

Discernment within a Conversational Life



Jan Johnson

The E-mail read, “So which graduate program do you think is best for me?” I winced as I typed out my more-than-sound-bite-size reply: “It depends on what you really want to learn and how you want to learn it. Write that down. Pray and wait. Refine it. Then do some research and line up the features of both programs. Finally, set it all aside and wait and pray a little more.” I knew my correspondent wanted a fill-in-the-blank answer and that my reply frustrated him, but to advise him to skip the path of discernment would have been a disservice.

Discernment becomes puzzling and downright frustrating when it’s viewed as finding an answer, as in the statement, “I wish God would just send me a telegram.” Such answers supposedly reveal the will of God and, as such, are unconsciously viewed as keys to success. People think, *If I discern well and get the heaven-sent answer, I’ll do everything right, which means I’ll have a good testimony and “finish well” (and I’ll never go hungry and everyone will always like me)*. Being consumed with making right decisions, we find discernment to be a burden. Our

irritation that discernment is a process requiring time and reflection reveals that we are hooked on outcomes and productivity.

Discernment both eludes us and surprises us because it’s more about relationship than outcomes. God is not a dispatcher of answers from a faraway office, but an up-close-and-personal being who wants to converse back and forth with us. God is relentlessly relational, inviting us into an interactive life so that discernment and decision making are fleshed out within ongoing nudges within our everyday life with God.

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So while people mostly want a "MapQuest Jesus" from whom they can request directions and find that a map pops up with five "to do" items, Jesus will have none of this mechanical approach.¹ We hang out with One who will not be charted or check-boxed. Jesus insists on jumping in the car with us, always letting *us* drive, pointing out to us the people on the side of the road who need assistance or urging us to stop to scramble up interesting trails or eat at a roadside stand we're

about to miss because we're addicted to work. Because such a journey takes a while, there's time to pour out our hearts along the way with, "Have you seen what so-and-so is doing?" and "But what about this situation in my life?" The path becomes clearer only after driving many miles, navigating a mountain pass, and stopping to watch ducks. But we don't mind this because we love being in the car with Jesus. Pretty soon we learn that the journey with Jesus is the point.

Discernment Flows From Within

A Way of Being

While post-Enlightenment folks think of discernment in terms of skills and techniques, Catherine of Siena called discernment a virtue, an inward capacity that grows as character grows. That's why we speak of someone as "being a discerning person" more than as "practicing discernment." Discernment gets behind the decisions you make to the kind of person you are.

According to *The Dialogue*, in which Catherine heard God speak (this having been recorded by her community), God said that those with the virtue of discernment "give what is due to me and to themselves. And then they give their neighbors what is due them: first of all, loving *charity* and *constant humble prayer*—your mutual debt—and the debt of *teaching*, and the example of a *holy and honorable life*."² (Emphasis added; see also Romans 13:8:

"the continuing debt to love one another"; also, "the debt of love I owe."³) You have perhaps experienced such persons—so different from others—who easily and happily honor God, themselves, and others. On the outside, said Catherine, such a life is full of *charity* and issues from obvious *constant humble prayer*, teaches others just by being itself, and gives others a close-up glimpse of a *holy and honorable life*.

Catherine linked love with discernment so closely that she pictured discernment as a branch of a tree, the tree being the charity within us: "Imagine a circle traced on the ground, and in its center a tree sprouting with a shoot grafted into its side. . . . [T]he tree of charity is nurtured in [the soil of] humility and branches out in true discernment."⁴ The growth of the branch (my capacity for discernment) depends on the health of the tree (my growing character and capacity for love): "only when discernment is rooted in humility is it virtuous, producing life-giving fruit and willingly yielding what is due to everyone."⁵ Her close linkage of love and discernment recalls, and perhaps flowed from, Paul's prayer for "love [to] abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best" (Philippians 1:9,10, NIV⁶).

Rather than the "will of God" always being a matter of finding an answer for a certain decision, it's more about being a humble, loving person in difficult situations. When a directee asked me if she should divorce her husband, I told her such advice-giving was outside the realm of spiritual direction, but we still had much to ponder together: "Let's consider this question first: What will it look like for you to

keep a right heart if you divorce him? What will it look like for you to *keep a right heart* if you stay?" (Before she could decide, he sued her for divorce, and so these questions became even more central.)

