

“Heart Searching and Life Choice” By Way of the Heart

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“By slowly converting our loneliness into-a deep solitude, we create that precious space where we can discover the voice telling us about our inner necessity-that is, our vocation.” Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (i)

Gospel love must be embodied in a concrete way of life and work, not merely talked about in a vacuum. When asked “How do we love God and neighbor?” Martin Luther answered: We love and serve God and neighbor “In community, through vocation.” (ii) Confronting every Christian, therefore, is the central question: “What is my call and purpose in life, my vocation?” In an age of lengthening life span and rapid change, when second and even third careers are increasingly common, this question pertains not only to the young adult starting off in the world, but also to the mid-life person in transition and the early retiree. A story told by a spiritual guide from India, succinctly introduces our discussion of life choice and how we go about discovering what God’s call might be for us.

The disciple was a Jew. “What good works shall I do to be acceptable to God?”

“How should I know?” said the Master. “Your Bible says that Abraham practiced hospitality and God was with him. Elias loved to pray and God was with him. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him too.”

“Is there some way I can find my own allotted work?”

“Yes. Search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it.” (iii)

Our “allotted work” is another way of referring to our vocation. In his study of self-actualizing people, psychologist Abraham Maslow discovered that these exemplary human beings often felt a sense of vocation. Their lives of excellence were inspired by an intense desire to contribute to the world in a way that they felt uniquely qualified and called to do. More is involved, however, in a Christian understanding of vocation, which explicitly links vocation with our relationship to God. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, for instance, defines vocation as finding “a purpose for being in the world that is related to the purposes of God.” (iv) In a similar way in his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola taught that our vocational choices should be rooted in the purpose for which we were created: “to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord” and by this means to be saved, (v) Because serving God is the primary vocation of everyone, whatever we choose to do with our lives must lead to the basic end of divine service. Thus, Ignatius states: “My first aim should be to seek to serve God, which is the end, and only after that, if it is more profitable, to have a benefice or marry for these are means to the end.” (vi)

Vocation as Covenant Partnership

The foundation of any authentic Christian spirituality must rest on a humble acknowledgment of the proper relationship between God and ourselves. God is the gracious and generous giver of all gifts, including the very gift of life. And we are the recipients of these gifts, called to show our gratitude by praising, reverencing and serving the creator. To succeed in this three-fold response of gratitude is to fulfill our vocation as human beings. Or, as developmentalist James Fowler puts it, “human fulfillment means to recognize that we are constituted by the address and calling of God and to respond so as to become partners in God’s work in the world.” (vii) Human actualization can be attained only when we live in reference to God and contribute to God’s purposes. As the response of the total self to the Lord’s invitation to covenant partnership, a vocation goes far beyond a particular type of job or career. Rather, it “involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and of the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God’s purposes in the services of God and the neighbor.” (viii)

Discovering One’s “Particular Way”

Within the framework of our common human vocation, however, each must ask ourselves: “How specifically am I being called to give myself to God in partnership? Given my unique personality, background, and talents, what is my particular way of serving the creator?” Only such questions can help us choose a personal way among a multiplicity of possible ways. Buber makes this point in a story entitled “The Particular Way.”

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz once said to his teacher the ‘Seer’ of Lublin: ‘Show me one general way to the service of God. ‘ The zaddik replied: It is impossible to tell [people] what way they should take. For one way to serve God is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting, and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way [one’s] heart draws [one] to, and then choose this way with all [one’s] strength. ‘ (ix)

This chapter suggests how we can better observe our hearts in discerning how we are being drawn by God to serve. Unlike the path that led Dorothy to Oz, there is not a single yellow brick road which each of us must take. Sociologists, for example, claim that a person seeking a spouse can form a happy union with more than one within a large pool of possible partners. The romantic myth that a successful marriage depends on meeting that one special someone is not verified in reality. The same is true with one’s vocation in life. Because there are many possible ways of serving God’s purposes, the key question is: “Which way am I concretely being drawn by the Lord speaking to my heart?” The issues raised in this chapter reflect my experience with vocational counseling. While much of my own work for the last fifteen years has been with people trying to whether they are being called to a professed religious life, the general principles discussed here apply equally to those wondering what career path to follow and whether to marry or remain single. In all cases, vocation discernment must be grounded in a solitude of heart that enables one to encounter the self and the Lord.

Solitude of Heart and Being a Self

As the zaddik of Buber's story correctly observed, it is impossible to tell individuals what path they should take. Each person must discover his or her own way through a process of heart searching. Mature vocation discernment first requires that individuals take responsibility for their own lives. Some people refuse to stand on their own two feet and, directly or indirectly, communicate the message, "Tell me what to do, how to live." This kind of dependence on others makes discernment impossible, because it detracts from the serious attention that should be given to one's inner life: one's thoughts, feelings, values, aspirations, attractions and repulsions. These inner realities make up the data that can eventually form the basis for a well grounded decision. By turning one's glance inward, solitude provides access to the heart and the valuable data stored within. If our questions and concerns are not tested and matured in solitude, it is unrealistic to expect answers that are really our own.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to a young man wondering whether he should be a poet reinforces the importance of solitude of heart for those searching for direction in their lives:

You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now... I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all - ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple "I must," then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it. " (x)

Independently, Rilke and Buber voice an inescapable fact of vocation discernment: it entails a heart searching that one must do for oneself. Of course, feedback and advice from others are important. But they can neither supersede nor supplant the kind of solitude of heart that invites a person to befriend his or her inner self. It is in that inner world that people who search are invited to experience the guiding presence of God, who, St. Augustine tells us, is more intimate to us than our most interior parts.

Liberating the Heart

Determining the direction in which our hearts are drawing us is often a difficult undertaking. Because many of us are out of touch with our own inner world and experiences, we are unable to understand our deepest desires. Moreover, others have long ago invaded our hearts and have installed their "shoulds" for our lives,

aims British psychiatrist R.D. Laing. Our hearts are no longer free, but more like occupied territory. Cultural imperatives, parental “shoulds,” and superego dictates often drown out the faint stirrings that suggest what we yearn for. (xi) Uncovering the invaluable data of the heart can only occur when the self has been liberated from these foreign “shoulds.”

