

## *A Life of Discernment*

*M. Renée Miller*

*He who knows others is clever; he who knows himself  
has discernment.*

—Lao Tzu

*“When will God speak to me, and tell me what to do,  
Rabbi?” the young man asked.*

*“Our God, blessed be He, is always speaking to you, if  
you have ears to hear,” replied the Rabbi.*

*“I never hear a voice, Teacher,” he said quietly.*

*“Yahweh spoke you into being as Yahweh spoke  
creation into being; as Yahweh spoke the covenant to  
Abraham; as Yahweh spoke our fathers and mothers  
through the wilderness,” the Rabbi answered.*

*“But, why can’t I hear?” he almost whispered.*

*“When your heart becomes as quiet as your whispered  
question, you will hear the still, small voice of God.  
Blessed be God.”*

—M. Renée Miller *Fertile Soil in a Barren Land*, 2005

Part of being human is engaging in the process of discernment. Discernment actually begins when we give voice to our longings for life in all of its fullness and it doesn’t end until the fullness of life has ebbed into eternity. Life in its plentitude is always presenting us with new and different options to which we must give response. This is at once a great gift that is offered to us, and also a great challenge. The great challenge is that we will reduce discernment to nothing more than achieving a result—getting a question answered—making a choice—coming to a decision.

When we find ourselves presented with a new possibility that requires action, we immediately feel the need of a process that will assist us in weighing the risks and rewards, so that we can make a prudent and wise response. We live in fear of not knowing, and if knowing, knowing only partially. So, we go to our spiritual toolbox, unclasp the hinge, and pull out our discernment tools. We consider. We reflect. We pray. We ask for input from friends and colleagues. We look for insight and inspiration. Then, when we reach a sense of clarity or when we feel our tools can do no more for us, we make a decision and pray that our discernment was done with enough intentionality that the resulting decision will be the right one. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. Unfortunately, the discernment tools we employ are not flawless when it comes to choice making.

When used as tools alone that will result in an answer, prayer and reflection are sometimes stripped of their true purpose which is to lead us into the heart of God. Rather, it is that we have exercised discernment about the wrong thing. We've been focused on a decision, an answer, rather than making our heart so still that it is able to detect the subtle, but sublime, sounds from heaven. Discernment is not so much about choice making as it is about living attentively. It is not so much a process to employ at certain critical times, as it is something to be lived every day.

We may find ourselves thinking of discernment as little more than trying to uncover something we cannot see. It is okay. This suggests that discernment is an attribute to be cultivated rather than an action to be taken. When we approach discernment as a way to live life rather than as a prelude to choice making, there is an opportunity to continually "grasp and comprehend what is obscure." When we embrace a life of discernment we are surprised to find that the choices that need to be made throughout our lives are revealed by piecing together the unfolding moments of daily life and reflecting on the meaning of those moments as they occur. Compared to this process, periods of sporadic, episodic, focused input and evaluation are paltry, unproductive options that do not bring the fullness that steady attention to each moment brings.

When we live a life of discernment rather than simply employing a discernment process to do choice making, time becomes our ally. There is no need to hurry the discernment process. Sometimes it takes a long time—even a lifetime. In fact, discernment seems to elude us most when we are most eager for its presence. When it suspects we're aiming right for it, discernment seems to play a devilish game of hide and seek. It peeks

around a corner only to disappear behind a pole when we approach too quickly, too closely.

I am not ordinarily an indecisive person. Even if I feel some uncertainty about taking a particular direction, I can usually cut through the foggi-ness by using the standard discernment tools from my spiritual toolbox. I talk with trusted people who have wisdom and objectivity. I read and reflect on sacred texts. I pray faithfully—even tearfully—to the One who has the power to give illumination. I examine the circumstances and situations that are a part of the decision needing to be made. And, as a last resort, I take out pen and paper to begin the ubiquitous pro and con list.

