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TREY GOWDY

*Start,
Stay,
or
Leave*

**THE ART OF
DECISION MAKING**



Start, Stay, or Leave

The Art of Decision Making

TREY GOWDY



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Dedication

Acknowledgments

By Trey Gowdy

About the Author

INTRODUCTION

Decisions, Decisions

I only remember two things from my wedding ceremony. I remember trying to take off my white gloves so my bride could slip the ring on my finger, even though she had told me no fewer than one thousand times she would slide it on over the glove. (Oh my heavens was she unamused.) The pain of that relatively poor decision did not last very long, though. It was the other thing that happened during the wedding that weighed on my mind for decades, and still does from time to time.

At the end of the ceremony, our wonderful and dearly loved pastor said, “Now I present you with Mr. and Mrs. Trey Gowdy; he will be in the governor’s mansion one day, and she will be our first lady.” I was twenty-four years old, one week removed from taking the bar exam, and had not even had my first legal job. But the expectation was set. A lofty one. In front of all of our family, friends, and acquaintances in the church we grew up in. It was an expectation that I could not imagine reaching. I wish he had said, “Terri will be the governor one day, and Trey can be her first gentleman.” That I could get behind.

On that day and for a season thereafter, I let someone else set the expectations for what my life should look like. Perhaps you would have viewed the comment as harmless fun, which it was. Perhaps you would have viewed it as a goal to shoot for and nothing more. I should have done that. But I did not. I let other people define what was success for too long in my life. And I spent many years chasing the fulfillment of other people’s

expectations. This is not the only example of me allowing others to chart my course, but it is one I remember thirty years removed.

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Some people die trying to meet the expectations of others. It is a lifelong sentence they submit themselves to. I was on that path. So, I want to ask you a question. The one I should have asked myself a long time ago.

What is the standard by which you judge a life to be well lived?

Some believe life is defined by their work: their career path, how high they've risen in a company, or how happy they are in their job. Others would measure the quality of their relationships with friends and family. For some, the pursuit of education and the unceasing craving for knowledge drive a meaningful life. Or maybe the photo sections of our phones or our photo albums are really what tell our stories, revealing who and what we treasure.

For most of my life, I evaluated my significance by the type and quality of the work I did. I firmly believed that my life could be judged a “success” by others—if I could secure *this* job or master *this* set of responsibilities. Through work, so I thought, I could prove my value to the world.

On those frequent days when the jobs, titles, and responsibilities did not match the expectations I had set—or let others set—for myself, my fallback marker was my relationships. I could rely on success by association, since many of my friends were more noteworthy than I was.

Admittedly, this is not an ideal way to navigate through life, but it is, candidly, how I operated for more than half of my existence.

I have come to realize that there is something larger that binds a life together. There is an inherent link among the jobs you take and the ones you don't, the people you befriend and the relationships you end, the schools you choose and the hobbies you pursue. Every one of those pursuits is initiated, nurtured, extended, or perhaps severed because of the *decisions* you make.

If you believe life is primarily defined by your career paths, think of the myriad decisions that shape that road. You have to decide which field to go into. You have to decide where to apply for work and which offer to accept. You have to decide when it's the right time to leave a job and when it's better to stay.

If you believe the essence of life is the relationships and friendships made, you have to make the decision to befriend someone else or make the decision to accept their offer of friendship. And for those relationships that we don't actively choose—mothers, fathers, siblings, or our natural children—we decide how intimate we are with them through the course of our lives.

For those who conclude that life is what we learn, formally or otherwise, and how we educate ourselves, some decision precedes that bit of education: where to attend school, what to study, how hard to apply ourselves, what to study or read even after our formal education has ended.

Decisions—these invisible underpinnings are the subject of this book. They are the building blocks of life. They touch every area of your life and they chart your course. I have found that if you excel at the art of decision making, you will undoubtedly craft a well-lived life.

