

The Way of Discernment  
Spiritual Practices for Decision Making

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## *Introduction*

How are we to live our lives thoughtfully and faithfully in the midst of all the forces, options, and decisions that characterize modern life? Discernment, the Christian practice of seeking God's call in the midst of the decisions that mark one's life, may very well be the single most important Christian spiritual practice for dealing with this contemporary dilemma. We all make decisions constantly, some with careful reflection, many offhandedly and without much thought. What if we understood these decisions, minor as well as major, as a matter of faithful Christian living? Though many Christians do create their own practices of faithful decision making, most are unaware that a long and varied Christian tradition of discernment exists precisely to help integrate decisions into the life of faith. Learning some of this tradition, but more importantly, internalizing some of these practices and incorporating them into one's decision making: these are the goals of the journey you are about to undertake.

Henri Nouwen once remarked, recalling the well-known aphorism, "Nature abhors a vacuum," that one of the things preventing Christians from moving ahead in their spiritual lives is a fear of empty space. They need a set of boundaries to provide a container within which they can be emptied of themselves and filled with God.<sup>1</sup> My own experience teaching spirituality suggests that Nouwen was correct. Even when Christians recognize that such a thing as Christian discernment exists, they often still founder for lack of simple parameters. How do I begin? What steps do I go through? How do I know if I am actually discerning? This book seeks to provide a set of boundaries, a kind of container to assist you not only in understanding what Christian discernment is, but more importantly, in taking steps to becoming a more discerning person.

As we shall see in chapter 1, the fundamental meaning of discernment is discrimination. This book focuses on faithful discrimination in service of decision making. Before we can discriminate, however, we have to notice—both outside and inside ourselves, both circumstances

and our inner responses. Then we have to make judgments about what is more conducive to our spiritual life and then to judge that *this* thing is better than that one, *this* action is better than other options for achieving that goal. But what provides the basis for such discriminations? Is it only what we can figure out for ourselves? Is it what feels good? Is it what makes me happy? Or what makes others happy? If we have to struggle, is it a sign that God doesn't want us to go in this direction? These are the very real questions that arise when people begin to ask seriously, "What does God desire here?" Finally, we have to choose: this thing over that one, this action over that one. Entering into discernment, then, means becoming increasingly able to notice where God is at work in the world and in one's own life, increasingly desirous of choosing the "more," and, God willing, increasingly generous with one's own life in response.

Important as it may be to come to a sense of what God might desire in the moment of decision, a still deeper benefit comes by engaging in discernment. The more one discerns, the more likely it is that one will become a discerning person. By the phrase "discerning person," I mean a person who seeks, in all that he or she does, that which better responds to God's call in the moment. A discerning person begins to desire what God desires more than any other created reality. Over time, and with God's grace, you can indeed become a discerning person. If this book succeeds, your former way of decision making will gradually be replaced by a discerning attitude. Your life will begin to take on a different orientation. You will be seeking God in places and through decisions that never occurred to you before.

When I first offered a church retreat on discernment to a mainline Protestant church more than fifteen years ago, one parishioner asked, "What is discernment? Is it New Age?" That this question surfaced in this well-educated congregation indicates how invisible this ancient Christian practice remains, especially among Protestants. This book seeks to change such perceptions. I will describe discernment—for until we know it exists, we are unable to choose to discern for ourselves. I will place it within the long Christian tradition—for if we are worried that it is somehow unorthodox, we will be unable to trust it to assist us to grow closer to God. But my central task is to invite you to actually do discernment—for unless we experience it for ourselves, we will miss the opportunity for spiritual depth that discernment can bring to our ever more complex and fast-paced lives.

