The Choice of Roads: Connecting J.R.R. Tolkien and Student Decisions

no admittance

except on party business
The Two Towers

Choices
- Debates
- Indecision
- Culmination: Choices of Master Samwise
Hagen


“As if hearing stories wasn’t already enough fun, we tell them stories, too, guiding them with the vast array of stories we carry with us.”

“One of the most important ways we have to persuade students to take the right path is to also tell stories. As advisors we use stories to teach, warn, recommend, admonish, and praise our students.”
Objectives

• **Our goal today is to gain:**
  • Appreciation and connection
  • Quotes!
  • Additions to personal advising philosophy

• **Focus on the text:**
  • Passages pulled from *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) story
  • Excerpts from relevant articles

• **Entirely Voluntary**
  • Discussion
By a Show of Hands...Who Has...

Watched any *LOTR* film?

Read the *LOTR* story?

Not read or seen either of the above works?

Speak, Friend, and Enter
Presenter Background

• Justin Burnley
  • Director of Student Services
  • Support a team of 8 Academic Advisors
Presenter Background

Office of Student Services
- Undergraduate Advising (from Orientation to Graduation)
- Student Programming
- Scholarships and Student Organizations

College of Education
- 13 undergraduate majors (teaching, health, and business)
- ~2,200 undergraduate students

University of Georgia
- Flagship, Public, R1, 4-year
- ~28,000 undergraduate students
Presenter Background

Current favorite character:

Office decor:

Referrals:
So It Begins...

Time for our first choice!

Are you ready?
You are in College now...

What is one of the first choices you make that could stay with you for years?
Defining Undecided


“Those considered undecided-multipotential possess an overabundance of talents, interests, and opportunities, and thus feel overwhelmed with viable options.”
No Longer In Our Hands
Choosing a Path

'Our choice then,' said Gimli, 'is either to take the remaining boat and follow Frodo, or else to follow the Orcs on foot. There is little hope either way. We have already lost precious hours.'

- Credit hours?
- Pressure of antithetical choices
- Lack of hope leads to negative thinking
'Let me think!' said Aragorn. 'And now may I make a right choice and change the evil fate of this unhappy day!' He stood silent for a moment. 'I will follow the Orcs,' he said at last. 'I would have guided Frodo to Mordor and gone with him to the end; but if I seek him now in the wilderness, I must abandon the captives to torment and death. My heart speaks clearly at last: the fate of the Bearer is in my hands no longer. The Company has played its part. Yet we that remain cannot forsake our companions while we have strength left.'

- Relieving external pressures
- Using internal decision making
- Certain outcomes vs. uncertain outcomes
Defining Pressure


“Changing majors involves **added expense** to the college experience, can **delay** entering the job market by years, and may **prohibit** students from some professional majors where cohorts are formed among freshman classes.”
'We have come at last to a hard choice,' he said. 'Shall we rest by night, or shall we go on while our will and strength hold?'

'But if we walk by night, we cannot follow their trail,' said Gimli.

'The trail is straight, and turns neither right nor left, as far as my eyes can see,' said Legolas.'

- Limited resources
- Taking time to rest
- Predicting the future
'Maybe, I could lead you at a guess in the darkness and hold to the line,' said Aragorn; 'but if we strayed, or they turned aside, then when light came there might be long delay before the trail was found again.'

- **Time limit**
- **Internal changes; external changes**
Defining Fear


“Fear of making a permanent decision with potential undesirable effects seemed to dissuade students from staying with a particular major. The students lack confidence in their abilities to make appropriate long-term decisions.”

“They are likely to repeatedly make choices with which they are unsatisfied, thus reinforcing their fear that they will make poor decisions.”
'I said that it was a hard choice,' said Aragorn. 'How shall we end this debate?'

'You are our guide,' said Gimli, 'and you are skilled in the chase. You shall choose.'

'My heart bids me go on,' said Legolas. 'But we must hold together. I will follow your counsel.'

'You give the choice to an ill chooser,' said Aragorn. 'Since we passed through the Argonath my choices have gone amiss.'

- Reliance on peers
- Negative conditioning
Defining Reassurance


“Students expressing these fears may benefit from reassurance that few decisions are unchangeable.”

“Academic advisors may need to help students see the benefit of learning from all of life’s successes and mistakes. An essential component of growing in wisdom involves gleaning life lessons from all choices and developing future prudence when faced with future similar decisions.”
'Come, Aragorn son of Arathorn!' he said. 'Do not regret your choice in the valley of the Emyn Muil, nor call it a vain pursuit. You chose amid doubts the path that seemed right: the choice was just, and it has been rewarded. For so we have met in time, who otherwise might have met too late.

- Positives of change
- Learning from choices
“Long ago I offered you a state beyond your merit and your wit. I have offered it again, so that those whom you mislead may clearly see the choice of roads. You give me brag and abuse. So be it.”

- Autonomy?
- Living with choices
Another Way Into Mordor

He wants the precious.
'Well,' he said, at last withdrawing his eyes, ‘we cannot stay here all night, fix or no fix. We must find a more sheltered spot, and camp once more; and perhaps another day will show us a path.'

'Or another and another and another,' muttered Sam. ‘Or maybe no day. We've come the wrong way.’