I am not a psychologist or a career counselor. I am not a statistician or a fortune-teller. My only credentials are my half century's worth of decisions made and not made, and the life that flowed from those decisions. I have placed some of the riskiest bets you can ever wager and I have succumbed to fear. I have won and I have lost. I have even lost by winning and won by losing. I have regrets and I have beautiful memories, and sometimes I have a hard time telling those two apart.

Through it all, I found that the most consequential decisions in life boil down to three simple questions, which I'd like to share with you: Do I start? Do I stay? Or do I leave?

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Experience is a wonderful teacher; it's just that the course takes so long. Oh, to be able to go back and make the decisions of early life using all the

knowledge and (possibly) wisdom I have now! Sometimes I look back at my winding path to divine whether I ever had a plan, or if my life choices were simply a series of reactions. Did I choose my course or did I allow others—or, more accurately, my perception of their expectations—to make my decisions for me?

I started working at the age of fourteen, delivering newspapers on a motorized bicycle at 5:00 A.M. Now, half a lifetime later, I deliver news on TV on Sunday nights and on podcasts on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You could argue that my life has been something of a circle, professionally speaking, although going to work at 7:00 P.M. in an indoor television studio is much better than starting my day at 5:00 A.M. on a moped being chased by dogs.

How do you go from delivering the news to delivering the news and consider it a productive life? There were many, many decisions made along the way. Every one of my jobs, from paperboy to television host, was preceded by a decision to start a new job, to stay where I was, or to leave and, in turn, start the cycle again.

During the paper route days, I concluded that I was neither a morning person nor a huge fan of dogs, especially those that could outrun a motorized scooter, so I left the paper route mornings and opted for an afternoon job bagging groceries at a local grocery store after high school classes ended. (Eggs and bread go on top of the canned vegetables and not beneath them, if you are wondering.) Most of my time was spent taking the groceries to customers' cars. My employer did not allow tipping, but there were some kind souls who defied that "ban on tipping" and I began to take note of the difference between "rules" and mere "suggestions."

As a bag boy I learned that there is a part of each of us that covets advancement, or at least perceived advancement. It's been forty years, but I still remember my pride when my then boss, Charlie Jones, told me he was going to "promote" me to cashier. I went home that day feeling like a million bucks. (This was before computerized cash registers told you the right amount of change to return to the customer. If only Charlie Jones had asked for my transcripts and seen my math grades, I never would have been

“promoted.” Public speaking and live television are nothing compared to a customer giving you \$2.15 when the cash register says \$1.65 and expecting the right change back. I still sweat thinking of those moments.)

During college, from 1982 to 1986, I worked in a warehouse filling tobacco orders. I learned more about life in that warehouse than I ever did inside a classroom or the halls of Congress. The decision to work four summers in a hot, unairconditioned building driving a forklift and pulling a cart was not based on my enjoyment of the work itself. It was purely transactional: I needed money. My father would not just give me cash, instead saying something about the intrinsic value of work, and so off I went to the warehouse. But forty years removed from that job, it remains one of my favorites. How could sweating all day trying to figure out the difference between Virginia Slims and Virginia Slims Light 100s be one of my favorite jobs? Because I loved the guys I was working with. That, in and of itself, was satisfying enough—I decided to stay and prioritize who I worked with over what I did.

I looked forward to getting up and going to work at the warehouse more than any other job I have had since. And I still find myself reflecting on two of the lessons learned during those sweaty summers: (1) who you travel the highways of life with is often more important than what road you are on; and (2) for many people, working in a warehouse for minimum wage, with a thirty-minute lunch break and no health insurance, is not simply a “summer job,” it is their job and the one by which they are trying to meet all the familial and societal responsibilities demanded of them.

In college, I decided to major in history for all the wrong reasons, and then I went to law school, since my initial poorly conceived decision did not leave me with many options. After law school, I clerked for two judges: One judge was an appellate judge and the other was a trial judge. It was while working for the federal trial judge that I was lured to our criminal justice system, which is where I spent the majority of my professional life. I was an assistant United States attorney for six years and then ran for what South Carolina calls “circuit solicitor” and the rest of the country calls “district attorney.”

