

The Second Decision

On the room between all of it and none of it — and why the person who stays clear is the one who gets the deal.

Watch what happens in a person the moment something gets taken from them. Money, credit, a commitment somebody made and did not keep. The mind does not go quiet and consider. It goes to one of two places, fast. Either I am going to get every dollar of this back and I am going to be loud about it, or I am done, forget it, write it off, I do not want to talk about it again. All of it, or none of it.

I have watched this in myself and I have watched it in a lot of capable people. What is strange is that both of those choices feel like strength while you are making them. Going after all of it feels like backbone. Walking away feels like detachment, maybe even like spirituality. And neither one of them is a decision. They are both the same reflex wearing two different outfits.

The reflex is the first decision. It gets made for you, somewhere under your ribs, in the second and a half before you know anything is happening. You do not get a vote on it. Anybody who tells you they have trained themselves out of having that first reaction is either not paying attention or not being honest with you.

But there is a second decision. That is the whole thing I want to put in front of you.

Between the two extremes there is an enormous amount of room, and almost nobody goes looking in it, because the extremes present themselves so quickly and so confidently that they look like the only two doors in the building. There is a version where you recover part of it and keep the relationship. There is a version where you restructure the timing instead of the amount. There is a version where you say the true hard thing calmly and see what comes back. None of those occur to you while the energy is still moving you.

“We see the emotions come up, and we see where they want to take us, and we just sit back and make that second decision.”

TIM O. DAVIS

So the practice is not about not feeling it. I want to be clear, because this is where people go wrong with anything they read about equanimity. You are angry. Good. The anger is honest and it is information and it has real force in it. The skill is not to stop the anger. The skill is to take that energy and make it do something. You concentrate it into something that gets built, something that gets recovered, something that gets said well. Otherwise it just goes out into the room as noise and you have spent your strength on the sound of your own voice.

Here is what I notice in negotiations, and I suspect you have seen it too. People get upset and their ego starts to run the conversation. They are trying to win something. Often they are trying to win the wrong thing, or something with no value in it at all, just so the ego gets to feel something. And the one who stays clear is the one who ends up with the deal. Not the coldest person in the room. The clearest. There is a difference, and everyone at the table can tell which one you are.

Clarity is not the absence of feeling. It is the presence of a gap.

That is why I keep pointing people back to their practice, even when their practice feels like the least urgent thing on the calendar during a hard week. When you sit every morning and watch emotions arrive and watch where they want to take you and do not go, you are not doing something mystical. You are widening the gap between the trigger and the reaction. You are making room for the second decision to exist at all. And then one Tuesday afternoon somebody says something in a meeting and you notice a half second of space where there used to be none, and in that half second you choose differently than you would have a year ago.

There is a useful way to find that room deliberately, before you are in it. Ask yourself: what are the two extremes I would have fallen into in the past? Write them down if you have to. Then ask what middle ground there is. You will usually find three or four options you had not seen, and one of them will be better than either extreme by a wide margin. The exercise works because it moves the question from your gut to your creativity, and your creativity is the part of you that gets shut down first when you are activated.

The other thing I would say is this. When you lose your energy in a moment like that, the loss is not the money. Your energy is your capital. It is your clarity, your judgment, your ability to see three moves out instead of one. You cannot buy that back with coffee or with a harder week. So when something goes wrong and you feel yourself about to spend the next four days in it, notice the price. Just notice it. I do not need to do this. That noticing is often the whole intervention.

None of this makes you passive. Putting your growth first does not mean you stop fighting for what is yours or for what is right. It means the fight comes out of a clear place instead of a loud one — and the clear place, it turns out, is also the one that wins.

THE PRACTICE

Before your next hard conversation, name the two extremes you would have chosen in the past. Then look for the room between them. That room is where your growth is, and it is wider than it feels.