused on how we live our lives on this earth, not some earth beyond us.

And we can spend all our time looking for that perfect ending, that right ending. We can spend all that time trying to read ahead. Trying to fall in line.

Here are the things required for a good life. To have a successful marriage. To have a high paying job. To be free from mental illness.

We can get so caught up in following those perfect scripts that we fail to see that there are other options.

If you'd like to hear about how all this relates to the choices that we make in our daily lives, vote for option A.

If you'd like to hear about how this was connected to the content of today's reading, vote for option B.

(Option A)

The thing is that life is not a Choose Your Own Adventure book, but I think that sometimes we can think of it that way.

We don't get to the end of a page and have two clear cut answers. We can't look back at single decisions and know with certainty that THAT was the decision that made the difference.

But I can understand the impulse.

Just a few months ago I shared in a sermon the story of how meeting and connecting with a Mormon friend of mine lead me to finding Unitarian Universalism, and ultimately to ministry.

And while he was obviously influential in my life, it's not difficult to see how the narrative that that was the only decision that mattered or the only factor that mattered is incorrect.

But if there is one thing I have learned from reading Choose Your Own Adventure books, it's that you really don't know if you are going to have a "happy ending," because whatever you pick, the book was still designed. You really don't have as much control as you think you do. And you can't know how your choice was going to make things happen.

And maybe it's the same way in life. Unlike in a Choose Your Own Adventure novel, you can't read ahead to see what happens. You can't go back.

Let me tell you another story of something that happened to me just yesterday. I live in Newton, and a friend had borrowed my car and had left it in Cambridge. I decided that I needed some exercise so I would bike from Newton to Cambridge (almost an hour long bike ride) to go get the car and enjoy the day.

Well, turns out, I got myself to Cambridge. I saw the car and I biked right up to and... And I realized that I had forgotten my keys. So I couldn't get into the car.

Now, I'm not going to lie to you. I was sooo mad at myself. All I wanted to do was to go back in time and put my car keys in my pocket so I wouldn't be in this situation. Then I could just go back home and work on writing my sermon.

But no. This was not going to be. My friend who had a spare key was at work so I was going to have to wait for her to get home. So I called up another friend and we had an impromptu

dinner sitting outside and enjoying the warm night. Eventually I got my key back and I got home. Three hours later than I had planned. But it all worked out in the end. And as much as I could have blamed myself for what happened – there wasn't anything I could DO once I was there expect wait.

Ok. So we've gone through quite the journey together. And I want to thank you for taking a chance with me on this. I really didn't know what was going to happen.

Unlike a Choose Your Own Adventure book, this sermon only has one ending.

There were multiple ways to get here, but here we are. One ending.

I think it can be really easy to take from this sermon that no matter why you do, you have no control over the outcome of your life, that no matter what you pick or what decisions you make you will end up in the same place, or with a "bad" ending.

But that is not the point I want to make.

The point that I want to make is that life isn't as clear cut as a choose your own adventure book, with a finite number of options and a finite numbers of endings. The ways in which every moment of our lives is a decision. We aren't just following some path set out for us.

New beginnings are everywhere. You can make changes any time.

Like the protagonist in a Choose Your Own Adventure book – if the script you are reading isn't working for you, stop reading it!

Because you know what else a Choose Your Own Adventure book encourages us to do? It encourages us to find different ways to an ending. To flip through a book not just from front to back, but other ways as well. It encourages us to be creative. To seek out a different way to find an answer.

What I want to tell you is that you aren't stuck having to have a pre-written ending. You aren't stuck following the actions of some unknown author. You have the power to change. You don't know who or what will change, but you have the power to stop following a script if it's not working for you. To take control of your life. And to make choices that fall in line with who you are and the kind of person you want to be.

Let us say together Amen.

Amen