- Deferred choice
Defining Undecided


“Persons described as undecided-deferred choice deliberately put off a necessary decision for defendable reasons”
'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'It's my doom, I think, to go to that Shadow yonder, so that a way will be found. But will good or evil show it to me? What hope we had was in speed. Delay plays into the Enemy's hands—and here I am: delayed... All my choices have proved ill. I should have left the Company long before... Every day that passes is a precious day lost. I am tired, Sam. I don't know what is to be done.

• Commitment to a goal
• Time limit pressure
Defining Commitment


“A student may be committed to completing a bachelor’s degree and be uncertain about the field of study.”

“A student’s commitment to educational goals may affect the student’s persistence when he or she experiences difficulties”
He sat upon the ground for a long while, silent, his head bowed, striving to recall all that Gandalf had said to him. But for this choice he could recall no counsel. Indeed Gandalf's guidance had been taken from them too soon, too soon, while the Dark Land was still very far away. How they should enter it at the last Gandalf had not said. Perhaps he could not say.

- Without external guidance
- Assuming a new responsibility
Defining Responsibility


“Students may be unsure of their own role in the advising relationship, but once their responsibilities are clarified, and the advisor-advisee relationship established, students’ participation in the advising process may be strengthened.”
And here he was a little halfling from the Shire, a simple hobbit of the quiet countryside expected to find a way where the great ones could not go, or dared not go. It was an evil fate. But he had taken it on himself in his own sitting-room in the far-off spring of another year, so remote now that it was like a chapter in a story of the world's youth... This was an evil choice. Which way should he choose? And if both led to terror and death, what good lay in choice?

• Optimism turned to negativity upon having to make involved choices
Defining Optimism


“This optimism, expressed as belief in endless future opportunities or lack of pressure to decide on a career, may have led Millennial students to defer a commitment to a major.”
Defining Negativity


“**Negative career thoughts** may affect an individual’s ability to **accurately assess self-knowledge**”
Summary So Far

- **Characteristics of Indecision**
  - Negativity from Optimism
  - Uncertain responsibility
  - Lack of guidance
  - Fear of permanence
  - External pressures

- **Cures for Indecision**
  - Defining responsibility
  - Fostering commitment
  - Providing reassurance
  - Comparing certainty to uncertainty
  - Relying on peers, when available
### Defining Self-Talk


“Self-talk refers to the silent... conversations people conduct with themselves; the conversation often contains some level of evaluative or judgmental quality by which the person articulates a self-assessment of a specific task.”

“Monitoring and control are described as the processes by which people can detect their dysfunctional self-talk and actively attempt to replace these thoughts with more positive self-talk.”
The Choices of Master Samwise

'What shall I do, what shall I do? ' he said. `Did I come all this way with him for nothing? ' And then he remembered his own voice speaking words that at the time he did not understand himself, at the beginning of their journey: I have something to do before the end. I must see it through, sir, if you understand.’

• Overarching goal
• Persistence in difficulty
• Initial optimism is resisting negativity because of the timing of the goal
The Choices of Master Samwise

`But what can I do? Not leave Mr. Frodo dead, unburied on the top of the mountains, and go home? Or go on? Go on?' he repeated, and for a moment doubt and fear shook him. `Go on? Is that what I've got to do? And leave him?'

- Doubt and fear
- Confusion of goals
The Choices of Master Samwise

But he could not go, not yet. He knelt and held Frodo's hand and could not release it. And time went by and still he knelt, holding his master's hand, and in his heart keeping a debate.

'What am I to do then? ' he cried again, and now he seemed plainly to know the hard answer: see it through. Another lonely journey, and the worst.

- Delay
- Reliance on others... “lonely” journey
- Commitment
The Choices of Master Samwise

`What? Me, alone, go to the Crack of Doom and all? ' He quailed still, but the resolve grew. `What? Me take the Ring from him? The Council gave it to him.'

But the answer came at once: `And the Council gave him companions, so that the errand should not fail. And you are the last of all the Company. The errand must not fail.'

- Defining responsibility
- Reliance on others
- Commitment
The Choices of Master Samwise

`I wish I wasn't the last,' he groaned. `I wish old Gandalf was here or somebody. Why am I left all alone to make up my mind? I'm sure to go wrong. And it's not for me to go taking the Ring, putting myself forward.'

'But you haven't put yourself forward; you've been put forward. And as for not being the right and proper person, why, Mr. Frodo wasn't as you might say, nor Mr. Bilbo. They didn't choose themselves.'

- Reliance on others turning to autonomy
- External pressures providing reassurance
'Ah well, I must make up my own mind. I will make it up. But I'll be sure to go wrong: that'd be Sam Gamgee all over. **No chance to go back with It and get advice or permission.** No, it's sit here till they come and kill me over master's body, and gets It: or take It and go.' He drew a deep breath. 'Then take It, it is!

- **Self-assessment leading to fear and doubt**
- **Certain outcomes vs. uncertain outcomes**
In your next advising appointment, consider how you:

- Help students identify external pressures
- Define responsibilities
- Grant permission for autonomy
- Ask questions leading to self-assessment
- Discuss goals for commitment
- Provide reassurance for choices
- Connect the student to other narratives
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