To discern the best way to go—to “discern the will of God”—comes not by getting magical answers from God, but by letting myself be transformed by the renewing of my mind rather than conforming to my old way of doing things (Romans 12:2). “What God gets out of our lives—and, indeed, what we get out of our lives—is simply the person we become. It is God’s intention that we should grow into the kind of person he could empower to do what we want to do.”⁷ A transformed person is free to do many things that would hogtie a world-conformed one.

Because discernment is about character, it’s not always a differentiated process or a special room to go to (“let’s have a time of discernment”). Instead this “knowledge and depth of insight” in people and organizations occurs all day long, or not: making wise choices about spending, or not; going out of my way to help someone, or not; sensing the body’s weariness and going to bed early, or not (see Philippians 1:10,11). The Holy Spirit doesn’t have to make an appointment with us, but seeks to move in and be constantly present to us.

Because discernment is about character, a wrong decision doesn’t have to turn out badly. Think of your last “wrong” decision. What did you learn? This became real to me many years ago when I chose a wrong speaking engagement over a right one for the same weekend. Rejecting one for which I was a perfect fit, I chose the one that

would give me more visibility and result in more book sales. As soon as I arrived, I saw that my approach and content did not fit. As I stood by my much-trafficked book table and repented of my efforts at self-promotion, I seemed to hear God say, “No, you don’t belong here, but since you are here, don’t beat yourself up. Be who I have called you to be.” Within a few minutes, the convener found herself faced with too many of what she called “hurting people.” She pointed at me and said, “There’s our ‘hurting people’ person. She’ll help you.” Over came the “hurting people,” and we began an informal support group out in the hallway that convened now and then throughout the entire week-end. “Making a mistake in one choice does not mean forever missing out on God’s will. God’s will for one’s life is found in the process of living in love and obedience, not in one crucial choice we made or failed to make.”⁸

Motives: The Why of Choices

Discernment not only gets beyond the decisions you make to the kind of person you are, but it moves beyond your choices to *why* you made those choices. To Catherine of Siena, the soil around the tree of charity is humility “born of [this] self-knowledge.”⁹ Discernment as “depth of insight” involves the “ability to assess our spiritual condition”¹⁰ and to examine our motives.

Yet such self-reflection is difficult because the heart is wily and even deceitful—who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9). Self-focused motives often mask themselves as angels of light and require time to be exposed. So as we make decisions, we

must also untangle the motives behind our actions, especially our noble actions. Am I helping this person because I am drawn to help her or because people will admire me for it? Since motives are usually not black and white but mixed, they must be pulled apart in the safety of quiet contemplation. In fact, the motive in the early stages is often pure, but after we get congratulated and thanked enough for a good deed or successful work, it easily becomes about us.

If we detect self-congratulation, the discerning question then deepens to these: What is behind this need for self-congratulation? What within me is crying out for attention? How might I recognize that God is paying attention to

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me and soak in that attention? How might I absorb the truth that “God is crazy about [me] and there is nothing [I] can do about it” (on a mug at a church where I taught recently)? As this desire for God and God’s attention is addressed, we can move outward to such a questions as, How can I help this person without soaking in the admiration of others?

Content to Move Slowly

Active Waiting

Questions of discernment are not answered quickly but require a time of expectant waiting as we pay attention to the movements of God (or not of God) within us. Such waiting is not like the typical impatient, agitated waiting of the medical waiting room, but the Psalmist’s eager, hope-drenched anticipation (Psalm 27:13,14, NRSV¹¹):

I believe that I shall see the
goodness of the LORD in the
land of the living.

Wait for the LORD; be strong,
and let your heart take
courage; wait for the LORD!

Active waiting resembles the second stage of the four-phased cycle of creativity: 1) data collection, 2) incubation, 3) the “aha” moment, and 4) verification from outside myself.¹² This second stage of incubation is one of percolation. The coffee grounds and hot water (your spirit interacting with the Holy Spirit) mix in a mysterious way. Yet for many in the creative process, incubation feels more like depression: Will anything come out of my desire and efforts? This

can drain the process of its intended essence so that we lose our incentive to discern.