Retaking the heart’s territory is crucial in the battle for personal freedom and authentic discernment. The loss of the inside information that the heart can provide is serious because it strips us of the ability to direct our lives according to the interior movements of God and subjects us to the manipulation of exterior forces. A person without access to the data of the heart is like a soldier without a map or a compass. The heart, will determine his or her course. Liberating the heart requires dealing with whatever obscures the messages it emits.

A common obstacle to monitoring the spontaneous attractions of the heart is what psychologists call “introjects.” Introjects represent the “shoulds” that other people, consciously or not, impose on our lives. These “shoulds” often interfere with our hearing clearly what the “wants” of our hearts are. According to Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, “An introject...consists of material-a way of acting, feeling, evaluating-which you have taken into your system of behavior, but which you have not assimilated in such fashion as to make it a genuine part of your organism-even though you will resist its dislodgment as if it were something precious, it is actually a foreign body. (xii)

To check for intrusive introjects, we might ask: Are the aspirations of our heart being drowned out by our desire to please our parents or spouse? Do we bury our inner longings by complying submissively to the wishes of others for our lives? Do we hesitate to accept a vocation of altruistic service because the party line among our friends is that there’s no room for the “good guys” in the real world? Do we betray our heart’s desire to create beauty in art and literature because there’s no money or security there? Do we turn a deaf ear to the Lord’s persistent call, heard in the silent depths of our hearts, to be a priest or professed religious because we fear the disapproval of others? Where and how do we betray the self by not listening with reverence to the voice telling us about our inner necessity-that is, our vocation?

Introjects endanger us in two ways. (xiii) First, people dominated by introjects never get a chance to develop their own personalities, because they are so busy holding down the foreign bodies lodged in their systems. The more introjects they have saddled themselves with, the less room there is to express or even discover what they themselves are. Second, introjection can bring about personality disintegration. If people swallow whole two incompatible concepts (their own desires and the conflicting expectations of others, for example), they may find themselves torn to bits in the process of trying to reconcile them. This is not an uncommon experience for many today.

Liberation of the heart not only involves expelling inhibiting introjects, but also

demands that we face up to inner forces that can be equally destructive of sound vocational choice. Traditionally, these enslaving forces have been called “inordinate attachments.” They represent the unruly passions and untamed urges that imperil our freedom of choice and cause us to compromise our ideals. These internal elements are like weeds that can choke the life out of the good seeds of genuine aspirations trying to take root in the soil of our hearts. The garden of every human life contains traces of these destructive weeds, because these disordered desires are part of our weakened human condition. The rich young man of Mark’s gospel is a touching illustration of the impeding nature of inordinate attachments. Loved by Jesus and invited to a closer share in his ministry, the young man was unfortunately incapable of an affirmative response and “went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth (10:22).” Contemporary examples of attachments that hinder a free response to God’s invitation to partnership are easily found in daily life: take the person who abandons a lifelong dream of being a great scientist or doctor because of a craving for ease or an excessive desire for immediate gratification; or a person who suppresses a deep urge to help the disadvantaged because her desire for worldly prestige makes being a social worker a poor career choice. If left unchecked, these impulses diminish inner freedom and lead easily to the betrayal of self. Self-liberation, therefore, necessitates taming these tendencies that bring disorder to our discernment. Facing them squarely and choosing not to let deficient motives interfere with heartfelt dreams and aspirations are critical to mature vocational choice.

Our heart’s deepest desires are like the pearl of great price or the field with the hidden treasure spoken of by Jesus (Mt 13:44-46). Once we identify what these are, we are challenged to sell all we have to possess them. In the same spirit, the poet Rilke says, “What is going on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love.” (xiv) To mold a life around these deepest aspirations makes a meaningful life possible. To base a life on social expectations and the wishes of others can only lead to fragmentation and patchwork. The challenge of vocation discernment is to discover what is our pearl of great price and then to give our heart and soul to it. To do this is to create the possibility of becoming a “unified soul” a person whose life is “all of one piece” rather than patchwork. The wise “Seer” of Lublin’s advice applies to all of us: we must each carefully observe what way our hearts draw us to, and then choose that way with all our strength.

Liberating Images of a God who Calls

Another obstacle that commonly interferes with sound choice is a distorted image of God resulting from psychological projection. Projection is a defense mechanism that enables people to disown or deny unwanted feelings, attitudes, and traits by assigning them to others. Chapter V illustrates how projection functions as an impediment to mature Christian obedience. Here the focus is on how projection impedes vocation discernment by destroying the freedom we are all meant to enjoy as children of God.

Just as people tend to project onto others unwanted attitudes and traits that really exist in themselves, so also do they project these attitudes and characteristics onto

their mental conception of God. A harsh and puritanical society, for example, will project its dominant qualities and most likely postulate a hard and restrictive god. Or people with tyrannical and domineering parents will often project these constraining qualities onto God and end up with a god-that is a suppressor of human freedom and individual autonomy.

A classical example of a distorted image of God based on projection can be seen in the myth of Prometheus, the legendary initiator of human culture. For stealing fire and sharing it with human beings, Prometheus was banished by the gods, who feared the development of human beings as an encroachment. Setting God and human beings in opposition, the Promethean myth reveals how false gods are easily fabricated out of human projection. Prometheus felt obliged to steal what he could not do without because he knew no god who would freely give it to him. He was unable to conceive of such a god, because if he himself had been god, he would have needed fire for himself and would never have shared it with another. "He knew no god that was not an enemy," notes Thomas Merton, "because the gods he knew were only a little stronger than himself, and needed the fire as badly as he needed it." (xv) In order to exist, these Promethean gods had to dominate him (for if he himself had been a god, he knew he should have had to control what was weaker than himself). Blinded by his own presuppositions, Prometheus failed to see that fire was his for the asking, a gift of the true God, who created it expressly for human beings.