The book unfolds in two parts. Part 1 sets out the biblical, theolog-

ical, and historical context for discernment. The first chapter looks at what discernment is and where we find it in Scripture. We examine our notion of God and of human beings: Can God communicate with us? How do we hear? What is our part in discernment, and what is God's part? You will also begin doing discernment through the Awareness Examen, a simple daily practice that centers on noticing where God is active in one's daily life. Over time, the fruits of the Awareness Examen include a deepened ability to notice, desire, and choose God in the everydayness of our lives—those very places we often overlook as important for discernment. In the second chapter, we discuss spiritual freedom, the essential disposition for discernment. Here you will begin to seek this disposition, which always comes to us as God's free gift. As it takes root, its fruit appears as a growing desire to put God's call first in one's life. We then examine the role that desires play in discernment. The accompanying practice will help you to examine your own heart's desire. We also look a bit at our own spiritual histories in order to develop a clearer sense of how God has already been at work in our lives. All these practices and their accompanying discoveries are foundational to living a discerning life.

Part 2 is the core of the book, and I move here from introducing discernment in general to inviting you to practice it in concrete instances. At this point, I invite you to begin your own discernment process, rather than just thinking about discernment. This invitation is crucial. Accepting it will make the difference between understanding about discernment and experiencing discernment, between secondhand knowing about it to knowing for yourself. Practicing discernment experimentally will help you adapt the tradition of discernment to your own life and to begin to become a discerning person. In discerning about your own issues, as God leads you, you will meet God in and through your own life.

The first step in discernment involves formulating the issue for discernment. Chapter 3 assists in that process, for process it often is. Your issue will need to be sufficiently limited that you can get around it, sufficiently concrete that you can imagine and try on various possibilities in your imagination, and sufficiently focused that you know what you are discerning. The first practice is, then, framing the matter for discernment. It seems like a simple task. However, the central issue for discernment may be hiding inside of another, more readily apparent issue, only revealed as you jump into your discernment. Or perhaps, in gathering information relevant to the decision you are discerning, some piece of

data comes to light that changes your issue substantially. The goal of chapter 3 is to frame your discernment with sufficient boundaries and clarity that you can work with it in the subsequent chapters, but to hold it with sufficient tentativeness that you can let it shift as you progress through the various exercises, always open to God's call for you through this decision. The remainder of the chapter, with its attendant practice, will help you begin to surface information and make some judgments about which information is relevant to your discernment.

Chapters 4–10 lead you deeper into your own discernment journey by means of a series of practices set in the form of prayer. Since one can move into making a decision from a variety of leaping-off points, so too discernment has a variety of starting points. Chapters 4–10 each use a different starting or entry point to lead you deeper into your discernment. These chapters focus, in turn, on memory, intuition, body, imagination, reason, a particular set of feelings called “religious affections,” and nature. Why these entry points? If we observe the decision making of a large number of people, we soon discover that they rely on a wide variety of favorite strategies and techniques to decide an issue. Some make lists and quite literally think their way to a logical decision. Others recognize a decision in their bodies; they might say, “I know in my gut that this is the right thing to do.” Others come to clarity by taking a long afternoon out in nature, sitting by the ocean or hiking in the hills. I myself rely on imagining myself into various possibilities, noticing what happens in me when I try on various options. Some people have honed their intuition to a fine point; they seem to arrive at a decision without going through separate steps—as if the solution just appeared whole. Some return to their storehouse of memories and find a comparable decision and use this memory to point the way. Still others compare their options to their deeply held values and see what option most closely expresses these values. Our ancestors in the faith were not so different from us. They too employed similar strategies in their attempts to understand what God might be calling them to be and do.

The first practices in chapters 4–10, the lead practices, are based on just such variations in preference and personality. Each chapter also contains one or more other practices that can enhance and deepen either the entry point as a whole or the lead practice. Should you attempt all the practices? Not necessarily. I have designed each chapter around the lead practice, however, and praying it will continue unfolding your discernment. Use the chapter's second or third practice to the extent that you feel called to them and they help you with your discernment. In a

subsequent discernment, some of these other exercises may prove very useful. In any case, their variety reveals the richness of the Christian tradition of discernment.

