

Embracing the Practice in Solitude and Community

Chapter One of *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* by Henri Nouwen

We ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord. —Colossians 1: 9– 10 NRSV

Discernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice. Discernment is faithful living and listening to God's love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission.

Definitions are a good place to begin, but let me sketch out some of the core affirmations and practices necessary to discernment. When I was living in a Trappist monastery as a temporary monk, seeking to discern whether I was called to live the contemplative life or a more active life of teaching and ministry, I remember walking through a building where I hadn't been before. I came across a reproduction of Hazard Durfee's beautiful painting *The Flute Player* framed with an old but familiar text by Henry David Thoreau:

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

As I studied the quiet, concentrated face of Durfee's musician, I realized that discernment is like hearing a different drummer. I remembered that one of the books about Thomas Merton is called *A*

Different Drummer. Merton stepped away from the active, academic life and chose a contemplative life. I wondered if I was called to make that kind of move myself.

When I reflected on *The Flute Player*, I knew myself as restless and searching. I felt I was stumbling over my own compulsions and illusions way too often. During my time at Genesee, I began to understand that when we listen to the Spirit, we hear a deeper sound, a different beat. The great movement of the spiritual life is from a deaf, nonhearing life to a life of listening. From a life in which we experience ourselves as separated, isolated, and lonely to a life in which we hear the guiding and healing voice of God, who is with us and will never leave us alone. The many activities in which we are involved, the many concerns that occupy our time, the many sounds that surround us make it hard for us to hear the "still, small voice" through which God's presence and will are made known (1 Kings 19: 12).

Living a spiritually mature life requires listening to God's voice within and among us. The great news of God's revelation is not simply that "I am," but also that God is actively present in the moments of our lives at all times and places. Our God is a God who cares, heals, guides, directs, challenges, confronts, corrects. To discern means first of all to listen to God, to pay attention to God's active presence, and to obey God's prompting, direction, leadings, and guidance.

I stepped away from my teaching to slow down for a time in intentional community. It was hard for me to see God at work in my life when I was running from class to class and traveling from place to place. I had so many classes to prepare, lectures to give, articles to finish, people to meet that I had come quite close to believing myself indispensable. Still I was frightened of being alone and having an unscheduled day, even as I longed for solitude and rest. I was full of paradoxes.

When we are spiritually deaf, we are not aware that anything important is happening in our lives. We keep running away from the present moment, and we try to create experiences that make our lives worthwhile. So we fill up our time to avoid the emptiness we otherwise would feel. When we are truly listening, we come to know that God is speaking to us, pointing the way, showing the direction. We simply need to learn to keep our ears open. Discernment is a life of listening to a deeper sound and marching to a different beat, a life in which we become “all ears.”

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DISCERNMENT?

Discernment is expressed concisely by the apostle Paul in the Letter to the Colossians: “We ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord” (Col. 1: 9-10 NRSV). By “spiritual understanding,” Saint Paul means discerning, intuitive, and perceptive knowledge, usually found in solitude, the fruit of which is a profound insight into the interconnectedness of all things, through which we can situate ourselves in time and space to know God’s will and do God’s work in the world.

Discernment as “Seeing Through”

By exercising spiritual understanding, we come to see more clearly and hear more deeply the mysterious interconnectedness of all things (what the desert fathers called *theoria physike*—a vision of how things hang together). Discernment allows us to “see through” the appearance of things to their deeper meaning and come to know the interworkings of God’s love and our unique place in the world. Discernment helps us come to know our true identity in creation, vocation in the world, and unique place in history as an expression of divine love.

Perceiving, seeing through, understanding, and being aware of God’s presence are what is meant by discernment. Opening the heart to what is really and truly “there” is a fruit of contemplation and spiritual practice. Those who practice discernment are often more contemplative than those who are so active that they do not take the time to reflect on the inner meaning of appearances. The most interesting things in life often remain invisible to our ordinary senses, yet are visible to our spiritual perception. In large measure they can very easily be overlooked by the inattentive, busily distracted person that each of us can so easily become.

Contemplation looks not so much *at* things as *through* them, into their hearts, into their centers, and through their centers to discover the whole world of spiritual beauty, which is more real, has more mass and density, more energy and intensity, than physical matter in its coarser, cruder aspect. That is why the Greek fathers, who were great contemplatives, are known as the “diaretic fathers.” (*Diario* means “to see into,” “to see through”—literally, into the heart of the matter.) That is why they could read the hearts and the troubled souls of those who consulted them: because they could see through appearances into the innermost self.

