

# Le Bon Journal

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Volume 3 Issue 6: Life decisions that change your life

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**D**ecisions that change your life and its context in a big way, such as altering the direction of your path or focus, are called 'life decisions.' They may range from a series of small incremental decisions of which you are barely conscious to a large decision which requires considerable thought. It could be one small decision such as not taking up an opportunity that passes you by. Situations in which you have no choice or those decisions that hardly affect the way you live are not part of this discussion.

A life decision may impact several areas of your life, such as where you live, whom you live with, and how you live. For examples, visit previous issues of the Le Bon Journal e-zine for decisions about relocation or uprooting (Le Bon Journal 'uprooting' issue), choosing a life partner (LBJ 'love'), pursuing a professional qualification, and changing your job or career (LBJ 'career change and second passions').

A *decision* occurs when you consciously choose among *alternatives*. It is not a decision if you have no choice or don't need to choose. It is also necessary to distinguish the *thinking and analytical* part of decision making from the follow-up (the *implementation*).

In this 6-page issue, contributors from England, Singapore, and the US generously share their stories of decisions that changed their lives.

**Balbir Chagger** describes in candid detail the events that prepared her for a career in relationship counselling and coaching. [**Learning from life experiences, page 1.**]

Television producer **Gill Stribling-Wright** implements her decisions as soon as she makes them, unlike many people who agonise over the process of deciding. [**On decisions, page 2.**]

The desire for greater happiness leads one to question the status quo. **Daddy Fatsacks** writes, "I think the process of enquiry has helped me get closer to finding my answer, although I do not think I have actually found it quite yet. I guess I owe myself a career change." [**Career and lifestyle dilemmas, page 2.**]

Sometimes the desire to do something else, something totally different, is so strong that it over-rides all rational reasons to stay put. **Ann Sarson** recalls how she managed to eventually leave her job. [**Leaving a salary to pursue a dream, page 3.**]

**Joan Yap** from Singapore discusses the steps involved in making good decisions from her own experience. [**About decision making, page 4.**]

Cellist and novelist **Alice McVeigh** reveals that one of the best decisions is to do what you love, never stop, and simply 'go for it.' [**Becoming a writer, page 4.**]

Emerging from the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan that devastated his home in Florida, **Buddy Claude** shows that however you plan or decide, life happens to you, often not according to plan. [Best laid schemes of mice and men, page 5.]

On page 6 are '**fear of regret**' and **readers' reaction** to the previous issue of Le Bon Journal 'Career change and second passions,' very much life decisions too. Readers, feel free to share your views, suggest new topics, and submit your personal story to future issues!

## *Learning from life experiences*

When I was 30, I faced a situation that felt even worse than my father's suicide when I was 18. I could either stay in my unhappy marriage or file for a divorce that would leave me penniless with two children and no income. The death of my mother when I was 21 left me without any family support. Despite being the youngest, I was never close to my two older brothers largely because of my father's alcoholism and resulting aggression and violence which tore the family apart.

My Asian culture is all about families, saving face and the sanctity of marriage; you see things through no matter what. But I believed that it takes two to make a marriage, without which I would have perpetuated the cycle of unhappiness of my parents. My children would have grown up surrounded by tension, deceit and tears. I was already seeing my brothers in that cycle, and it made me very sad that they felt helpless to do anything about it. After much deliberation, I decided to take the very difficult and painful path of divorce.

Getting the divorce was quite tricky. I had pressure to conform and stay in the marriage to stop tongues wagging. I faced the stigma of being an Asian divorced woman and a lesser human being by most Asian men. I became a threat to my married peers who feared I was after their husbands.

In that first year, my days were dark and I did the essential chores in a daze. The routine of school drop-off and pick-up was a blessing. It gave me a reason to get out of bed. Through the isolation, loneliness and fear of how the future would turn out, I found the inner strength to rise above the criticisms, judgements and ignorance to focus on what I had.

The positives in my life were that I had two loving children (son aged 8, daughter aged 5) and excellent health. We were not dependent on anyone else to cook, clean or fetch for us. I have always believed that if you have your health, you have everything.