In discernment, even after gaining a sense of the best decision for the moment, your discernment is not yet finished. The final step is confirmation, which is one of the distinctive aspects of Christian spiritual discernment. Figuratively speaking, we lay our discernment at God's feet. We bring to God the results of all our prayer and reflection, our tentative decision, our best effort to gain clarity. We seek confirmation of two kinds. First, is the tentative decision confirmed within us? Second, does it hold up when we examine it in light of the wisdom of the Christian tradition? In the final chapter, you will learn what some of this wisdom suggests and test your own tentative decision.

### PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Who am I, and why did I want to write this book? The facts are easy to relate. I am a white, lifelong Roman Catholic religious Sister who teaches spirituality at a Presbyterian seminary set within a large ecumenical and interfaith consortium of theological schools. But what is harder to relate is how these facts came to be: my typical pre-Vatican II upbringing, the excitement of Vatican II that corresponded with my early days in my religious congregation, my struggles to learn to teach junior high-level math and science, my discovery that pastoral ministry could have many faces beyond teaching, my return to graduate school in religious studies and transition to teaching college religious studies while simultaneously working in the formation of new members of my religious congregation, my second stint at graduate school for a doctoral degree in religion and personality studies, and my subsequent move to seminary teaching.

But still that doesn't tell you about the struggles that have formed my person—the failures, the closed doors, the deaths, the boredom, and the hard work that have fueled my desire to understand discernment and incorporate it into my life. “What is it, God, that you want here?” has been my steady refrain for the past forty years. Still, my discernments have been my own; your discernments will be yours. You are a different person, and God is calling you personally and uniquely. My task is to help you listen, notice, discriminate, and choose within your own relationship to the One who ultimately sustains the whole world.



I am also a Christian who is writing primarily for persons within the Christian tradition. However, the practices, suitably adapted, may be useful to persons in other traditions or no specific tradition. I have, for example, occasionally used the exercises in situations where it is not appropriate to advocate a specific tradition. Yet discernment arose within the Christian spiritual tradition, and its fullest expression, I believe, assumes its practitioners follow this tradition.

I have a certain group in mind as I write. Given that we all make decisions, this book is for all serious Christians who desire that their decisions be a central part of the way they seek and respond to God. You need not have it all together to begin. All that is necessary is the desire to listen for God's call in the midst of your life. That is enough. We bring our little drop of generosity, and God responds. We ask for spiritual freedom, and God assists us to grow in it. We seek what is better in a particular situation, and God meets us in that seeking.

You will meet real people in these pages. No actual names appear. I have also altered details to protect identities.

Two disclaimers are in order about language for God used in this book. First, our language is more or less welcoming of persons who differ from us. Women, among others, have frequently felt unwelcome or invisible in church-speak. Therefore, I have tried to use gender-inclusive language for people and to avoid pronouns—inescapably gendered—for God.

Second, I am thoroughly Trinitarian in my theological beliefs. This book is intended to reflect and foster Trinitarian perspectives. But where one person might use the language of "Father" quite comfortably, another finds it a barrier, subtle or not so subtle, to prayer and discernment. When one person readily thinks of Christ as the active agent in his or her prayer and life, another more easily uses the language of the Holy Spirit. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus tells us to wait for the Counselor who will bring to mind all that he has said and done and who will, in fact, teach us what we could not yet understand, so both of these prayers are standing on traditional ground in their prayer. Because I do not know the language for God you prefer to use as you pray, I generally use the more general term "God" in practices and explanations. I mean this term to stand in for the preferred language of address to God that each of you might choose to bring to the exercises. If you prefer, for example, to call on the Holy Spirit as you begin each spiritual practice, please do. You have a long Christian tradition behind you. If "Father" or "Creator" or "Lord" or "Christ" or "Jesus" are more useful to you or feel more

personal, by all means shift the language. Our God is the one whom Jesus called Father; whom the Scriptures address as Creator and Lord of all that is; and whose Spirit, flowing from Father and Son, animates our lives and renews the face of the earth.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book differs in one essential dimension from the many good books on discernment that have appeared in recent years. You will not simply be reading about discernment; you will learn discernment through its practice. Since this method of proceeding asks unexpected things of readers, some advice will assist you to make the most of the information and exercises.