Integral vocation discernment requires the liberation of God from such inhibiting images that arise from projection. These images destroy our ability to live freely as people loved by God. We must abandon the false image of a power oriented and possessive deity opposed to human desires and development. Instead, we must develop images of God that accentuate the loving generosity of a personal God who not only gifts people with life, but is ever present as a support for the development of that life.

These life-giving images are not new, for they are rooted in the New Testament and reflect the God revealed by Jesus. In the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15), for example, Jesus portrays God as a forgiving and affirming father. God is like a parent who, without any trace of regret, freely permits us to live our own lives even though our self-directed journey is often misguided and our return home often tortuous. Unlike the insecure Promethean gods who viewed human development as a danger to divine status, the God whom Jesus called "Abba" perennially supports the human effort to establish a life based on the desires of the heart. Sin and misjudgment may retard our progress. What first appeared to be the pearl of great price may turn out to be a fake. But, as the parable points out, God's graciousness provides many chances. We live in a multiple chance universe, and the effort to root our vocation in authentic, divinely inspired, desires must not be abandoned when faltering steps lead initially to failure. Significant learning sometimes comes only through trial and error. Fortunately for us God, like the father of the prodigal son, allows for trial-and-error learning.

The parable of the prodigal son likens human life to an unrestricted gift which we

receive from the hands of a loving God. The creator gives us time and energy, talents and opportunities to serve within a unique vocation that is revealed to us in our own hearts and in prayer. But often we do not experience our life as an unrestricted gift and are unsure that God is really behind us. Afraid to trust our hearts, we hesitate and hedge. Yet like the master in the parable of the talents (Mt 25: 14-30), God has high hopes that we will develop fully our talents and potentialities. Only when we realize that we are given many chances to ascertain God's call will we boldly take risks and try out alternatives. Fear of having only a single chance and of losing it through mistaken choice leads to paralysis and indecision. This fear, as depicted in the parable of the talents, will tempt us to bury our assets rather than invest them with hope for a profitable life. To strive for a vocational existence based on the deep desires of our heart is truly a response to a gracious God's invitation to be co-creators of lives that speak of the marvelous gift and opportunity that human life is.

Balancing Images of Transcendence and Immanence

In searching for liberating images of a God who calls us to vocational existence, we are looking for adult images that do not trivialize our freedom and responsibility. If the Christian faith is to speak to us today, it must reject any view of God that would keep adults infantile. This requires the rejection of images of God that have been built on a pattern of deficient relationships experienced as children. For example, a conception of God that is based upon a fear relationship in childhood is not a satisfactory basis for an adult Christianity. We need images that respect both the dignity of God and of human beings. Many of our unhelpful images stem from a distorted understanding of God's transcendence. When we say that God is a transcendent being, we mean that God is wholly other, distinct from all created beings. While positing a real distinction between ourselves and God, the notion of transcendence in no way implies that God is a distant deity with minimal contact and interest in us. Scripture, after all, presents this transcendent God of ours as the loving creator of Genesis, the faithful liberator of Exodus, and the merciful "Abba" of Jesus. Unfortunately, these biblical images have been eclipsed by aberrant images. The Promethean picture of distant gods antagonistic to humans exemplifies such a misrepresentation. The unequivocal message of Jesus can be reduced to this: the creator of the universe and the Lord of history is forever and unambiguously for us, on our side. This message constitutes the core of the Christian gospel. To obfuscate this central truth is to garble the Good News proclaimed by Jesus.

To rectify such distortions, a reemphasis on images of immanence is needed. "Immanence" comes from the Latin *manere*, meaning "to remain within," as distinct from "to go beyond or outside," which is the root meaning of "transcend." Traditionally predicated of God to express the belief that the divine is to be encountered within the created universe, the notion of divine immanence has been given a variety of interpretations throughout history. In asserting God's immanence, some have slipped into pantheism by holding that God and the universe are one and identical. The church has always rejected all forms of pantheism as unacceptable because it does away with the absolute qualitative distinction between God and the universe. The challenge

throughout the ages has been to affirm God's indwelling presence within the world while maintaining that God is wholly other and irreducible to any aspect of creation. "The religious imagination," states theologian William Lynch, "has fought a long struggle to separate God out from everything else in the world while keeping [God] altogether present to the world." (xvi)

The beneficial use of images of immanence for vocation discernment has been well-delineated by Edith Genet, a religious educator calling for the need to "respect the creative impulse God has put in us." (xvii) Images of immanence allow us to visualize God, not as a rival, but as a benevolent presence working in us and with us. Made in God's image, we have been endowed with the ability and opportunity to discover our unique way of collaborating with God in covenant partnership. Having no detailed blueprint for our lives, God leaves open many possibilities for choice. St Paul makes this clear when he speaks of the plan of God as a plan of love in his letter to the Ephesians. "God's plan is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head (Eph 1:10)." Speaking of God's will as a divine yearning, a contemporary writer conveys well the Pauline sense of God's will as one of love.

Unfortunately many people view the will of God as rather like a ten-ton elephant hanging overhead, ready to fall on them. ..Actually the word which we translate into English as will comes from both a Hebrew and a Greek word which means yearning. It is that yearning which lovers have for one another. Not a yearning of the mind alone or of the heart alone but of the whole being. A yearning which we feel is only a glimmering of the depth of the yearning of God for us. (xviii)

Thus, the will of God is dynamic, personal love urging us along the path that leads to union with the Lord. As with an ordinary journey, there may be several paths that lead equally well to our destination; or some may well be notably better; or some way may lead us away from our destination. So "the prayer to know God's will," states theologian John Wright, "is a prayer to have this kind of insight about the choices open to me." (xix) When we pray "Your will be done," we are not thinking about a script of our lives that God has destined from all eternity. Rather, we are referring to the choices we must make. And when these lead to union with God, they are compatible with God's plan to unite all creation. "Thus, it may sometimes happen that I will actually be doing God's will, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whether I choose this or that." (xx) A conversation between Shug and Celie in *The Color Purple* makes this point well:

"Us worry about God a lot. But once we feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like."

