

Discernment, Orienteering, and the Education of Desire: Practical Guidance for Making Decisions

Trudelle Thomas, mentor, Professor of English

During the past school year (2012-13), I was invited to make a presentation on discernment as part of the “Year of Faith” sponsored by Xavier University for the benefit of members of the local and campus community. I drew upon notes and examples that I have used in classes over the years to provide students with practical understanding of how to “discern spirits” when facing choices. I offer the following presentation notes and handout to others who want to introduce the concept in of discernment in a classroom context. My notes include a personal story, while the handout consists of two parts: the numbered “points” that were part of my original talk, and an allegorical “spiritual map” drawn by my colleague Stephen Yandell to accompany the talk.

My favorite part of the handout is the allegorical map lays that lays out some of the signs through which the Holy Spirit offers guidance: clarity, kindness, love, delight, fresh perspective. If I were using this map with students, I would link it to the tradition of allegorical spiritual maps, such as the “carte de tendre” of the seventeenth century France, or *Pilgrim’s Progress* (by John Bunyan, published 1678 and remaining influential for at least two centuries). The pitfalls shown on the map (guilt, over-busyness, greed, lust) are ones with which students can readily identify. I also considered using a video of the hymn “He Leadeth Me”, a Protestant hymn I loved as a child, because it shows that discernment is practiced among many Christian groups (and other faiths as well). I no longer think of God as “He” but I do recognize the sense of “leading.” (A youtube video features the London Fox Singers singing it.)

My experience has been that the best way to make the practice of spiritual discernment come to life is to offer a personal, practical story. If you are addressing undergraduates, I suggest that you preface this talk with a personal story of a time you (or someone you have advised) faced a decision familiar to students.

Presentation notes: Discernment compared to Orienteering

Discernment grows out of an innate human yearning for understanding, goodness, and love. We frame it in different ways: How do I know I’m in God’s will? How do I practice “right livelihood” over the course of my life? How can I make choices that will most benefit the common good, not just myself?

As a child going to Sunday School in a United Methodist Church, the path was very clear: I was in God’s will as long as I went to church every Sunday, obeyed those in authority over me, and didn’t break too many rules.

Over the past fifty years, I’ve changed and the world has changed. “Knowing God’s will” is much more complex. As adults we all face many decisions that are not a matter of right vs. wrong but involve choices between two possible goods--or two not-so-goods. Sometimes we feel as if we are in a dense forest without a clear path.

A human being faces all kinds of decisions over the course of a lifetime. Sometimes a person faces an urgent decision, such as a cancer diagnosis where you must quickly decide a course of treatment. Or a decision about whether an elderly parent, who can no longer speak for himself, would want a “do not resuscitate” (DNR) order if his heart stops.

Other times we face decisions that may be less urgent but are still important: choosing a major or a spouse. Perhaps the most important decisions involve the way we live day to day: A family has decided to reduce meat consumption and must figure out how to do so without alienating

relatives. Another person is concerned about a child who's having trouble in school. Or someone is striving to find work-life balance, or trying to figure out how to deal with a tricky personnel issue at work.

St. Ignatius has provided us with guidance on how to make decisions, large and small.

I find a useful metaphor in Orienteering, a competitive sport in which individuals are dropped off an unfamiliar terrain and must find their way back during a limited time-frame. To succeed as an Orienteer, one needs certain equipment: a compass, a topographic map, field notes from others who have traveled the landscape, some familiarity with the foliage and animal habits, as well as an ability to read the stars and sun. Sometimes there may be landmarks or paths. While orienteering, a person needs equipment and also practice in using the equipment.

In the same way, we sometimes must find our way through dense forest. At first we may feel completely lost, but help is available. God is with us, eager to offer guidance. But like the Orienteer with her topo map, finding our—hearing God's voice—comes more easily if we make use of time-tested tools. The following are the ones I've found most useful in my own life over the past forty years or so. [Shift attention to the handout points 1 through 5].

My own story: These “tools” became very useful for me personally four years ago when I was faced with the task of settling my mother's estate after she died three months following a stroke at age 78. She lived far away, my siblings and I were weary from her long hospitalization, and the task of emptying her home of sixty years was daunting. We consulted a realtor about how to proceed. She strongly encouraged us to hire someone to empty the house ASAP so that we could get it on the market right away. Despite her advice, my sisters and I felt a strong inner leading to do it ourselves. We knew it would be a huge task and would take us away from our own families--so we had to think about it and pray about it before we made a firm decision.