First, think of this book as a personal retreat facilitator. A human retreat facilitator would make suggestions for prayer or other activities and then talk with you about your experience, and I have set up this book to echo this dynamic. Each chapter begins with a practice, with enough detail so that you can launch into it for yourself. Once you complete your reflection, pick up the text that follows. The subsequent discussion adds commentary and connects the practice to the Christian discernment tradition.

Second, do the practices wholeheartedly. The practices at the beginning of each chapter, the lead prayer exercises, are the heart of the book. The words surrounding the practices are there simply to help you understand how to proceed and how to interpret what you experience. I encourage you also to try the supplementary practices, especially if you are new to discernment. They will enhance your discernment and give you a sense of the breadth of the Christian tradition of discernment.

Be sure to keep in a spiritual journal a record of your unfolding discernment. Each discernment exercise will generate thoughts, feelings, judgments, questions, all rich data relevant to your overall process and direction. In order not to lose the freshness and detail of your experiences, write down a summary of the insights and feelings that occur along the way. This rich life palette will then be available to weave back into the tapestry of your discernment. By reserving the same journal for all your discernment practices, you will soon begin to recognize patterns in yourself and in the way God calls you. You may also discover key metaphors and multivalent images that will lead you to further insight and reflection about the course of your life.

Third, since discernment is deepened in community, seek someone with whom you can share your discernment process. Ideally, you will have a friend, a spouse, a pastor, or a spiritual director who can provide this attentive presence. This person represents the larger Christian community, supporting your prayer and pondering. As you speak aloud about your experience, your discernment deepens. Perhaps, as I shall describe below, you can participate in a discernment group in which all the members listen and support each other.

Fourth, begin each exercise by asking to grow in the spiritual freedom upon which discernment rests. The first step in each practice suggests a form of this crucial preparation. Be generous with your time and yourself at this point. Resist the impulse to “get to the discernment”; this *is* the discernment. If you are unable to come to some measure of spiritual freedom, at least ask for a deeper desire for spiritual freedom. As you proceed with the reflection, you may feel your spiritual freedom ebbing away. Stop and renew again your desire to grow in spiritual freedom. Chapter 2 discusses this important foundation in more detail; the accompanying exercise will help you get started.

Fifth, take your time. You cannot push water up the river. Neither can you make clarity come before its time, nor make the Holy Spirit act on your command. Discernment is more than a means to a particular decision; it is a way of life. Sometimes, though, a decision is urgent. If you must make a decision quickly, do as much reflection and prayer as you reasonably can, make the decision that best grows out of your wisdom at that moment, and trust that God will be with you.

Sixth, assume control of your own discernment process. If a component of a practice or an entire practice causes undue anxiety, feel free to stop. Examine, perhaps with a spiritual director or pastor, what other issues might have been triggered or what might lie behind your response. If this kind of reflection also makes you anxious or resistant, then simply stop. You can move on to a different step or to the next practice. Likewise, when you are sharing with your friend, spouse, spiritual director, or prayer group, judge the content and level of self-revelation that feels safe yet simultaneously challenging. Do not violate your own sense of safety. If this topic is important for your growth, the Holy Spirit will prepare you to deal with it in more depth in the future.