Two years after my divorce, on my doctor's recommendation I went for counselling and so started a humbling, introspective journey to address my relationship with my parents, brothers, ex-husband, my children and most importantly, the relationship with

myself. The exploratory and at times painful process I went through enabled me to mature emotionally, overcome my victim blame mentality, come to terms with significant events in my life and start discovering the person I was.

By the time I turned 37, I had attended many workshops on personal development and healing, read countless books on personal development psychology and autobiographies of overcoming adversity, finished my counselling and trained as a counsellor in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and as a Reiki Master, and Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) Practitioner. I believed in the mind and body connection and that 'it doesn't matter what has happened to you, it's what you do with what has happened.'

During all these years of counselling and training, I was searching for a vocation. I felt there must be a good reason why I had experienced so much in my young life (nightmares about my father's suicide until I was 34, worries about my mother's mental illness and her death while I was pregnant with my first child, my childhood as a carer, my getting married for all the wrong reasons and trying so hard for 10 years to make it work, the divorce and living life as a single parent).

I had come out of the tunnel without relying on alcohol, smoking or chemicals. I wanted to be a positive role model. I wanted to show that no matter what your early experiences, it was possible to break old debilitating patterns and habits. I wanted to discover a purpose to my life. Why had I gone through it all? What could I do with it? How could I use it to inspire others?

*Balbir Chagger founded the Harley Relationship Centre based in Harley Street, London (<http://www.harleyrelationshipcentre.com>) which specialises in counselling, coaching, training through workshops and talks on relationships.*

### **On decisions**

We have a neighbour who cannot decide anything. For over two years she has had assorted curtain samples pinned to her sitting room walls but still cannot decide which would be best. She invites us for lunch and agonises over which dish to put the potatoes in, where she should hang a picture, which new tile to put in the bathroom. Add to this the fact that she doesn't want to pay much for anything - she likes a bargain, she is not a miser, she just has a mindset - and you can see that her inability to make decisions is further complicated. She has nonetheless made a life decision in returning to live in London after forty years overseas, the last eighteen in the West Indies which she loved.

I am unaware of ever having made life decisions. Of course I must have made them but they didn't seem such, rather more 'a good idea at the time' or what I was offered or came up. I have been asked for career advice since it appeared to others that I had carved one out successfully whilst I was unaware that I even had a career - I just did jobs. I have been asked about my

decision not to have children when rather I never thought about having them. Why did I decide not to marry? I didn't, it just didn't happen. When I eventually did, I didn't 'decide' it as such it was just the natural thing to do for tax purposes after living together for six years and not wanting to be with anyone else. Even the living together was a natural progression, we never sat and talked about it and made a 'decision' to do so.

This all seems very simplistic and I suppose at some level I must have put out various desires or else they would not have happened. My decisions have always been instinctive because that is what I have felt right about and could carry off. When I have tried to intellectualise over what would be the best course it proved a mistake, not a bad one in anyone else's eyes, but I was not happy.

As a television producer most of my time in programme making was spent making decisions on a daily basis and I was good at it. If I hadn't been, no one else could have got on with his or her jobs and deadlines would not have been met.

I also learned the value of not making a decision --- which is, of course, one in itself. The courage to do nothing and let things develop may look like sitting on the fence but there are occasions where events have to run their course and letting them do so requires enormous self restraint and patience. You learn this when you bump up against things you cannot control such as waiting to see which way someone will jump or the terminal illness of a loved one.

The worst of decisions are those you have to take when you are between a rock and a hard place. The best advice I received on one of these occasions was to make the decision whatever it was and stick to it without regrets. It was sound advice because in the absence of a happy outcome at least there is a plan. You don't have to like it, you just have to get on with it and there is comfort in that.

I remember hearing a man being interviewed on the radio who had written a bestseller, produced a hit movie, run a large organisation and done various other spectacularly successful things, all of which had been one-offs. When asked why he hadn't decided to stick to one course and turn at least one of his talents into a legendary achievement he said, "I am not here to live up to someone else's image of my life, I am here to enjoy myself!" --- happy words from a man who had lived life to the full and a good mantra where possible for decision-making.

*Gill Stribling-Wright lives in London*

### **Career and lifestyle dilemmas**

I live and work in London. My family and I are happy here, well adjusted and making the most of living in the city and all it has to offer. My wife has her hobbies and activities. I have fun by staying fit. Our daughter has a

full life. On the other hand, I find myself creating negativity in the family, which reverberates in others and comes back at me.