It’s important to esteem this waiting time because in those moments of supposed delay, profound insights come to us. It used to be that if I had a decision to make, I always waited until after 4:30 p.m. each day when I did my aerobic workout routine. As my eyes and body followed the movements of the video

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instructor, my much-stretched mind rested from a day’s work. Behind the scenes, my thoughts cleared so that they blended undetected and formed rich conclusions. That time became so fruitful that I had to place a pad of yellow paper near my workout setting to jot down all the good ideas that came to me: what to say to my then-rebellious teenage daughter, how to fit together a magazine article that was flying apart, what

might strengthen my injured ankle. These were all things I had found difficult to discern earlier in the day but seemed quite simple after a time of unintended incubation.

The Will of God Unfolding

Discernment as part of our continual quest for God requires that we be open-ended. As the e-mail inquirer I mentioned at the beginning processed his decision, he chose not to take any of the graduate courses he investigated. Instead, he made an Ignatian retreat. Was the time he spent investigating courses wasted? No, because first of all it was conversation with God, which is never a waste of time. Second, through this process he discerned within himself a desire to impress others; that’s what seeking the degree was about. After he dealt with that desire, a process that took time, he reassessed his needs. He discerned that he had all the tools he needed to do his job, but he wasn’t where he wanted to be with God. The final decision required all these stages of discernment.

Most of my discernment experiences resemble this same meandering flow. I begin by muddling over whether I should do A or B, but after reflecting on myself, others involved, and my circumstances, I end up choosing Q or Z or a letter from another language’s alphabet. So now when I face a decision, I’m more patient and more open to the things that happen along the way. I move through it with more equanimity, enjoying the conversation, eager to see what I’ll learn from God and not so anxious about what the final outcome will be.

Too Much Information

While I still analyze the factors in major decisions, I now see the limitations of such a linear approach. I first learned this from Oswald Chambers: “I know when the instructions have come from God because of their quiet persistence. But when I begin to weigh the pros and cons and doubt and debate enter into my mind, I am bringing in an element that is not of God.”¹³ Chambers’ words persuaded me to make a drastic change back when I was the mother of two young children. I had read so many helpful parenting books that when I faced a dilemma, I mentally scanned what I’d read, looking for an answer. I decided to call a moratorium on reading parenting books and instead focused on paying closer attention to the words, facial expressions, and behaviors of both kids. These two opposite children needed to be approached differently. From this I gained the valuable insight that when my high-relater daughter lied to me, she lied because she so desperately wanted to please me; she was nothing like my caution-to-the-wind son, who never considered what I thought. This gave me enormous insight into her needs and my behavior.

Knowing Only the “Next Step”

Once we let go of the notion that we must manage outcomes, we understand that God doesn’t usually tell us too much at a time. I believe God tells us only what we can stand to hear: our next step. So now I ask only for a next step. I no longer wish to know the rest.

Such next-step thinking keeps us tuned in continually. Instead

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of panicking as we come to a cutoff date for choosing between two jobs, we’re calm because we’ve been discerning all along. During the first interview for a job and every interview afterward, we picked up clues and paid attention to them. While looking at the company’s website and talking to people who work there, we asked God, “What do I need to know? What could I be discerning here?” Early in the process, it occurred to us that certain people would be difficult to work with, or that the company’s mission statement matched our own. At each juncture, we interacted with God about these clues. By the appointed time, the decision seemed quite naturally made. And along the way, our interaction with God has grown—interaction that, for God, is the point.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This is covered more fully in *Invitation to the Jesus Life*, chapter 2, NavPress, 2008.
- ² Suzanne Noffke, O.P., ed., *Catherine of Siena The Classics of Western Spirituality*. Mahway, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980, 41.

- ³ Isaac Watts, “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed?” *Inspiring Hymns*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Singspiration, Inc., Zondervan Publishing House, 93.
- ⁴ Noffke, 41, 42.
- ⁵ Ibid, 40.
- ⁶ Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.
- ⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, 250.
- ⁸ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 201.
- ⁹ Noffke, 41.
- ¹⁰ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1997, 94.
- ¹¹ Scriptures marked (NRSV) are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- ¹² Art and psychological therapists Mary Braheny and Diane Halperin (Manhattan Beach, Calif.) introduced these ideas to me via interview. I synthesized their input about the creative cycle in *Living a Purposeful Life* (Waterbrook Press, 1999), 65–83.
- ¹³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today’s Language*, James Reimann, ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publications, 1992, March 28.

About the Author



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2008). www.janjohnson.org