Jesus, of course, had this capacity to see truly. For example, Saint John tells us, “Jesus did not want to entrust himself to them because he knew what was in every heart” (John 2: 24). Such intuitive and perceptive knowledge is the nature of discernment.

Discernment as “Being Seen”

I am struck by the way Jesus “saw” Nathanael under the tree in the Gospel of John. Even before meeting him, Jesus said of Nathanael: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” When the two men met on the road, Nathanael asked Jesus with amazement: “How do you *know* me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when

you were under the fig tree, I *saw* you.” Jesus’s seeing through Nathanael under the fig tree was such a powerful act of discerning what was in his heart that it caused Nathanael to proclaim: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” To which Jesus remarked, “You believe this because I told you I *saw* you under the fig tree? You will *see* greater things than these. . . . You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1: 47– 51).

This wonderful story about seeing through to the heart of things raises a deeper question: Do I want to be fully seen by Jesus? Do I want to be known by him? If I do, then a faith can grow that will open my eyes to heaven and reveal Jesus as the Son of God. I will see great things when I am willing to be seen. I will receive new eyes that can see the mysteries of God’s own life, but only when I allow God to see me, all of me, even those parts that I myself do not want to see.

While I was at the Abbey of the Genesee, I found that my anger and my desire to be special and to be admired all bubbled up in my times of solitude. I began to see how in so many ways I had been living for my own glory rather than for the greater glory of God. Once we are willing to see and be seen by God, we can look for signs of God’s presence and guidance in every appearance presented to our senses. Discernment becomes a new way of seeing (and being seen) that results in divine revelation and direction. This heart knowledge enables us to lead a life worthy of the calling (Eph. 4: 1).

The Purpose of Discernment

The purpose of discernment is to know God’s will, that is, to find , *accept*, and *affirm* the unique way in which God’s love is manifest in our life. To know God’s will is to actively claim an intimate relationship with God, in the context of which we discover our deepest vocation and the desire to live that vocation to the fullest. It has nothing to do

with passive submission to an external divine power that imposes itself on us. It has everything to do with active waiting on a God who waits for us.

Finding ourselves in a relationship with God is prerequisite to discernment of God’s will and direction. As in any relationship, there will be feelings of rejection as well as attraction, resentment as well as gratitude, fear as well as love. There will be ups and downs in faithfulness as we discover new things about ourselves and God. In our dynamic relationship with God, we can be sure of one thing: “If we are faithless, God is faithful still, for God cannot disown his own” (2 Tim. 2: 13).

Acceptance of God’s will does not mean submission or resignation to “whatever will be will be.” Rather, we actively wait for the Spirit to move and prompt, and then discern what we are to do next. When we see ourselves in a relationship of love with God, there is always something of a lover’s dilemma, a struggle to give and receive, to trust and obey the call.

REBORN IN THE SPIRIT

Jesus looked at the human condition with the eyes of love and tried to teach us how to look at ourselves and others “from above” and not “from below,” where dark clouds obscure our vision. “I come from above,” Jesus told his disciples, “and I want you to be reborn from above so that you will be able to see with new eyes” (John 3: 3). This is what spiritual theology is all about— looking at reality with the eyes of God.

And there is so much to look at: land and skies; sun, moon, and stars; human beings in all their diversity; continents, countries, cities, and towns; events in the past, present, and future. That’s why there are so many theologies. The sacred scriptures help us to look at the rich

variety of all that is with the eyes of God, and so discern the way to live with more clarity of vision in the here and now.

Those who live lives worthy of their calling have been “reborn from above” and are able to see with the eyes of faith and hear with spiritual ears. Their lives of discernment are characterized by single-mindedness: they have but one true desire—to know God’s heart and do God’s will in all things. In the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, they live the truth and seek to “come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:21 NRSV). Such persons are so caught up in God’s love that everything else can only receive its meaning and purpose in the context of that love. They ask only one question: “What is pleasing to the Spirit of God?” And as soon as they have heard the sound of the Spirit in the silence and solitude of their hearts, they follow its promptings even if it upsets their friends, disrupts their environment, and confuses their admirers.

