



## ***Discernment of the Heart***

Doris Klein, CSA

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The doorways of discernment are as multiple as the processes and facilitation models that can aid us individually and communally in making choices and decisions. I don't profess to be a scholar or expert in any of them. As an artist, author, and spiritual companion, I would instead invite you to join me in reflecting on discernment using an intuitive perspective as a basis for all the processes and models. The discipline of discernment demands a listening heart and a willingness to trust the deep inner call of Mystery. The techniques are simply those processes which will clear space so we can hear our hearts and the intuitive voice of the Divine Creator who calls us to faithfulness. Let me begin with an image.

A vase of recently purchased pink tulips stood straight, vibrant, and perky in a neat and orderly arrangement. I became accustomed to the gift of color and beauty they brought each day as the tight buds slowly unfolded. Then one morning as I looked up and it seemed that they had each taken in a deep breath, exhaled, and just relaxed! The flowers were open wide with the stems curved gracefully in every direction. They had released the rigidity that held them straight and each bowed to the natural pull of gravity. This image can mirror for us the posture needed to enter the discernment process in which we are called to move to the deeper knowing of the soul and, like each of the tulips, relax into the gravitational pull of grace.

Discernment is so much more than the sorting and sifting of facts. It is rather the descent into the depths of the soul where we walk into the inner cave of Mystery, intuitive energy, the deep self. There we wait to know, not the answer, but the integrity of the call. Today's culture is fraught with illusions that there is a "right" answer and if we work hard enough to gather enough information and opinions, we'll make the "right" decision. The discernment process challenges us to enter the paradox below the dualistic

split of “right and wrong” and listen deeply to the darkness until we hear the whisper that invites us to risk following the movement of Mystery.

Our egos, linear minds, and contemporary theories and models are great resources as we collect pertinent data and information essential to decision-making. This initial step of discernment is critical to wise personal and communal choices. The paradox we sometimes resist in the process is letting go of all of this gathered data for the descent into discernment, moving into the less comfortable space of Mystery where we are one with the unfolding evolution of the universe. The risk of trusting that we will hear the movement of grace beneath the facts can be disconcerting, disturbing, and sometimes downright terrifying. What made so much sense factually, now must pass through the purification and distillation of a discerning heart, a process less easy to define. We’d all like some magic technique that might guide us through the discomfort of discernment, something that would give us the answer so we could move on with a sureness of knowing we have chosen the “right” path, made the “right” decision.

As we enter this intuitive space it can be invaluable to turn to mystics, artists, poets, and musicians to companion us and bring balance to the intellectual information. Their ability to move that “Cloud of Unknowing” (1) reminds us that each of us can and must walk there as well, asking to know at a deeper level below the facts. We resist entering this space for numerous reasons, often the greatest deterrent being fear and mistrust. When we are not at ease in this intuitive space, there is a tendency to minimize it and judge it as “fluff”, “touchy-feely,” unreliable, undocumented, and unnecessary.

I believe discernment is an extremely creative process, since, like the arts, it draws heavily on accessing the deep intuitive space below the mind. The challenges of creativity and discernment are actually quite similar. Three of my favorite books on the creative process are *The Courage to Create*, (2) *Fearless Creating* (3) and *Trust the Process: the Artist’s Guide to Letting Go*. (4) In each of them the author identifies fear as the greatest obstacle to the creative process. The challenge to risk surrender to the unknown has stopped many from entering the creative space and, I believe, sabotaged discernment as well.

Access to the intuitive space is much simpler than some suspect. It requires quieting the noisy verbal brain, moving into non-dualistic, non-judging space, welcoming something new. Physical environment is critical in the process of entering intuitive space. Common practices of contemplative sitting, centering prayer, and silence can be initial starting points, inviting discerners to let go of thoughts, preconceived outcomes, and expectations. Guided imagery or chanting are helpful to fill what feels like such vacant space to those of us who spend our waking moments verbally processing everything.

At the risk of appearing overly simplistic, breathing is the most essential element in moving into deep discerning space. As the body lets go of the breath, we can begin to open our hearts to Mystery, let go of the outcome, and risk the sacred journey. Conscious breathing quiets the dualistic inner chatter of judgment about a “right” or “wrong” outcome and draws us to deeper bodily knowing. The wisdom that resides in our body holds the key to the intuitive. Paying attention to how our body feels when we reflect on various choices is invaluable.

Taking adequate time to simply sit with the question is also essential. We often give limitless time to gathering facts and then move immediately into decision-making without allowing the information we collected to be influenced by the silence. Here in the stillness we simply ask to hear the voice of the Beloved in the depth of our heart.

Getting out of our heads and into our hearts presents a challenge for most of us. Our minds dominate and dictate so much of our lives that we need to intentionally engage in activities that will bring us to that intuitive space of Spirit. It is essential to reinforce that none of these techniques be seen as performance or production. Many individuals have been shamed or discouraged in the area of creative activity and resist entering the space, especially in group settings. The list below, though far from exhaustive, offers some concrete practices that may assist individuals and groups in accessing deeper intuitive space.

- Body movement, much to the surprise of some, can be simple and non-threatening. Walking in nature, consciously connecting our feet to the earth, feeling the elements and taking in beauty without thought or words can be helpful. Mindfulness of the unfolding expansiveness of the cosmos and experiencing the vastness of oceans, mountains, and landscape can put thoughts and decisions in the perspective of the universe story.

- Poetry has the ability to distill into a few words or phrases the depths of soulful knowing. Both reading and writing poetry can be a wonderful doorway into what one knows at a deeper level. Writing in simple formats like the Haiku can be less intimidating and aid in surfacing metaphors and images which identify feelings and insights as they link the intuitive with the linear.
- Listening to music, singing, or playing an instrument can be helpful in drawing us into the mystical place of discernment. A simple chant, mantra, or toning will quiet the mind, deepen the breath, and bring us into a presence of Mystery.
- Drawing sometimes frightens people, especially in groups. However, visual expression of abstract feelings can clear the way for discernment. Sometimes the simple act of coloring in a printed mandala will serve to quiet the “efforting” mind and relax the spirit.
- Writing with the non-dominant hand will assist in accessing the less dominant brain hemisphere and often clears some of the self-judgment that is unconsciously streaming in our minds. Journaling, timed flow-of-consciousness writing, or composing letters to significant persons can all offer opportunities to access deeper wisdom.

Practices such as these are simply methods to assist us in making decisions using our diverse ways of knowing, relaxing into the balance of the head and the heart. Historically our faith has incorporated the arts into our spirituality because they move us to the place beyond words where our hearts resonate with God. Whether we are in a situational event of specific discernment or engaged in daily discernment of our ongoing journey, this posture of balance can open our heart to the movement of Mystery and grace.

I close with a second image of the posture and grace of discernment. The flower, wet with spring rain, waits with an open heart in anticipation of something new. As I began to paint on the photo I could feel the energies of the universe contained in the freedom of trusting that the Mystery of the stars and generative creation were greater than my simple knowing.

It is God who leads us in this liminal space of discernment. Can we breathe into our deeper self, connect with the evolving Mystery of creation in the universe, and risk something new being born in us? Can we trust Intuitive

Spirit to lead us through each decision and walk with us as each choice unfolds into an unknown future?

*Doris, a Sister of St. Agnes and former LCWR member, is an artist, author, and spiritual director in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*

## **Endnotes**

1 Anonymous (14<sup>th</sup> c. English), *The Cloud of Unknowing*

2 Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1975

3 Eric Maisel, *Fearless Creating*. New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995

4 Shaun McNiff, *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*. Boston & London, Shambhala, 1998