I work in the City in a career that I have to say is starting to get a little old and same-ish. It is a highly competitive environment where everyone is kept on their toes—if not the back foot—at all times. For this work I earn a high-ish salary, but it gets entirely taken up by living (not lavishly) in London—high tax, high rent, high school fees, etc. My wife does not work but even if she could find work, she would not be able to support us without my income.

Looking upwards the career ladder, I can pretty honestly conclude that climbing it is not overly attractive—there are just more headaches up there, and I figure it should be left to those with more drive and aptitude. Although I can stay at the career level I am now, it would be nice to have more autonomy. I am in my early 40's, and feel that if I should do something new, it would be good to do so while I am still basically youthful. I would love to travel for adventure for much of each year, have less job stress and more fulfilment or at least be my own boss if I have to cope with stressful situations.

To solve my dilemma of whether to stay in the status quo or do something different, I have turned to Decision Science as a tool to chart a course forward. So far I have learned that people tend to doom themselves to chasing irrelevant decisions, because they frame the question improperly, usually as a choice between alternatives when in fact there are many more options available. In fact, everyday there are options, maybe infinite ones, for small gestures or thoughts that would propel you toward your goals—many things as small as smiling at your neighbour.

The question becomes not so much 'which of these two do I choose?' but 'what things can I do to move in the direction I want?' The issues therefore are first to know what the goal is, not arbitrary goals such as 'I want to be rich' but the real desire behind that sort of thing. For example, in this case, perhaps 'I want to be attractive to women,' 'I want to not have to work,' or even 'I want to feel important.'

In addition to knowing one's real goals, it is paramount to have a positive attitude. Someone with a negative attitude makes a loser out of himself. Someone with a positive attitude is more likely to make the right little choices at every moment and win over time.

The realization of the need for a positive attitude hurts. I see myself now as self-victimised, held back by a long life of negativity. The question of 'how do I improve my attitude?' provides an avenue in its own way for moving forward. It is as if as a human, my conscious mind is an overlay on the forces motivating me in my body, my subconscious and in society. I have been reading about brainwashing and think perhaps there is an application here of the techniques. But in the

meantime, I can strive to stay positive by looking for warning signs of negativity -- anger, sadness, hopelessness, disdain, anxiety -- and try to detach from them.

Apart from my negativity, I think I am quite clear on my needs and desires, and they are genuine. I merely want a fulfilling life rich in experiences. I see that right now I have many options that could work to move me in that direction, in the big questions such as work and place of abode—such as manoeuvring myself into a position where I could work from home, and then travel while working. I just need to move forward with a positive attitude.

*Daddy Fatsacks is the pseudonym of an American living in London*

### ***Leaving a salary to pursue a dream***

One of the biggest 'life decisions' I had to make was to train as a reflexologist and eventually leave my dull, but salaried (with pension) job and take the big leap into the unknown world of the self-employed.

It took several years for me to realise that I was wasting away in my predictable job, but the thought of taking this leap scared me. I would spend hours analysing and daydreaming. Whenever I got the opportunity I would quiz other self-employed people for insight into the peaks and troughs of such a lifestyle. This gave me good information that set me off in the right direction.

The more I worked for other people, the more I realised that after all these years of taking orders, I could not take anymore. I eliminated alternatives by my eventual unwillingness to accept the status quo.

In the end the frustration with my situation made it inevitable that I'd leave my job and follow my dream. I felt pushed towards my decision by my increasing dissatisfaction of my quality of life. I wanted to work on my own terms, not be dictated by someone else.

My constraints were financial. Would I be able to make a living doing something that was considered quite unconventional? I had always been conventional, stolid even. Would enough people be interested in coming to me for reflexology? What on earth would I do if I couldn't make a go of it? I couldn't see myself going back into office work. I was anxious to succeed.

Reflexology reflects my life values: to balance all aspects of work and life; to be caring; to help people help themselves; to make a difference in people's lives; to do all these amazing things AND earn a living.

The hardest part of the decision was to get down and actually do it: stop pussyfooting around, stop dreaming and just do it. After I made the decision, things slipped into place easily. I even wondered why I had spent all those years hesitating.