Also, feel free to adapt the practices in this book to your individual or group circumstances. They have been constructed with a variety of persons and circumstances in mind, but their particular wording and

focus may feel constraining to you. Feel free to adjust the language, including the language for God, so that the process better fits you or the matter you are discerning. Furthermore, though the tradition reveals that many processes have been employed in discernment, the essence of discernment lies in the prayerful searching for God's call, weighing and deciding on the most appropriate response. Any process that encourages such prayerful searching, weighing, and deciding might therefore appropriately be used for discernment. And never forget that the Holy Spirit can work outside the parameters of even the most carefully crafted process. While the practices contained in this book have been used fruitfully over a number of years, there is nothing particularly sacred in them.

You will likely find that some practices are more sympathetic to the way you naturally process information. I encourage you to notice your preference for certain practices, and build them into your personal discernment repertoire. At the same time, be aware that no single process provides a sufficiently complex means of uncovering all that you might need or want to know as you seek God's preferred future. Thus, I also recommend you regularly use at least one practice that offers very different data or relies on your less preferred ways of being in the world, for it may reveal some otherwise inaccessible information that may deeply affect your ultimate decision. For example, I rely heavily on imagination for my discernment. I imagine possible scenarios and then try them on for fit—that is, how they feel in my emotions and my body. Thus, I would naturally employ the practices based on imagination, feelings, and body. To balance this preference, I will frequently list all the pros and cons of a course of action and systematically think through the alternatives. Combining a more intellectual practice with the emotional and physical that I instinctively prefer lessens the possibility that my feelings and imagination might become disconnected from the concrete particulars and the realistic possibilities of a situation.

Finally, believe that God accompanies you wherever your decisions take you. In this sense, you cannot fail discernment. A poor choice may not necessarily be a bad discernment, because discernment is not measured by outcomes but by our increasing sensitivity to God's gracious invitations and desires for our welfare. The only ways we can fail at discernment are by stubbornly turning our back on spiritual freedom or by deciding not to seek God's call in this situation at all. Even then, God remains with us.

## USING THIS BOOK IN GROUP SETTINGS

An ideal way to use this book the first time is in the context of a discernment group. Discernment concerns call, and call is best uncovered in the context of community. This book can be used in two kinds of groups. In the first, each person works with her or his own discernment, but shares from the fruit of prayer and reflection at each group meeting. This kind of group provides an excellent setting in which to learn discernment because part of the group's time together can be given to discussing the content of each chapter. In addition, the faith sharing, magnified as it is by the attention and contribution of all the members, can bring enormous support for each individual's personal discernment, and a sense that every person's discernment will be unique.

In the second kind of group, the group members focus on one person at a time, taking turns supporting each other's discernment from start to finish. This option makes the most sense for long-term sharing or discernment groups, which have the leisure to attend to each person for as long as necessary to complete the discernment. Those members not presently engaged in a discernment process simply support by prayer and contemplative listening the member who is, knowing that at another moment others will return the support. The first kind of group may evolve into the second, after completing their introductory study, or if they choose to reconvene whenever a member desires support for a new discernment. The advice below concerns the first of these variations.

First, choose the number of meetings to balance the way the book is constructed and the needs of the group. The most straightforward option is to proceed at the rate of one chapter per week for an eleven-week commitment. Adjustments to this length of time should preserve the sharing at the heart of each chapter in part 2; to give sufficient time for that personal sharing, I recommend at least one week per chapter in part 2.

Second, choose the appropriate size for your group. Groups of between four and seven are ideal; groups of more than seven participants should break into smaller groups of four to seven. It's best if these small groups remain constant for the duration of the study. Dividing the groups by compatibility is not necessary; in fact, the more diverse the group, the better. Spouses can decide if they would feel freer in the same or in separate groups.

Third, select leadership. The leadership can easily rotate, or one person may assume leadership for the study in part 1 and another for the sharing in part 2. In this case, select these two leaders by the different skills needed for each section. For part 1, the ideal leader will be able to summarize the main content points and to help others remain on track in a discussion of the main ideas. For part 2, the skills of helping people be comfortable with silence, inviting sharing, and creating an atmosphere free of intrusive advice giving rise to the fore. Since the leaders serve primarily as process facilitators, they can engage in their own discernment along with the other members.

