

**“The Spiritual Practice of Discernment”**  
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Last year around this time, my obstetrician started encouraging me to find a pediatrician. I put it off for quite a while, figuring that I had plenty of time. But at each visit, she'd ask again and as the months passed, she became more and more insistent. And so, by the beginning of May, I set out in earnest to try to make that important decision: Who would be our daughter's first doctor?

I started with a list of recommended doctors and practices. I took special interest in the ones that were closer to our house. I looked at websites. I read on-line reviews, which helped rule out one practice near home. We narrowed it down. I had some conversations with the office manager in another of the practices. We went to a new patient orientation. We met one of the physicians. By the middle of June, we had chosen a practice and a doctor.

I'm happy to say that all of that work paid off and we have been very pleased so far with our decision. Katelynn seems to like her doctor and her doctor seems to like her. The office staff “ooh” and “ahh” over her appropriately and forgive us graciously when we occasionally show up a few minutes late. The nurses are friendly and are very good at giving immunizations carefully yet quickly. The on-call doctors have been very helpful and very reassuring for us as new and nervous parents. It is good.

There is just one minor thing that occasionally makes me wonder if we really made the right decision. You see, in every one of the 4 or 5 different exam rooms in which we've met with staff so far, I have noticed that along with the requisite swabs and wipes, along with the nice little collection of age-appropriate picture books and toys, somewhere in the room next to the scale or the jar of cotton balls there is always...and I mean in every room...a magic 8 ball. And it does concern me just a little bit to think that for all the trouble I took choosing the practice, the staff may actually resort to using a magic 8 ball when they run out of ideas on a diagnosis. I haven't actually seen it happen yet, but I've got my eyes peeled.

This past week when I was preparing for my sermon, I actually found a website on which you can type in a question and ask a virtual magic 8 ball for its advice. When I asked it, “Shall I begin my sermon about discernment with a story about you?” it answered, “Definitely!” We were off to a good start!

Next, I asked it if the St. Lawrence women's hockey team would win Friday night's game against the Harvard Crimson, and it said, “Absolutely!” Which was not the right answer. So I thought I'd ask again a different way. (Have you ever done that with a magic 8 ball?) Hoping to trip it up, like a wily prosecutor in a courtroom, I asked it, “Will the Harvard women's hockey team beat St. Lawrence on Friday night?” But it replied emphatically and consistently, “No way!”

Friday night, as Cathy and Katelynn and I were on our way to the game, I said to her, “You know, I’m not sure why we’re even bothering to go to the game. I know what’s going to happen. Harvard is going to lose. The magic 8 ball was cocksure.” Having no idea what I was talking about, she just looked at me funny and kept driving.

In fact, Harvard ended up beating St. Lawrence soundly, 4-0, to take back first place in the ECAC. Which just reaffirms for me that – magic or not – I don’t want Katelynn’s doctor listening to the 8 ball in a critical moment. Nor would I advise you to abide by its advice when making important life decisions.

There are, in every life, important decisions to be made. And there are important things to be discerned. This month we have been reflecting on vision and on vocation – or call. These are both the types of things that ought to be discerned, slowly and carefully, rather than hastily determined. What are we meant to do with our lives, individually and collectively? What are we meant to do with each day? How are we called to act or respond in any given situation? These are big questions to be mulled over, not answered quickly with a shake of the forearm and a flick of the wrist.

“Discernment” is a word, which comes from a Greek root meaning “to sift through.” In one of my favorite novels, one of the narrators describes how he used to walk about the parish with the clergyman who believed that walking allowed time for things to sort themselves out. In fact, he believed that the process of “things sorting themselves out” was God.<sup>1</sup>

In traditional Christian usage, the term “discernment” means listening to find God’s voice speaking amongst all the other voices that chatter constantly so that we might come to understand God’s will and know what to do. One could as easily say, as we have been saying the last few weeks, that “discernment” is listening for the whisper of the still, small voice within amongst the cacophony of other voices. Discernment is sorting out which voice is which.

A few weeks ago, we reflected together on how so often, our help comes from within – from that still, small voice that resides in each of our hearts. On that day, I encouraged you to go out and listen for it. Today, I want to give you a tool to help you do that. Today, I’d like to talk about discernment as a spiritual practice and offer you a model for how to do it.

Discernment as a spiritual practice is really part of almost every religious tradition, although it is not always known by that name. Lao Tzu referred to it as “waiting for the mud to settle.” The Islamic Sufi poet Rumi called it “deliberation.” In a poem by that name he wrote:

A friend remarks to the Prophet, "Why is it  
I get screwed in business deals?  
It's like a spell. I become distracted  
by business talk and make wrong decisions."

Muhammed replies, "Stipulate with every transaction  
that you need three days to make sure."

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<sup>1</sup> Mosley, Nicholas. *Hopeful Monsters*. Vintage: New York, 1990, p. 177-178.

Deliberation is one of the qualities of God.  
Throw a dog a bit of something.  
He sniffs to see if he wants it.

Be that careful.  
Sniff with your wisdom nose.  
Get clear. Then decide.

Discernment is a practice of getting clear and then deciding. It is a practice for discriminating “between what is true and what is false, ... between what is primary and what is secondary, between what is central and what is peripheral.”<sup>2</sup>

We might use the practice of discernment when we are trying to make a decision about a taking a new job, or whether or not to move, or whether to begin or end an important relationship. It might be used when we’re trying to decide if it’s time to retire or whether or not to make a big expenditure. Or it could be used to help us figure out how to apply our Unitarian Universalist faith and principles to a specific situation, as parents, as children, as neighbors, as family members.

Discernment as a spiritual practice can be used by individuals to make individual decisions. It can also be used by groups to make important communal decisions. There are different models of discernment, and the specifics of each are different, but they do have some things in common.