"You telling me God loves you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?"

"But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to. There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes." (xxi)

The Christian notion of vocation entails the belief that God calls us to live in certain

ways. Yet, God's expectations for our lives are broad: as Shug puts it, "There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes." God calls us, for instance, to imitate the interpersonal love of the trinity through our vocation to be loving human beings. Our vocation as Christians, furthermore, calls -us to pattern our lives on the example of Christ to whom we are joined through baptism. Like St. Paul, Christians have been "specifically chosen" to "preach the good news about" Jesus (Gal 1:15-16). However, the distinctive way each Christian is called to do this is a very personal matter. Through vocation discernment, we try to identify the unique way each of us is called to glorify God in our work or way of life. Because we possess many options and because every "yes" we say implies a "no" to other possibilities, we have to choose with care. God's plan for us is neither a static scenario predetermined from all eternity, nor does it exist independently of our inclinations and desires. Our vocation unfolds through time and is shaped by our choices. The Christian ideal is that we submit these choices to God and benefit from the guidance of grace. In the solitude of our hearts and with the wise counsel of others, we must choose our particular way. Once we choose a way, that way becomes our vocation. Our lives are subsequently shaped by that vocational choice. While our lives could have been different, they would not have been necessarily more in accord with God's will. "In a situation where many choices are possible it does not seem necessary to suppose always that only one of these is according to God's will." (xxii)

Reconciling the Exterior and the Interior

Images of immanence highlight the belief that God works through the "natural" processes (our thinking, feeling, fantasizing, and seeking advice) by which we decide on a vocation. When we earnestly and prayerfully rely on these processes to determine a course for our lives, we can be united to God and see God's will active in us. Some people may find this hard to comprehend, if they are used to viewing the will of God as coming from outside themselves or if they see vocation as something decided beforehand by God without any input from the individual involved. In this view, God issues a call and our duty is to respond with confidence and joy. This way of imaging vocation as an exterior call, such as in the cases of Isaiah and Jeremiah, appears in many biblical texts.

However, there are other texts in scripture that suggest an alternative understanding of how God summons people into service. In contrast to an exterior call, this view portrays God's call as embedded in one's heart and emanating from one's life situation. Take, for example, the passage in Exodus about Moses' return to Egypt after a few years in the Arabian peninsula where he got married. In two connecting verses we see an interesting presentation of contrasting descriptions of the same event, (xxiii)

Moses went away and returned to his father-in-law Jethro, and said to him, "Give me leave to go back to my relatives in Egypt to see if they are still alive. And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in Peace" (Ex 4:18).

The very next verse provides quite a different explanation of how it came about that Moses went to Egypt to check on his family.

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Yahweh said to Moses in Midian, “Go return to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead. So Moses took his wife and his son and, putting them on a donkey, started back for the land of Egypt” (Ex 4:19).

The first text, verse 18, leaves the responsibility of the decision to Moses and his understanding of the situation. He assesses things and wants to find out whether his relatives are still alive. The second text, verse 19, belonging to the Yahwist tradition, attributes directly to God the initiative resulting in Moses’ return to Egypt. It bypasses Moses’ interior process of evaluating his situation and making a decision.

These Old Testament verses represent alternative ways of understanding how God operates in the world. The latter, based on a transcendent image of God, emphasizes the direct intervention of God in directing our lives. The former, based on an immanent image of God, sees the hand of God always at work in the people and events that make up our present reality. Corresponding to these two viewpoints, an understanding of vocation can emphasize either the exterior or the interior aspect of the call.

Similarly, New Testament accounts of the call of the apostles illustrate the same thing. Matthew’s gospel, for example, recounts that Jesus, seeing Simon and Andrew, said to them “Follow me” (4:18). In contrast, John’s gospel describes the experience of two disciples of John the Baptist being interiorly drawn to follow Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and asked “What do you want?” They answered “Rabbi, where do you live?” “Come and see,” replied Jesus (1:35). In Matthew, the initiative is attributed to Jesus. In John, however, the call to follow Jesus is instigated by the prompting of John the Baptist and the disciples’ own desire to see for themselves.

Because both approaches have potential pitfalls, sound vocation discernment must balance both views of how God leads us. An overemphasis on vocation as an exterior call can endanger responsible selfhood by fostering the kind of conformity and outer-directedness that easily lead to immaturity. More seriously, an excessive emphasis on an external summons can result in a feeling of being trapped a feeling that saps all enthusiasm for living and ministering. Without free choice, joyful commitment is impossible. Once a Jesuit priest was approached by a man at a busy shopping mall. “By chance, Father,” he asked, “are you a Jesuit?” “Not by chance, sir,” the priest responded, “but by choice!” It is this sense of personal freedom that enables people to serve the Lord gladly.

On the other hand, an exclusive reliance on the interior can easily lead to self-deception and delusion. If we are not open to feedback from others in the faith community, our blind spots can lead us into error or lull us into a proud and stubborn

sense of certitude that gives the impression that we have a direct line to God. Furthermore, an excessively subjective sense of call may lead to weakened commitment and compromise when difficulties arise. Because discipleship always entails a cost, following Jesus with fidelity, whether in the lay or the religious state, will necessarily involve some hardship and struggle. During these times, our commitment to an interiorly felt sense of vocation can find valuable support in the external ratification of that call by the community.

Concretely, reconciling the interior and exterior requires that we take seriously the data emanating from our heart and life situations, as well as the opinion of others who, by training, and charism, can keep our heart searching enlightened and free from self-deceit. Honest and integral discernment of our vocation involves listening to God, speaking both within our hearts and in the world around us. It calls for a sensitivity to our inner desires, as well as an ability to interpret these desires through a process of prayer, reflection, and spiritual direction.