The outcome was brilliant, better than I thought it could be. I have no regrets whatsoever. Although it

took me a long time to decide and leave my job, the relief was beautiful and well worth the wait. My new career since 2000 has brought me great joy. In following my dream my kids tell me how proud they are of me. That makes it all worthwhile.

I would advise others to follow their dreams. Please don't sit around thinking 'what if?' Life is too short. Seize the day, seize the dream and be glad to be alive. Feel your aliveness.

*Ann Sarson, age 55, married with two grown-up children, is a full-time self-employed reflexologist. She was one of the fifteen delegates on the 'Great Decisions for Great Results' workshop run by Anne Ku and Mark Forster in September 2004.*

### **About decision making**

There is no one method in decision making that works for everyone. Over the years, I heard about and tried many approaches and concluded that you just had to go through the trials and tribulations to discover a unique way that works for you alone.

Making a decision and realising (implementing) it are two different things. Making decisions for the sake of it is not sensible. You must be able to visualise what you want to achieve as a result of the decision. Most of the time we are measured by our achievements and not by our decisions.

First of all, we must accept that we make decisions all the time based on the best knowledge of our situation. It is really hard to pinpoint what is a life decision. Why is that so? Let me relate a story. A man was returning home from work, decided to take a different route, got hit by a car and became paralysed. Was his simple decision a life decision? It was not at the time of making but the consequence of that decision has a lifelong impact. In life, there is always the sense of uncertainty and risk.

I think that the only time we will know if our life decision is really the decision of our life is when we die and could look back. Some people resort to fortune telling to catch a glimpse of their lives in the fast-forward future. It is very subjective but that is one method in decision making. The rest of us do our best in making decisions the conventional way, by exploring priorities, resources, options and circumstances. Decision making, especially one that is long-term and affects the lives of others, involves and requires a process.

When I am at the crossroads of my life, I visualise what I want to do and where I want to be in a particular timeframe. This is the 'weighting' stage. Some people talk about finding the 'big rock' in your life, that is, establishing the only most important reason for how you want to live your life. A good illustration is the weighted toy that is designed with a heavy base and a light body that will remain upright no matter how you topple it.

I had a goal of becoming a professional writer by the time I turned 50. In today's networked world, I could work from anywhere and at anytime. I explored various ways of achieving this goal. When I first talked about being a writer, people were quick to give advice and offer assistance. After much consideration, I dropped the less realistic ideas and expanded on the ones that were more manageable.

I find the phrase 'follow your passion' incomplete. Everyone has some responsibility, and we cannot just pack up to follow our passion. It is good to have passions but people who make decisions based on passion alone may end up being dreamers and drifters. Matching personal resources and commitments to ideas would increase the probability of success and prevent unnecessary stress in the future.

Never rush a major decision if time permits. After many 'bad' ones, I learned to give myself time to make important decisions. Holding off a decision does not mean being indecisive. Frequently changing decisions is being indecisive. When I was younger, my biggest mistake was confusing the two. I rushed through many decisions and realised I was just gambling with choices.

What do I do with the outcomes of bad decisions? Some I live with and others I work to eliminate. I do not regret any bad decision. I simply avoid that route for the rest of my life.

*Since deciding to be a writer two years ago, Joan Yap has completed several short stories and articles, distributed a monthly arts newsletter, published a guidebook, completed a novel, and founded Asia Write Resource Centre which offers training, writing, and publishing services at <http://www.arcWrite.com>.*

### **Becoming a writer**

I have been asked many times, especially since orchestral work has been so on the wane in London, how I started writing.

I think the answer is, I never stopped! From the age of four I wrote bad poetry, bad even by kiddie standards. By the age of ten I had written over a hundred short stories, almost all of them dreadful. My first novel was completed at thirteen: it was the first of a trilogy, so my output, at least in terms of quantity, was pretty prodigious. Unfortunately the quality was less so: I have kept the trilogy, mainly because of the affectionate and kind comments my only reader (my sister) penned in the borders. (Her favourite comment was, 'Croak!' not because some character had died, but because, in her editorial opinion, it was too over-dramatised or sentimental.)