First, they make use of our reason. In discernment, we gather data, we learn as much as we can, we take into account what we know for sure and any advice that has been given to us. We weigh pros and cons. We explore the many dimensions of the situation before us.

But discernment is not purely an exercise in rationality, for it also takes into account our intuition and our imagination. Discernment is prayerful. It involves sifting in silence. It involves asking questions, trying answers on, and seeing how they feel.

This morning I’d like to share with you a specific discernment practice for individual discernment, one that has been used by Quakers for over 300 years. This is a practice, which is centered around what is known as a “Clearness Committee.”

The practice of the Clearness Committee assumes a couple of things. First, it assumes that our help does indeed come from within, that we have within us already all that we need to make the decision at hand. And second, that we sometimes need help from our community to sort out what we – at some level - already know. For so often, when we try to sort things out on our own, we just get more muddled and confused.

Of course, when we bring in others for help, there is always the danger that their voices will make things even more confused. And so, when people are part of a Clearness Committee they do not offer advice, they do not counsel, they do not try to fix. Here’s how a Clearness Committee works...

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<sup>2</sup> George Hendry, The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology ([www.spirithome.com/disrnm.html#whatitis](http://www.spirithome.com/disrnm.html#whatitis))

A person seeking clarity, known as the “focus person,” calls together a group of 5 or 6 people whom he or she trusts, and who represent a fair bit of diversity in terms of age, gender, and life experience. Ideally, the focus person, will write about his or her issue and let the committee members see it in advance. The purpose is to concisely state the problem and to provide relevant background information. The process of writing about the issue often helps the “focus person” develop new clarity around the issue.

Then, the committee meets in person. Sometimes they meet for a long time – like 3 or 4 hours – but sometimes they meet only for a half hour or so. One person is chosen to facilitate – to keep time and keep the group on track. A second person is chosen to record portions of the meeting.

The meeting then begins in silence, which is meant to help the group members get centered. When he or she is ready, the focus person then briefly summarizes again the core of the problem with which he or she is faced. Then there is more silence. Next, there is an opportunity for the committee members to ask any clarifying questions they might have and for the focus person to answer briefly. And again, silence...

After this third period of silence, committee members are invited to speak. They are not, however, allowed to offer advice, or to share stories of what has worked for them in a similar situation. They are not allowed to say, “Oh, I had an uncle who went through something like that before...” or “Hey, there’s a new book out that might be helpful for you to read.”

Instead, they are allowed only to ask questions that might help the focus person to clarify his or her own thinking. Open and honest questions. Spacious questions that invite deep reflection and the encourage imagination. Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer and educator, says that “the best single mark of an honest, open question is that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it.”<sup>3</sup> He suggests as an example a question such as, “What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered.”<sup>4</sup>

If the group is meeting over the course of many hours, the focus person can reply to these questions as they are asked, and a wonderful deepening can occur. If there is but a short time, the clerk will simply write down each of the questions as they are asked and the focus person will have them to take home and to use later on his or her own as a starting place for further prayer or prayerful reflection.

Silence is essential to this process, as is the complete attention of all participants to the needs of the focus person. This is not the time for conversation, but simply for being together and trying to help the person uncover the wisdom which lies within. The meeting ends with each member of the committee taking the time to affirm and appreciate the focus person and with the opportunity for the focus person to express gratitude for the group.

Parker Palmer tells the story of a time in his own life when he made use of a Clearness Committee. He had just been offered a new job as the president of a large and prominent educational institution. He was excited about the possibilities of more income and more

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Parker. “The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

influence and recognition, but he wasn't sure whether he should accept the offer or not. So, he called together his committee of trusted friends.

The early questions involved his vision for the school, and the like, but then someone asked him, "Parker, what would you like about being president?" And immediately, Palmer started listing things that he thought he would not like. He would not like the fundraising piece. He would not like the political piece. He would miss teaching.

And so they asked again, "But what *would* you like?" To which he responded, "I wouldn't like to give up my summer vacations." And so they asked a third time, and finally from deep within, he answered with the only honest answer he could find, saying, "I guess what I'd really like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it."

And then the group was silent for a few minutes, until finally someone asked, "Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

It had become clear – to all of them – that this was not the right job for him.

I'd like to invite you now to call to mind some decision that you find yourself struggling to make – or a choice that you know you'll need to make in the not-too-distant future, and one you imagine will be difficult to make. Think of an issue around which you don't have clarity right now. And I invite you to reflect on this issue for the remainder of this morning's service – during the anthem, during the prayer, during the silence that follows...

Think for just a moment about the cacophony of voices that are speaking up about this issue...what do you think about it? What are the pros and cons as you see them now? What about your family? Your friends? What do they think? What is the voice of the larger culture saying as it weighs in? What voices are present? What mixed messages are you getting either from within or from without as you wrestle with this issue? What additional information might you need in order to discern further?

And now, take a few moments to think about who might be able to help you sort things out? Who might you ask to be on a sort of Clearness Committee to help you discern for yourself a right course of action. Who are those trusted 5 or 6 people – of different ages and stages of life, of different backgrounds and with different experiences?

I would encourage you to consider reaching out to those people when you're ready to get some help with sorting through the voices in order to find your way through the brambles. And I would invite you to use this practice – of being together in silence, of allowing the questions to stoke your imagination and the answers to bubble up from the bottom of your heart. You may find it a practice worth using again and again...

When you do discern a right course of action – and notice again that I'm saying "a" right course instead of "the" right course – you'll know it based on its fruits. A decision made in alignment with your inner voice will bring with it peace, contentment, ease, and relief. You know that

feeling, I'm sure. That is what I wish for you as you wrestle with whatever you wrestle with in this time.

So may it be.