The Role of Desires

Sound Christian decision making dictates not only that we take our desires seriously, but also that we be willing to discuss them with a spiritual guide. Such a person can serve as an objective sounding board and help us avoid the pitfalls of an unbalanced and one-sided interior or exterior approach. According to Thomas Merton, it is important to appreciate the role of desires as indicators of God's will and to be honest about these desires in spiritual direction. Because a real connection frequently exists between our spontaneous desires and God's will for us, he advises people seeking help from a spiritual director to be genuine rather than present a facade. "We have to be able to lay bare the secret aspirations which we cherish in our hearts," he writes, and in this way make ourselves known for who we really are. He stresses the importance of discovering our "holy and spiritual desires" because they "really represent a possibility of a special, spontaneous and personal gift" which we alone can make to God. If there is such a gift then most certainly, according to Merton, God asks that gift from us, and "a holy, humble and sincere desire may be one of the signs that God asks it!" Merton's point is central to vocation discernment: Our deep longings are sometimes very important indications of the will of God for us.

Our discernment is sometimes faulty because we ourselves do not know what we really want. An introject-filled heart or a tyrannical image of God can keep us in the dark about our own desires. Often a legalistic notion of the will of God may lead us to hypocritically falsify our true aspirations. Discernment is drastically undermined when we think that God is a harsh lawgiver, uninterested in our thoughts and desires and concerned only with imposing upon us a rigid, predetermined plan. This attitude is challenged by the fact that we are called to collaborate actively with God in covenant partnership. St. Paul reminds us that "we are fellow workers with God" (I Cor 3:9). As colleagues, we are called to freely contribute to God's kingdom in the world, to advance God's cause. In this collaboration, which is our basic vocation as Christians, we are not merely passive and mechanical instruments. Our loving, spontaneous

contributions to God's work are themselves the precious effects of God's grace. "To frustrate this active participation in the work of God," Merton warns, "is to frustrate what is most dear to God's will." In a similar vein, E. Edward Kinerk argues, in an essay on the place of desires in the spiritual life, that desires can galvanize our spirituality by generating power and physical energy. If we do not take our desires seriously, "if we are timid about our stronger desires for God and his service, we will have failed to utilize the greatest source of human vitality and passion which God has given us."

The spontaneous desires of our hearts are valuable clues to the will of God for us. Yet, we are often mistrustful of them because we are suspicious of spontaneity. We are "afraid of spontaneity itself," states Merton, "because we have been so warped by the idea that everything spontaneous is merely natural, and that for a work to be supernatural it has to go against the grain, it has to frustrate and disgust us. The truth is, of course, quite different." When we fear spontaneity, we mask our desires, sometimes hiding them even from ourselves. This repression of desires binds the discernment process because only when our desires are brought out of the cave of the unconscious and exposed to the light of day can they be tested. Only through prayerful discernment can we discover which of our desires are authentic indications of God's will and which of them are not, in Brueggemann's phrase, "related to the purposes of God" and therefore incapable of defining a vocation.

The Nature of Authentic Desires

If desires are to give direction to our vocational existence, we need to be able to distinguish between authentic and less authentic ones. In discussing four overlapping presuppositions about desires, Kinerk provides some criteria that can help us sort them out.

First, while all desires are real experiences, they are not all equally authentic. For example, a devout Christian who has been hurt by another might feel both a desire for revenge and a desire to forgive. But he or she would probably judge the desire to forgive as more authentic because the desire to forgive springs from a more profound level of himself or herself. Such a person's reflection might be along the lines of: "I feel more genuinely myself when I picture myself forgiving. And I feel out of synch with the person I want to be when I harbor the desire for revenge." The desire to forgive is more authentic because it more accurately expresses what a devout Christian really wants, even though the desire for revenge might be intensely felt. Distinguishing between authentic and less authentic desires involves a groping and fallible process, because it is often difficult for us to know clearly our deeper desires and to separate them from those that are more superficial and ephemeral.

Second, our authentic desires are vocational. What we want is integrally connected with who we are. Insisting that "the question 'Who am I?' can never be answered directly," Kinerk maintains that authentic desires serve essentially to enlighten our hearts. We cannot know ourselves unless we know what we really want. Only by

asking the question “What do I want?” do we begin to sense the nature of our unique vocation in life. The more honestly we identify our authentic desires, the more these desires will shape our vocational choice. “What do you want?” is precisely what Jesus asked the first disciples in John’s account of their call (Jn 1:35-39). In their religious quest, the disciples found themselves drawn intuitively to follow Jesus as he passed by them along the river Jordan, where John was baptizing. Jesus aided their vocation discernment precisely by directing them to their desires.

Third, the more authentic our desires, the more they move us to glorify God. All of us experience in some degree a restless yearning for God. Whenever we sincerely respond to this longing we are also responding to the grace of God who has planted that desire in every human being. Our most genuine desires spring ultimately from this level of ourselves. They must not always be expressed in explicitly religious terms, but they always move us towards self-donation to God and others and away from self-centeredness. “At this level,” states Kinerk, “the distinction between ‘what I desire’ and ‘what desires God gives me’ begins to blur. The more profoundly we reach into ourselves, the more we experience desires which are uniquely our own but also God-given.” Thus, heart searching is key to vocation discernment because God is often the source of the desires that emanate from our hearts. Because the danger of self-deception is great, we need to test our desires and our interpretation of them with others who can provide some objectivity. Nevertheless, in no case can these desires be trivialized or disregarded without seriously crippling the process of vocation discernment.

Fourth, authentic desires are always in some way public. This is paradoxical, but nevertheless true. While our desires reflect what is most uniquely personal and idiosyncratic in ourselves, at the same time, when seen at their depths, they stem from communal values, not just individual ones. In Kinerk’s words, “Superficial desires such as those linked with consumerism demonstrate all too graphically our cultural narcissism, but more authentic desires always lead us out of ourselves and into the human community.” Thus, such desires as those to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to utilize our talents in service of others become more compelling than private concerns. These desires are more authentic because they reflect our true nature as social beings.