As Mom's executor, I used the tools mentioned: I talked to two different friends who had handled the estates of loved ones. I tallied how much time it would take. I discussed it with my spouse and son because it would mean being away for a series of long weekends. My three sisters and I all agreed to pray about how to proceed. There was no pressure from outside to make a certain choice, nor any sense of guilt or even duty to do it in a certain way. Within a couple weeks after Mom's death, my sisters and I decided that we did not want to delegate the work but to do it together. Perhaps we realized that “to comfort the grieving” was a work of mercy, and the hands-on work of breaking up the household would help us to comfort one another and even to connect with our family and neighbors back home.

Actually settling the entire estate involved a great deal of gritty, hands-on work over a period of a year as we emptied and repaired our childhood home, sold the house in a down market, and settled all Mom's legal and financial affairs. Even so, it was one of the most worthwhile things, most prayerful things I've ever done. I knew going in that sharing an estate can damage sibling relationships but we found just the opposite to be true. As we worked, elbow to elbow, we reconnected at a deep level. We felt strongly the guiding presence of not just Mom but also our father and brother who had died in the preceding decade. We grieved our mother's passing at our own pace, and gained a new perspective on the transience of life. It is one thing to view a painting on the theme of “memento mori” but quite another to experience it through handing on the home and possessions of a beloved relative. We made peace with painful aspects of our pasts and reflected on our parents' virtues. Now looking back on that process, I still feel a great sense of satisfaction and gratitude.

What follows is the handout I put together.

Discernment & the Education of Desire Trudelle Thomas

Discernment – “a form of critical reflection that seeks to draw both affectivity (feeling, desires, impulses, moods) and understanding, reason, judgment, and choice into a creative partnership. Thus it seeks to go beyond, on the one hand, a rationalism or crude dogmatism which devalues affect, and, on the other hand, being dominated by subjectivity, sentimentality, unreflective piety, or uncritical enthusiasm. . . . Assumes that God approaches human beings through experience, rooted in the pattern of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Occurs within the context of a living relationship with God.” (Michael Buckley in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, cited below)

Orienteering --- Originally a form of military training, the sport of Orienteering involves being dropped off in unfamiliar territory with only a compass and topographical map (“topo map”). Knowledge of animal habits, the stars and sun, the vegetation, and other elements all help the Orienteer find her way back to base. (Think of *The Hunger Games*.)

“Tools for Discernment” include the following:

1. Scripture. Studying, praying with, memorizing passages from the Bible can be tremendous sources of light as well as comfort. Not viewing Scripture as a “rule book” but as a living source of guidance. The words of Christ (in red letters), Psalms, the Golden Rule, and Isaiah and other prophets have been especially meaningful to me. Lectio Divina, the Spiritual Exercises, the Divine Office all view Scripture as central.

KEY MESSAGES: What is the well-worn path? It is not always the best path.
Pay attention to the “North Star” of love for God and all other beings.

2. Consult wise and loving spiritual friends. This could be a religious superior, trusted pastor, or spiritual companion/director--or a trusted friend or relative who has faced a similar decision, even a favorite saint (not just the canonized ones).

3. Embrace the wisdom of your own tradition (and sometimes other traditions). This includes teachings from the Christian heritage: Roman Catholic encyclicals, Quaker counsels, writings by holy people such as saints and social reformers; devotional practices (such as labyrinth or rosary). Thomas Merton and M.L. King, Jr. found their faith was expanded through study of other wisdom traditions.

4. Reflect on experience. Be attentive to one’s own inner landscape—moods, emotions, desires, fears. The Ignatian “daily examen” helps one to become more attuned to patterns of consolation and desolation.

Gathering information and considering the pros and cons are preliminary steps.

Notice what other people expect & their effect on me.

What is the *well-worn* path? Question it.

Notice messages from my body—tension, numbness, nausea, excitement, revulsion.

Consider times in the past when I’ve faced a similar decision. Outcome?

Where is the energy, joy, attraction for me? Do I feel a “leading”?

Ask: In what direction will a particular path lead me—toward greater love and freedom?

Imagine myself following a particular course of action.

5. Habitually practice using these “tools” over time. As with Orienteering, all these tools become more reliable and familiar when used over and over, for years and decades. Discernment becomes second nature. Sometimes even when facing a big decision, it is easy to see the right course of action and carry it out.

Some wonderful resources:

The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality. Ed. Philip Sheldrake. 2005.

Foster, Richard. *The Celebration of Discipline.* 1978 (and several new editions),

Haidt, John. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom.* 2006.

Silf, Margaret. *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality.* 1999.

Note to students:

The allegorical map on the next page follows the tradition of spiritual maps such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* (by John Bunyan, published in 1678 and remaining influential for at least two centuries) or the “carte de tendre” of the 17th century France. It was designed by Professor Stephen Yandell based on my suggestions and this talk.

the Orienteering Tools of Discernment