And it was over-dramatised and sentimental. I suspect trilogies by romantic teenage girls who spent the majority of their free time hunched over a cello tend towards the flamboyant and madly sentimental, steeped as we were in Dvorak and Elgar cello concertos.

But the truth was, I had nothing to say. I had emerged from an interesting-ish childhood spent in various southeast-Asian American embassies, but I had lived only in music and in dreams. I had got a performing degree at Indiana University School of music and freelanced in London orchestras for around ten years before I knew I was prepared to write, not as escapism and fantasy, but something that COULD have happened, a contemporary novel that SOME publisher might find buyable, that SOME readers might find illuminating.

It took me a couple of years to write my first novel, and then I showed it, not to my sister but to my husband. He said, "This is it. Go for it." I sent it to six agents, of which one accepted. The book was published by Orion a year later.

So I suppose my advice would be to wait. Don't wait to write: write diaries (I kept a diary for twenty years), write friends, write blogs, write stories. But don't go for a real novel (or play, or screenplay) until there's something you really have to SAY. I think it was Berlioz who said, 'One should never compose anything until the NOT writing of it becomes a positive inconvenience to you,' and that is my motto now with writing. Only then will you care enough to make it real enough to count.

As for writing together with music (or while acting, which many actors do) I think it is a sanity-saver. Few musicians, and even fewer actors, have enough work, or enough worthwhile work, in their career: but we can all write, even if it's 'only' a diary, and it can be a terrific relief, to be able, any time you choose, to express all that's pent-up inside. (A writer friend who is paid to work with prison inmates tells me that it is awe-inspiring to watch the relief of some people who have NEVER before been able to express anything, and who, now given that outlet, might never need to resort to violence again.) And it was Graham Greene who wrote: "Sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human condition."

So dust off those diaries and dig out those keypads! Ready, aim, write!

*Alice McVeigh, cellist and novelist, lives in London and updates the weekly classical music agony aunt column 'Ask Alice' at the classical music website <http://www.mvdaily.com>.*

### ***The best laid schemes of mice and men***

"In proving foresight may be vain;  
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft agley,  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!"

---- Robert Burns, "To a Mouse"

I find life decisions often make themselves, provided you are listening to what life tells you. 'Life decisions' is a misnomer. Planning decisions is more like it. Life is what happens to you, not what you have decided. You have no control over life, only what you think about it, how you feel about it, emote what you are programmed for, and we are all different, infinite subgroups and stereotypes. Decide what you would like to happen, play God. Who among us can resist?

Who can control themselves without the group? My mother always said, "I'm gonna do something, even if it is wrong." What would you like to do? Someone can and will always criticize or praise you.

How did I choose my current profession? My high school girlfriend wanted to be a dentist. I wanted her. So we talked about it. My abilities and aptitudes let me apply. I decided to try and I was accepted. I decided to pay the price and fate allowed me to do it. My girlfriend and I went our separate ways for college and amazingly four years later, we went to dental school together. We are still friends.

Why did I decide to live in Florida? Family ties and opportunity.

Why did I decide to get married? The first time, because she was pregnant is the short answer, the longer one has to do with belief in rules I could not judge due to my youth.

When I get stuck on a decision, I meditate on it. This is the way for me. I prepare myself, make lists, assess the pros and cons, the good and the bad, listen, read, and talk about it.

Pose the question in your mind and allow the answer to come to you. Some are easy, some require much time, and some you will never be confident it is the right thing to do or try.

The answers are always there, we have to be open to them. They come in many ways: dreams, signs, visions, a song on the radio, an encounter on the Internet. When you are ready, it will become clear. Remember, this works only if you do it for yourself and not for others. They must have their own process.

*Buddy Claude is the nickname of a dentist in Florida*

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Contributors to this 'life decisions' issue were invited to think of a significant and interesting life decision they made in the past and use the following guidelines to form their 700-word piece.

1. Describe what it was and why it was a life decision.
2. What were the factors that most influenced how you decided?
3. How long did you 'dwell' on it, struggle with it, or analyse it before choosing a course of action?
4. Describe your approach.
  - a) Did you consult other people?
  - b) Did you use the process of elimination?