These insights into the nature of authentic desires are very useful when struggling with life choices. Sound discernment requires not only that we be aware of the data of our hearts, but also that we know how to interpret that data with spiritual sensitivity. If we are not spiritually discriminating, we make ourselves vulnerable to being misled. Distinguishing between authentic and less authentic desires enhances our ability to judge which of our desires are worth building a life upon and which desires should be left dormant.

Wholehearted Wanting

Distinguishing between simply wanting something and really wanting it can also help

us to determine which of our desires should influence the direction of our lives. According to philosopher Robert Johann, the struggle for freedom is not that we do not have ample choices, but that we do not really want what we choose. We continually make choices that we ourselves cannot wholly approve. We make choices that, even as we make them, we realized are at odds with our other interests and desires. Consequently, we are inwardly divided and only halfhearted in our choice. To be free and unconflicted, contends Johann, our wanting must be wholehearted. Wholehearted wanting should be the basis of a life choice.

We must take our desires seriously, since “they provide the only access we have to the worth of things.” However, Johann cautions that taking our desires seriously is not the same thing as leaving them to themselves and indulging them as they arise. Because they are simply reactions to present objects, desires arise piecemeal. Our wantings can never be more than fragmentary, so long as they are not examined for their conditions and consequences. If our wanting is to be wholehearted, what we want has to be grasped not only in itself, but in its connections with the rest of reality. It must be understood and evaluated in light of what it portends for our life as a whole. A husband who is committed to being faithful to his wife, for example, may realistically choose not to act out his desires to flirt with a woman colleague or to have a nightcap at her apartment after the office Christmas party. He realizes that his fleeting desire for intimacy with her might well jeopardize his deeper desire for marital fidelity. His desire to flirt is not wholehearted because he does not want the possible consequence of sexual involvement with her.

Requiring thought and reflection, wholeheartedly desiring demands that we step back from immediate goods and pleasures to see where they lead. This means refusing to endorse our initial reactions until their credentials have been checked and validated. We cannot want something wholeheartedly when our minds tell us that we will not want to finish what we have started. In short, the aim of thought is neither to suppress spontaneity nor to substitute for wants and feelings. Rather, the functions of thought is to liberate our desiring from its fascination for fragments and to make wholehearted wanting possible. Reason and emotion are both critical components of holistic decision making. Excluding one or the other seriously detracts from the validity of the process. St. Ignatius, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, teaches how thinking and feeling can work harmoniously in discernment, and at the same time be influenced by God’s spirit at work in these human processes.

Integrating Reason, Affect, and Religious Experience

Ignatius’ guidelines for decision making or “election” place heavy emphasis on the integration of thoughts and feelings. Underlying his recommendations is the concern that personal choice be made in the context of one’s religious experience. His instructions, consequently, are intended to maximize a person’s sensitivity to the influence of God throughout the decision-making process. To alert the person to God’s influence, he describes three times or ways in which God can guide the person faced with choice.

The first time occurs when God “so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it.” Ignatius cites the example of St. Paul’s and St. Matthew’s response to Christ’s call to illustrate this first time of election. Phenomenologically, this first time can be viewed as a moment of peak religious experience when individuals feel overwhelmed by an inner sense of absolute certainty as to what their decision should be. At such moments, they may experience something deep within click into place, providing them with an intuitive sense of how they must proceed. Or they may perceive such a total congruence between their sense of internal requiredness (what they feel they must do) and God’s will (what they think God wants of them) that the course to be followed is unambiguously clear. Quite apart from any deliberation, this personal “moment of truth” can spring suddenly upon the person without any antecedent cause, like a forceful flash of insight, removing any further need for deciding.

The second time of decision making suggested by Ignatius emphasizes the knowledge-bearing capacity of feelings. It occurs when individuals must rely on their affective states of consolation or desolation to detect the influence of God regarding the decision to be made. In the case of people progressing earnestly along the spiritual path, Ignatius understands consolation as a complexus of positive feelings that encourages, supports, and confirms a prospective decision as being “right”: desolation he sees as a complexus of negative feelings that discourages, questions, calls into doubt a prospective decision, suggesting it is not “right.” The assumption underlying this second time of election is that one’s emotions can be indicators of God’s guidance.

The third time of decision making highlights the process of reasoning. Picturing oneself on one’s deathbed and recalling one’s purpose for existing (that is, “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to be saved”), the person is asked to list the pros and cons of various options. This third time presupposes that God’s guiding influence can be felt in the process of reasoning. Like the values-clarification exercise which asks people what they would do if they had only a week to live, this Ignatian method relied on the truth that can come at death’s door to provide a perspective for present choices. In other words, it asks people to anticipate which decision they would most likely be able to ratify when facing death.

The genius of Ignatius, theologian Michael J. Buckley points out, was not that he counted transpersonal influences, or the attractions of affectivity, or the process of thinking as critical factors in securing the guidance of God. Others also shared this inclusive view. Unique and underivative, however, was Ignatius’ explanation of the dynamics of these three, often interrelating, factors within a person’s religious experience. “What Ignatius provided,” maintains Buckley, “was a structure within which each of these finds a significant place; none is dismissed out of hand. A coordination among them is established so that they reach an integrity of effect and one is taught how to recognize and reply to each.”

Feelings Can Confirm

The phrase “integrity of effect” aptly describes the desired outcome of Ignatian decision making. Presuming the person is genuinely committed to doing the will of God and is free from inordinate attachments that destroy freedom, the decision is integral if it emanates from an integration of feelings and thoughts. Ignatius sought this integration by building into the second and third times of decision making a complementary dynamic. He directs the person who has made a decision based on the rational approach of the third time to seek affective confirmation by prayerfully attending to his or her feelings as suggested by the second time of election. In other words, following a decision the person should stay in close touch with the feelings which arise as a result of the decision and determine whether they confirm the rightness of the choice or cast doubt on it. After a period of testing, if positive feelings (e.g. peace, joy, hope, confidence) dominate, it is clear then that affectivity has joined with intelligence to produce an harmonious effect. However, if negative and disturbing feelings (e.g. doubt, fear, anxiety, discouragement) persist, then a closure would seem premature and the person should continue the process until an inner harmony is produced through the alliance of one’s thoughts and feelings.