Fourth, covenant together. The group process and the individual discernment of each participant benefit if everyone makes five commitments.

1. Commit to the entire process in order to allow sufficient trust to build in each person and in the group as a whole.
2. Contribute actively from your own prayer and reflection, but maintain the boundaries and level of vulnerability that, for you, are appropriate and safe.
3. In order to allow time for all group members, limit your sharing accordingly.
4. Avoid offering advice or telling another, however subtly, what to do, since advice giving can easily intrude negatively upon another's discernment process.
5. Keep everything that is shared in the group strictly confidential.

Fifth, practice contemplative listening. This is the richest and deepest support for individual discernment. Carmelite spiritual author William McNamara offers a simple yet profound definition of contemplation: a long, loving look at the real.<sup>2</sup> Contemplative listening, then, means bringing a full-bodied, loving presence to the person before you, as well as to what is said and what as yet remains unsaid. Contemplative listening seeks to honor the presence of the Holy Spirit in the speaker and between the listener and speaker. Such listening rests in warm, loving, engaged, and prayerful silence, which often needs few or no words.

Contemplative listening is more than simply not speaking. It involves putting oneself aside to attend fully to the other. When your own current or remembered experience begins to play in your mind, set it aside for the moment. I call this self-forgetfulness "bracketing" to

convey the notion that one does not ultimately lose the self. Rather, one chooses, for this moment, to leave one's own concerns aside in order to be fully present to another. Any time your attention wanders from the speaker, it is time to bracket what you are then musing about and refocus your attention lovingly and prayerfully to the speaker. You can return to your own musing and memories later. This discipline also means that you must withhold your own pearls of wisdom, no matter how hard-won ("Let me tell you how I dealt with this same kind of thing—it worked really well"); your own similar stories ("The same thing happened to me"); and your own informed knowledge ("That's what I do in my job; I can help you"). Your best gift is your attentive, supportive presence.

Many groups choose to receive all personal sharing in contemplative silence—a silence that offers a very active and supportive response, as well as one that assures that the listeners will not subtly intervene in a member's discernment. On the other hand, other groups may desire to give some spoken response to each person's sharing. These groups add contemplative responding to their contemplative listening. In this case, some simple, yet difficult rules of speech apply.

In contemplative responding we act like a sounding box, taking in the speaker's words, letting them resonate within us, and giving them back magnified and made more resonant by our loving attention. We help the speaker, through our response, to hear more deeply what he or she just said. We do not move ahead of the speaker or begin nudging, however subtly, toward our own preferred interpretation or outcome. Short, succinct statements that summarize the speaker's words along with their underlying emotional tone are the most effective responses. Some typical starter phrases include:

"I heard you say . . . [repeat, in the same or similar words, what you heard]."

"It seems that you . . . [repeat what the speaker did or felt] because . . . [name the expression, action, or tone of voice that supports your educated guess]."

"I noticed that you . . . [describe something the person said or did, but without interpreting it]."

"There seems to be a pattern . . . [briefly describe the two or three aspects that link together]."

The briefer and more accurate your statement, the more helpful it usually is to the speaker's own contemplative process.

In the group setting, these simple speaking and responding rules protect the spiritual freedom of each person before God. If you want a more interactive response, for example, to talk over the various options appearing in your own prayer, simply approach one of the members (or your spouse or spiritual director) outside the discernment group setting, and ask to talk over your discernment.

Finally, rest assured that the most important activity in all that follows is simply to hunger for God's life to come more fully—in you, in others, in the world. All the rest is God's job. And God is faithful, beyond our ability to ask or imagine.

Our discernment begins, then, with the ancient Christian prayer beckoning the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.

Enkindle in us the fire of your love.

Send forth your spirit and we shall be created

And you shall renew the face of the earth.