- c) Were you conscious of how you made the decision?
  - d) What were your considerations?
  - e) What were your constraints?
  - f) What were your values and goals?
  - g) What were your alternatives?
5. What was the hardest part of your decision?
  6. After you made the decision, did you stick to it? Or did you backtrack, that is, try to 'undo' it?
  7. Did you get a good outcome? Why or why not?
  8. Did you regret what you did?
  9. In hindsight, what would you have done differently?
  10. How would you advise others to approach such a life decision to get a better outcome?

Interested readers may find it helpful to do the above exercise as a way to learn about their own decision making styles or apply this process of enquiry to a current decision dilemma.

The theme of 'life decisions' was selected in anticipation of the 'Great Decisions for Great Results' workshop conducted in September 2004 in England. The 15 participants explored important considerations in decision making such as insufficient information, not being ready to decide, conflict of values, analysis paralysis, and resistance to change.

In every issue of Le Bon Journal, we include a piece from the online journal entries at analyticalQ.com. Search for 'decision' and you will find many entries about decision making, information, uncertainty, flexibility, commitment and other related topics.

One of the reasons we hesitate (or procrastinate) in making a decision or committing ourselves to a decision already made is the fear of regret. Avoiding or minimising regret could also be a goal, particularly if the consequences are irreversible and costly and the stakes are high. Of course, if we've never been 'burned' before, that is, if we've never experienced regret or failure, such fear would not exist. Fear of regret could keep us locked in the status quo --- no risk, no reward. Minimising regret does not prevent regret --- and is quite different from fear of regret or avoidance of regret.

### **Fear of regret**

Children are so innocent, simple, and unafraid. Somewhere along the way, they learn to fear. And if they happen to study decision analysis, they would learn the decision criterion of minimising regret.

How often I've operated in that mode: act to minimise future regret. One strategy is to accumulate lots of options so that I wouldn't regret not having a choice when I need one. Another is to perform scenario analysis on all possible outcomes and constantly prepare against each.

Fear has set in. Where once I embraced uncertainty, I now prepare cautiously. This is not a way to live.

I became afraid to let go of what I had in case I'd regret not having them if I needed them. I became afraid of reaching out, in case I got rejected. Fear grips the handle of uncertainty.

In my recent travels, I met many interesting people whose lives I would dearly like to intersect, not just on a professional basis. But it is much safer to stay on the main road than to veer off. Would I regret not choosing the path least taken? Would I regret not staying on the main road?

As things get more complicated and uncertain, people take comfort in the familiar. Perhaps that's why people mind their own business and stick to routine. Would I rather know what I may be regretting or fear that I would regret?

*From 'The Diary of Anne Ku', 1 April 2001*

### **Previous issues**

Love is actually all around the world  
Volume 3, Issue 2, 15 February 2004, 3 pages

Uprooters on the uprooting experience  
Volume 3, Issue 4, 15 April 2004, 6 pages

Career change and second passions  
Volume 3, Issue 5, 15 July 2004, 8 pages

### **Reaction to 'Career change and second passions'**

Very well done! I must congratulate you on a great effort and possibly the best edition of LBJ e-zine yet. I think using a diverse group of contributors and not confining it to 2-pages has made it far more interesting than past issues.

*Information technologist, Malaysia*

It's nice to see other perspectives, particularly encouraging to read interesting stories of ordinary people. Very inspiring!

*Composer, Netherlands*

Read your e-zine with interest.

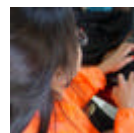
*Violinist and caterer, London*

Makes very good reading indeed.

*Accountant, London*

The most helpful article for me was 'Changing your job or career: expert advice' by Guido Egidi. It was instructive and constructive. Perhaps I should have read it 10 years ago.

*Engineer and singer, London*



Anne Ku, editor

Le Bon Journal e-zine is a free quarterly publication for self-expression intended as a vehicle for sponsorship of the arts and other good causes. Sponsorship is sought to keep this publication independent, alive, and free. Benefits include targeted web traffic to sponsor's website.

Each issue has a unique theme set in advance. Contributors are invited to submit up to 700 words to the editor by the deadline (usually one month before publication date). If accepted, submissions will be edited and returned for correction and approval. Le Bon Journal reserves the right to edit for space and clarity just before final publication, typically on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month.

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