Conversely, a person who makes a decision based on the affective approach of the second time should also seek rational confirmation through a method of the third time. William Peters, in his commentary on the Spiritual Exercises, cites the Directory of 1599 to substantiate this point. He notes that Juan de Polanco, a close friend of Ignatius, called the second time of election “more excellent” than the third, but adds that it might be wise to check the result of an election made in this time by one of the methods of the third.

Clearly, the second time of decision making, based on affectivity, and the third time, based on reasoning, were designed by Ignatius to function in a complementary dynamic. The Ignatian process seeks to ground life choices on felt knowledge, not on theoretical abstractions. This process, according to Ignatian scholar John Futrell, involves paying attention simultaneously to “the continuity of thoughts during reflection, the concomitant feeling constantly reacting to these thoughts-feelings which confirm or call into question the orientation of the reflection- and the growing understanding which involves both the thoughts and feelings-felt knowledge.”

Whole Organism Consulted

Ignatius’ approach is an early form of what today is called holistic decision making, which encourages individuals making a decision to rely not only on their mind, but also on the data that come from feelings, senses, bodily sensations and the imagination. Psychologist James Simkin recounts a case that illustrates this approach. Once when working with a man struggling to decide whether to remain in a business venture recently begun with a friend, Simkin asked the client to imagine sticking with his business commitment. As the client tried to imagine as vividly as he could what this option would entail, Simkin directed the person to attend to his bodily sensations.

When entertaining the option of remaining with the business, the client experienced his stomach tying up in knots. Then Simkin directed the client to fantasize other alternatives. As the patient did so, he discovered that his patient stomach began to unravel and relax. The therapist then asked the patient to continue to shuttle between the two different fantasies, while simultaneously paying attention to his bodily reactions. As the patient did so, he began to discover a recurrent pattern: whenever he imagined staying with the business venture, his body was filled with stress; whenever he imagined abandoning the business deal, his body began to relax.

This case cited by Simkin demonstrates how useful the data produced by the imagination, senses, bodily sensations, and feelings can be in decision making. “My total organismic sensing of a situation is more trustworthy than my intellect,” states Psychologist Carl Rogers in support of a holistic approach. Testifying to this “wisdom of the organism,” Rogers states:

As I gradually come to trust my total reactions more deeply, I find that I can use them to guide my thinking... I think of it as trusting the totality of my experience, which I have learned to suspect is wiser than my intellect. It is fallible I am sure, but I believe it to be less fallible than my conscious mind alone.”

What psychologists such as Rogers and Simkin say of decision making is equally true of discernment. When thought is made the coin of the realm, other important sources of information, like feelings, bodily reactions, and intuitions, can be overlooked. A purely rational approach to discernment is impoverished because it fails to recognize God’s influence in religious and affective experiences. Like holistic decision making, good discernment must take into account one’s total, organismic sensing of a situation. A society dominated by science and technology often mistrusts feelings and touts a coldly dispassionate approach as the only intelligent way to decide. Nevertheless, Christian tradition maintains that we must be open to being touched by God in all areas of our lives, because no aspect escapes the influence of Christ’s spirit. As Ignatius reminds us, we can encounter God in our cognitive processes, our affective states, as well as in our religious experiences.

Making and Keeping Commitments

Successful vocation discernment results in a sense of satisfaction—a feeling that with God’s help we have discovered a mission that is worthy of our wholehearted commitment. Some people, however, are blocked from putting closure to their process because of an inability to make a commitment. This incapacity seems to stem from several interrelated myths.

First, there is the myth that “Somewhere there is a problem free lifestyle.” When spelled out so explicitly, its obvious falsehood is apparent to all who are in touch with the real world. Nevertheless, this myth subtly deters commitment and encourages an endless search for the perfect lifestyle, job, or mate. The proper question that mature Christians must ask themselves is this: “What vocation will allow me to live out most

fully Christ's twofold commandment of love?" This focus on loving will enable us to deal creatively with whatever problems are part of our lives. Facing problems that arise from our efforts to love God and others is a way of becoming holy. It is the Lord's way of transforming our hearts and making us more like Jesus, whose problem-filled life led him to the cross for our sakes. Thus, problems should not be seen as being in the way of our vocations, but the way by which the Lord calls us to embody his sacrificial love for others. Since no way of life is without its problems, the task is to discern which set of problems bears the most promise for developing our capacity to love and serve as Jesus did.

Second, there is the myth that "Somewhere, this side of the grave, I can have the whole enchilada!" In our clearer moments, we know this is an illusion. But there is a stubborn resistance in many of us to accept the limitations of creaturehood. Often, only a mid-life crisis can extract from us a reluctant and humbling admission that there are real limits to our lives. So often in our weariness and frustration, we are tempted to focus more on the 20 or 30 percent that may be missing in our lives rather than concentrate on the 70 or 80 percent that is there. Because life is a more-or-less situation, total fulfillment will come only when we finally rest in the Lord in the heavenly Jerusalem. Until then, as Augustine so eloquently prayer, our hearts will remain restless. To yield to this fact of faith is the beginning of wisdom and inner peace.

The painful law of human existence is that every choice we make necessarily involves some exclusion. Every "yes" to some choices necessarily involves a "no" to others. Because I say "yes" to being married, I say "no" to the kind of solitude and mobility that a celibate can enjoy. Because I say "yes" to celibate love, I say "no" to the joy of having my own children. Maturity is the ability to live peacefully with limits. The refusal to accept limits makes commitment impossible. In the world of imagination and desires, the absence of limits eliminates the necessity to choose. However, the real world is bound by limits, and it is in this world that we as Christians are called to embody the love of Christ. Maturity consists in making wise and loving choices, not in avoiding commitments.