People reborn in the Holy Spirit with spiritual understanding come across as very independent, not because of psychological training or individuation but because of the fruit of the Spirit which “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3: 8). Spiritual rebirth is an evergreen openness to let the spirit of Jesus blow in us where it pleases.

Truly “born again” people always desire to be renewed continually, precisely because the Spirit keeps on revealing, in and around them , places of darkness that have not yet been transformed by the light. For as long as we live, we need to be reborn and deepen our spiritual understanding, as we walk together in the light.

DISCERNMENT IN SOLITUDE

Communion with God alone in prayer leads inevitably to community with God’s people, and then to ministry in the world. But it is good to

begin this spiritual movement in solitude. Our first task in solitude is to simply allow ourselves to become aware of the divine presence, to “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46: 10). When we are alone with God, the Spirit prays in us. The challenge is to develop a simple discipline or spiritual practice to embrace some empty time and empty space every day.

When I went to the Abbey, I had begun to see Sunday as a special day, but all other days blurred into work and teaching. Through the sacred rhythm of the community prayers, I began to be pulled into a new way of perceiving time and a new way of experiencing God’s presence. I was able to embrace solitude again, with all the disorienting and discouraging thoughts that intrude, as a royal road to God’s presence. At first I spent most of my solitary time in the library, but increasingly, I was able to be alone before God in the quiet of my own room.

I encourage you to make a similar commitment to spending time alone with God each day for prayer and meditation. Biblical meditation is a traditional method of solitary prayer. By selecting a particular scripture verse from the gospel reading for the day, or a favorite psalm, or a sentence from a letter from Paul, you can create a safe wall around your heart that will allow you to pay attention. Reading and reciting a sacred text is not meant to fill up your empty space or limit your spiritual thoughts, but to set up boundaries around it. Sometimes it is helpful to take one word or phrase from the text and repeat it during your solitary prayer time. Some people find sitting quietly a good way to center their prayer. Others need to move and walk slowly to let the mind and body come into God’s presence. Especially in the beginning, when you are easily distracted, it is good to be able to remember and repeat the word or phrase that attracted your attention. Then your focus and awareness can gradually descend from the mind into the heart and be held there for an extended period, close to the heart of God.

Lectio divina, or spiritual reading, is another helpful exercise to practice in solitude. By reading a biblical text three times and stopping to ponder the word, phrase, or image that calls our attention, we become more aware of the active presence of God's spirit within us. It is not reading to acquire new information or to learn a critical skill. Rather, it is a form of devotional reading in which we allow God to "read" us and respond to our deepest desire. Spiritual reading, therefore, is slow, deliberate, meditative reading in which we allow the words to penetrate our heart and question our spirit. *Lectio divina* means reading the Bible with reverence and openness to what the Spirit is saying to us in the present moment. Besides the Bible, many other books can be used for spiritual reading: classic Jewish and Christian devotional texts, contemporary essays on spiritual life, good theological reflections, spiritual autobiographies and lives of the saints, stories about new communities of faith, and so on. Most important is *how* we read— not to understand or control God, but to be understood and formed by God.

It is good to give some of our prayer time to intercession— to lift up to God particular people of whose pains and struggles we are aware, especially those with whom we live or work. People we pray for regularly come to receive a very special place in our heart and in the heart of God, and they are helped. Sometimes this happens immediately and sometimes over time. In addition, an inner community begins to grow in us, a community of love that strengthens us in our daily life. As a conclusion to our time of prayer, we can say the Lord's Prayer slowly. Or other prayers of the church and Christian tradition can be used. Such "formal" prayers connect us to the people of God and the whole of the praying church. I found at Genesee and in the following years that I often needed to pray from the newspapers, too. The tragedies and triumphs of the world were all part of the world for which I prayed.

The Spirit works deep within us, so deeply that we cannot always identify its presence. The effect of God's spirit is deeper than our thoughts and emotions. That is why setting aside a special time and place for prayer is so important. Often we do not feel like praying and our minds are distracted. The lack of motivation and difficulty focusing make us think that our prayer time is useless and wasted time. Still, it is very important to remain faithful to these times and simply stick with our promise to be with God, even if nothing in our minds, hearts, or bodies wants to be there. Simple faithfulness in prayer gives the Spirit of God a real chance to work in us, to help us be renewed in God's hands and be conformed to God's will. During these sacred times and places, we can be touched in deep, hidden, and tender places. We can become more fully aware of the divine presence and more open to God's guidance as we are led to new places of love.