The decision to leave the work I loved as a prosecutor and start a career in Congress in 2011 is a big part of this book, as is my decision to leave Congress in 2019. Yes, the kid who started his career as a paperboy reading about Congress while rolling newspapers in a gas station bathroom ended up as the chairman of a congressional committee, occasionally even making it into the newspapers himself. As it turned out, being in the newspaper wasn't nearly as fulfilling as that fourteen-year-old kid thought it would be. I learned the hard way, as many people do, that fame is not the proper barometer for success or significance. People spend decades striving for fame or notoriety and then, once they taste it, often go running back toward anonymity as fast as their feet will take them.

As you can see, I've made a lot of decisions in life. Some seem unconventional or strange in hindsight. Some were influenced by outside forces, and some (usually later in life) were made with the self-confidence that can only come from defining terms like "success" and "significance" in your own way. People might argue that some of my decisions have been backward steps or maybe even missteps. But, in the end, others do not get to define those terms in my life—or yours.

What is important is that we understand what we have done, and why we have done it, and that, moving forward, we apply a method and purpose to our decision making. I have written this book in hopes that those decisions I have made—good, bad, or indifferent—can help you as you write your own book of life.

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How well do you know yourself? To build the best version of your life that you can, you have to know yourself and have enough confidence in that self-knowledge to let it guide your decision making.

Now consider: Where do you want to wind up? What is the desired destination? Are you traveling with a certain degree of speed or commitment? Do you need to stay on this road but with a few adjustments,

maybe slow down or accelerate? Or do you need to find an exit and backtrack or head in a totally new direction?

Starting anything new is both exciting and nerve-racking. Doubt can creep in. There will be critics and naysayers. But in this book, I will offer you ways to evaluate when to start something new, whether a job or a relationship, so that you can move forward with confidence and awareness. In the summer of 2021, I started a new television show. Starting the show meant leaving the practice of law full-time. But it also meant deciding what I wanted the show to be like. *Is one night a week enough or should I shoot for more? Do I copy what has been successful for others in the cable realm or chart my own path? For that matter, what does success even mean in television? Is it viewers or ratings? Is it the quality of my writing or the diversity of my guests?* The beauty of a start is that the canvas is unspoiled. But the season of starting does not last long. Pretty soon what began as a decision to start became a decision to stay.

Staying may lack the excitement of starting something new, but often it is the wisest course. We must evaluate the decision to stay using many of the same metrics and tools as we do when evaluating whether to start in the first place. My wife and I have lived in the same town for nearly half a century and have lived in the same house for nearly a quarter of a century. We often debated over questions such as: *Do we move closer to the media centers of the country? Do we move closer to where the largest law firms are? Do we move closer to the beach (although I do not really like sand)? Do we embark on the excitement of building a house rather than adjusting what the original builders had in mind?* Ultimately, we decided to stay put for a reason that wouldn't matter to any other couple. It was the trees. When my wife's dad died, a friend in landscaping planted a tree in his honor in our front yard. He did the same thing when her mom died. And he did the same thing to honor our three dogs, Judge, Jury, and Bailiff—all of whom have gone. We stayed in a house for reasons that had nothing to do with the house. We traded the excitement of something new for the memories we could not live without.

Finally, this book will look at the difficult decision of leaving—of how to know when the time and the circumstances are right to leave something or someone. Even when we obtain the things we are striving for, sometimes they wind up being less satisfying than what we anticipated. Sometimes a decision can be right for a season of life, but the seasons change—and so do we. I hope to give you tools to leave with confidence and no regrets.

We both find ourselves in this sentence, in this paragraph of this book, based on decisions we made. I am grateful you have made the decision to read this far. You and I will both need to be brutally honest and search deep within ourselves as we embark on this book, making decisions that will lead to the most fulsome and consequential life possible.

So, shall we start?