Third, there is the myth that "Because I'm struggling, I must not be called to live this life." Here it is critical to distinguish between vocational struggles and developmental struggles. For example, a husband or a wife could mistakenly conclude on the basis of recurrent marital problems that he or she is not being called to married life. Instead of calling into doubt their vocation to marriage, they perhaps should look at growing in ways that would make them better spouses. Or a priest struggling with loneliness could erroneously judge that he does not have the charism of celibacy. Instead of doubting his vocation, perhaps he should look at ways in which he can foster greater intimacy with the Lord and others. Some persistent struggles can suggest that, try as we may, "the shoe does not fit." Other struggles, however, far from indicating that we do not have a vocation, invite us to invest in further growth as we try to remain faithful to our call.

Closely related is another myth that can undermine commitment. Colloquially, it

takes the form of “If only I weren’t here, I wouldn’t be having this problem.” This myth tempts people to escape their existential situation with the hope that moving on will solve everything. The difficulty with this approach is that often individuals move on only to discover the same problem in a new setting, as if it were carried there in their back pockets. It seems that their problem is connected more to their way of perceiving, feeling, and behaving than to the concrete situations of their lives. Not to recognize this truth condemns many to a wandering, nomadic life. Seeking a geographic cure for personal struggles results often in disappointment and makes permanent commitment impossible. This is illustrated in the case of people who are always on the move, frantically trying to escape all traces of loneliness. Naturally, their efforts are doomed to failure, because a certain loneliness is inescapable in everyone’s life—sometimes experienced most achingly when surrounded by loved ones. Being alone, and sometimes feeling lonely, is a burdensome part of the human condition, for which there will be no final solution short of seeing the Lord face to face. Changing the commitments and locations is a dead-end solution to human loneliness.

The phrase “to make a commitment” contains much wisdom when taken literally. Commitments are never given to us already fully developed and ready simply to be enjoyed. We are given precious opportunities to create something worthwhile when we make commitments. But to do this, we must invest -our time, energy, and resources-into making a commitment, that is, to actualizing the full potential of a promising reality. Without personal and persevering investment, a commitment can never flower. This is true of commitments made in marriage, friendship, religious life, and the priesthood.

A Jesuit friend tells young couples at their wedding that what they are doing on that day is making an initial installment. By exchanging marriage vows, they are committing themselves to possessing something so precious and costly that they cannot pay for it all at once. They can only “purchase” the fullness of marital love by “buying on time.” Only by making their regular installments in the daily routine of their years together will they be able to achieve the full promise of what they long for on their wedding day. In short, only continual investment can help them “make their commitment” to each other. Something similar can be profitably said to priests on their ordination day and religious on the day of their profession of vows.

Conclusion

“What will this child turn out to be?” This is the question posed by the relatives of John the Baptist (Lk 1:66). It is asked about every person who comes into the world. And no one can answer it except the person himself or herself, when he or she grows old enough to ask: “What shall I be? And what shall I do that I may be myself, that I

may use all my God-given talents to live a full life?" When the person asks such questions, he or she is confronting squarely the question of vocation.

Heart searching in solitude and with those who accompany us in our search is the process of vocation discernment. In this process, we must learn to take the data of our heart seriously and realize that our spontaneous desires can be important indications of God's will for us. It is fallacious to think that God's will has nothing to do with our will. We must unlearn the idea that our unique vocation is something our creator peremptorily orders us to do, without any direction from our creator.

Theologically, the discernment process presupposes several theological truths: (a) that we can have access to God who dwells in our midst; (b) that God's guiding voice can lead us in the way of a personal vocation, if we listen with solitude of heart and without fear; and (c) that God never coerces us, but always respects our freedom of choice.

God's will reaches us through the Spirit sent to us by the risen Jesus. This Spirit reaches us directly or through others. However, since the means through which Christ touches us by his Spirit are all human, no direction of the Spirit is totally unambiguous until we take the lonely human responsibility of removing the ambiguity by responsible decision. That decision is responsible if it is a sincere response to the Spirit reaching us through all the ways determined by Christ. With regard to any concrete human decision like our life's vocation, the will of God is not "something out there" waiting to be found. By acting responsibly, that is, by responding to the Spirit's lead as best we can, we contribute to bringing about the will of God.

As Christians, we are called to choose our vocations with confidence in the Lord's promise to be with us "always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28:20). We know that "by turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those who love the Lord" (Rom 8:28). Finally, we rely on the promise of the Lord for a blessed future: "I know the plans I have in mind for you-it is Yahweh who speaks-plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you" (Jer 29:11-12).

i Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 27

ii As quoted in James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 93.

iii Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*, p. 15

iv Walter Brueggemann, "Covenanting as Human Vocation," *Interpretation* 33 (2), 115-129.

v St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Principle and Foundation," *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, No. 23.

vi *Ibid.*, No. 169.

vii James Fowler, *Becoming Adult*, p. 92

viii *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ix Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 15.

x Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Norton, 1954), pp. 18-19.

xi R.D. Liang, "Violence and Love," *Journal of Existentialism* 5 (1965), 417-422.

- xii Frederick Peris, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: The Julian Press, 1951), p. 189.
- xiii FritzPerls, *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy* (Ben Lomond, California: Science & Behavior Books, 1973), p. 34.
- xiv Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters*, pp. 46-47.
- xv Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 85-86.
- xvi William F. Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A New Image of the Secular* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1970), p. 130.
- xvii Edith Genet, "Images of God," *Lumen Vitae XXXIV a* (1979), 72.
- xviii Ron DelBene with Herb Montgomery, *The Breath of Life* (Minneapolis,MN: Winston Press, 1981), pp. 8-9.
- xix John H. Wright, *Theology of Christian Prayer* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company), p. 134.
- xx *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.
- xxi Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 176.
- xxii John H. Wright, *A Theology of Christian Prayer*, p. 134.
- xxiii Genet, "Images of God," pp. 67-68.

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