Clock time can become sacred time. We can choose fifteen minutes, half an hour, or even a few hours, and set them aside for God. For a healthy physical, emotional, and spiritual life, we have to structure our time. We need to know beforehand when we will pray, when we will spend moments in spiritual reading, when we will participate in common worship, and so on. A rhythm of life in which sacred times and places are scheduled in gives us much spiritual support and causes us to look forward to them as "times of refreshing" for discernment.

DISCERNMENT IN COMMUNITY

While discernment begins in solitude, individual seekers of God always come together in community, for the Spirit gathers all believers into one body for accountability and mutual support. A person honestly seeking to know God's will and way will choose to be in community.

At the Abbey of the Genesee I began to see the utter necessity of life in community. I learned to bake bread, haul stones, and pray with the

brothers. My capacity for intimacy with God was interrelated with my ability to love and live with the others in my community. Those months in the monastery taught me that the spiritual life is to be lived together. Since then I have sought to create community wherever I have lived. For the last few years, I have chosen to reside at Daybreak Community in Canada, where I live among the poor in spirit, to be spiritually formed, find support and accountability for my personal decisions, and be of service. Daybreak, as a L'Arche community, seeks to be a place where people with physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities and their assistants live together as a sign of hope to the world. Daybreak, small and hidden as it is, wants to proclaim that love is stronger than fear, that joy is deeper than sorrow, that unity is more real than division, and that life is stronger than death. Being at Daybreak means being invited to make regular choices that radically contradict the powers and principalities of our world. We learn to discern by living out the challenge of the gospel together.

Living in Christian community offers concrete ways to make choices that support discernment—deep listening for the way and will of God. The choices we face often are quite specific and require thoughtful conversation around basic questions that confront our individual and collective motives and agendas: Are we working *with* the poor or choosing to *be* in solidarity with them? Are we squandering our time or seizing time as a constant opportunity to discover more about ourselves, our neighbors, and our God? Are we structuring our days to be distracted and entertained, or to let our hearts grow more mature and strong? Are we responding to our inner fears and pains by ignoring them, or do we choose to face them and live into and through our fears and pains with the help of others who accompany us? Are we talking or praying, worrying or giving thanks, looking at images that arouse or those that bring joy, dwelling with our anger or with the one who can bring peace?

All these questions show that we are constantly making choices that can lead us toward God's way and will. These decisions are difficult because we live in a world that thinks we are wasting our time, that there are more exciting ways to use our talents, that there is more money to be made, more prestige, education, and success to be had, more respect and honor to gain, if we would just step away from our spiritual idealism and be realistic in our choices like everyone else.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCERNMENT IN COMMUNITY

Specific spiritual practices form a context and structure for discernment in community, in different seasons of the liturgical year, as well as in critical moments of our daily journey of faith. While few guidelines can be given that are good for every person or community of faith, the following concrete suggestions based on practices at the Daybreak Community may be helpful in other faith communities.

Sacred Time and Space

The first task of a faith community is to create sacred time and space, when and where we can allow God to reshape our hearts and lives and communities. Community offers sacred times (a regular schedule for worship, prayer, fasting, scripture reading, and fellowship) and sacred space (chapels, sanctuaries, retreats, homes, and nature) to take a step back from the urgencies and emergencies of our busy lives and listen to God and to each other as children of God. The Daybreak community, for example, has a chapel and retreat center that invite us to be quiet and peaceful, to rest and be restored, to read about the spiritual life, to share our journey with others, to worship in private or common prayer. It is a good place to come together for teaching or workshops, to share in small groups for spiritual formation, to seek individual spiritual direction, or to practice spiritual discernment, and just to become more open to God's presence.

Community Worship

Worship at L'Arche Daybreak is centered in the chapel, a simple, accessible building full of color and light. The community gathers daily in the chapel for Eucharist and common prayer. People from all walks of life and from very different religious traditions share their unique spiritual gifts and offer their particular forms of worship, as well as developing new forms and common ways of worship. Together, we bring our joys and pains, share our smiles and shed our tears, and open our hearts to God. We listen to the Word of God and to words of encouragement, warning, and hope. Thus in worship the chapel becomes a holy dwelling and a special place for formation and discernment. Sitting in silence after we have prayed together, we listen for God to speak.

In common worship (service of the Word and Sacrament), we avoid busyness and entertainment. We gather to be made into a spiritual body in which God's presence can be made manifest. We sing, read, dance, sit in silence, and pray, allowing our liturgical actions to open space among us where God can act. We try to do nothing in haste, allowing for silence and encouraging simplicity.

Spiritual Teaching

Communities of faith intrinsically offer informal and formal teaching on the spiritual life. We have found that there is great value in being exposed to classic and contemporary biblical scholarship and theological reflection, to the different schools of spirituality, to historical spiritual writers, and to contemporary issues of justice and the spiritual life. We encourage all members of the community to bring their ideas, to share their perspectives on the Bible, and to tell stories from their own lives. It is important for people who have little time for systematic reading and study but who still long for a deeper understanding of their lives and work to have opportunities for sound

teaching and spiritual formation. Without seeing the larger context of their lives, the danger exists that some will lose touch with the spiritual roots and theological traditions of their community of faith. Good teaching affects one's personal prayer life, common worship, the desire for spiritual reading, and thus the practice of discernment. To want to know God's plan and purpose without regular prayer and engagement with scripture and God's people is like trying to bake a cake without assembling the various ingredients. Discernment grows out of the life of faith rooted in community.

Such are the gifts of Christian community: listening, sharing, worship, prayer, music, books, images, ways of resting and eating, walking and talking, laughing and crying— sacred time and space set apart to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34: 8 NRSV).

A NEW WAY OF SEEING

When Christian community provides sacred space and times for discernment, we will gradually be lifted up into God's dwelling place and come to see ourselves, our neighbors, and our world in a new light. This “seeing” does not require intellectual knowledge, articulated insight, or a concrete opinion. No, it is a sharing in the knowledge of God's heart, a deeper wisdom, a new way of living and loving.

Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives, loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well liked, and influential becomes increasingly less important as we come closer to God's heart. To our surprise, we even may experience a strange inner freedom to follow a new call or direction as previous concerns move into the background of our consciousness. We begin to see the beauty of the small and hidden life that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Most rewarding of all is the discovery that as we pray more each day, God's

will— that is, God’s concrete ways of loving us and our world— gradually is made known to us.

GIVING GOD A CHANCE

Spiritual discernment comes from the Spirit of God. The human side is the concentrated effort to create sacred time and empty space, as well as concrete structures and boundaries, where God can speak to us.

Christian community offers unique opportunities for spiritual formation and discernment. Together, we are called to let God become the center of our lives, speak to us, guide us, hold us, renew us deep within. We have the freedom to say yes to God’s call and to choose to live it in very specific ways. Our communities help us make and sustain that choice. Thus God has a real chance to form us into lights in the darkness, a source of hope for many in the world. That, after all, is the true goal of spiritual discernment.

Discernment is rooted in spiritual practice, yet it is not a step-by-step process. It requires learning to listen for and recognize over time the voice and character of God in our hearts and daily lives. In the next chapter we will look at what Saint Paul calls “the discernment of spirits.” Learning to listen to the Spirit demands sorting what is of God in our lives and what is not.

EXERCISES FOR DEEPER DISCERNMENT

1. Discernment is about seeing, knowing, and being known. Do you want to be seen by God? Do you want to be truly known, with all your inner thoughts and outer activities laid out before an all-seeing, all-knowing God? Write a personal letter to God openly and honestly looking at the areas of life you are not sure you want God to investigate. Of course, God knows these things already. This is an exercise for you to see what areas of your life you might want to keep

private. Once you identify them, pray that God will help you see yourself (and these tender areas) fully as God sees you.

2. People who are “reborn from above” (John 3: 7) are those who seek to do what is pleasing to the Spirit of God. Make a list of all the activities and desires of your heart that you believe are pleasing to God. Try to write a poem or hymn of praise or gratitude for all God’s goodness that overflows into your life.

3. Define your spiritual community. Who is allowed to know you and hold you accountable? If you have identified people who know you at a soul level, take a moment to write them a note of thanks for their role in your life. If you did not identify persons who have free range in your life to lift you up and encourage you, begin to pray about who to cultivate as a spiritual companion and how to do it. Discernment performed alone often can become delusion. We need each other.

4. What shared practices (meditation, prayer, songs, Eucharist, silence, service in the world) are your most natural pathways to listening to God in your daily life? Reflect on the times when you discerned God’s presence. What were you doing? Where were you? What insight might these reflections give you about your need for sacred time and sacred space?

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