At one point in my life, however, I felt keenly that a decision needed to be made, but I couldn't seem to gain any clarity about the way forward. I pursued discernment with the trained and focused eye of the most expert photographer, ready to capture the decision the moment it came across my viewfinder. I utilized the discernment tools from my spiritual toolbox with intention and receptivity, but years went by without the decision even peeking from behind a leafy tree. The longer I searched for it with no result, the more frustrated I became. I knew a decision needed to be made, but I couldn't see what it was. I felt it was my responsibility to do the discernment (notice the use of the verb *do*) so the decision would be cajoled out from behind the leafy tree. Simply giving attention and awareness to my everyday living didn't seem to be a faithful response when I felt so certain a decision was required.

One day I was lamenting—no, complaining—to my son about the elu-siveness of the decision and my frustration in the discernment process and he said, “Why don't you just keep doing what you're doing until it's time to do something else?” Ah, so there was the bigger truth. Just do what I was doing until it was time to do something else.

I began to realize that as long as I directed my discernment energy toward making a decision, I was missing living the life I had right then. The decision that I felt needed to be made would only emerge in the living of the life that I had—not in the life I imagined for myself, but one which had no edges. When my son's words descended into the dark, soft, open space of my soul, I was able to relax. It was as if I had just set ten bags of groceries on the kitchen counter and could finally sit down and breathe softly and fully. I stopped trying to ensnare a decision through the stalking techniques of discernment. Instead, I lived my life with two important intentions. First, I invited discernment into my life—to show up at dinner, at work, at prayer, at the movies, at the coffee bar, in sorrow and grief, in joy and contentment.

Secondly, I kept my eyes and heart open to notice her presence in the disparate moments of life and I tried to hear what she wanted to say to me in those moments.

In *The Alchemist* the popular writer, Paul Coelho, writes about the need to pay attention to the omens in our lives because they are often the signs that lead us to places we might not otherwise go. When it comes to discernment, such a way of being feels a little like consulting a psychic or engaging in some other nefarious necromancy. But, the word “omen” is allied to the Latin word “*audire*”—meaning, to hear. Omens are not metaphysical, new age, magical directions leading to buried treasure. Rather, they are the voice of God we can hear in the unfolding moments of our life. When we hold the moment in our mind—when we are concentrated and focused on it—we are able to hear what God might be trying to say to us. We are able to hear what God might be trying to reveal to us.

Living in the present moment has become a trendy way to think about mindfulness, a trendy way to think about living with awareness. But, the capacity for attentiveness is really about what we hold in our mind. An example of this might be how focused and concentrated we are when we know we need to pick up a loaf of bread on the way home from work. We hold the bread in our mind until we get to the store to purchase it. The Good News translation of Proverbs 4:23 says, “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.” The mind is limitless, and we may sometimes feel that we are hopeless and hapless victims of its whims. Mindfulness in its broader context helps us see that the power of our minds is also the power of our souls, that what we hold in our mind affects what we hold in our souls. When our mind is still, our soul can become still. When our mind is attentive and aware, our soul is attentive and aware.

The life of discernment is the way of this deeper sense of mindfulness. Clarity emerges from that life of discernment only when we hold our mind on something. When Jesus asked a blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Luke 18:41) the blind man didn’t need to go away to think about it, he didn’t need to ask his friends what would be best, he didn’t need to ask what Jesus meant, he didn’t need to make a list of the pluses and minuses. He answered immediately and with clarity. He said, “Let me see again.” (Luke 18:41) He was in the habit of practicing mindfulness. He held one thing in his mind—he wanted to see. And this made it possible for him to be clear in his heart and in his thoughts in the moment when he encountered Jesus.

One of the reasons that decision-making is so difficult is because we are easily caught in what I call discernment dualism. We believe that there is a right choice and a wrong choice and that we have to ferret out the right one so that the wrong one will be avoided. The very act of trying to weigh the positives and the negatives tends to lead us to making a decision that favors the side with the most positives. In truth, what may be the best decision is the one that seems to have the most negatives, because it is possible that the most long-term, life-giving, positive result may be achieved there. When we dally around in discernment dualism, we can't imagine how choosing the decision with the most negatives could ever turn out to be the best decision. When we shed our discernment dualism, letting go of the either/or tension, allowing discernment to be lived in the moments of our lives, we become less obsessed with right and wrong answers, right and wrong choices, right and wrong decisions, and become more aligned with the unfolding of life tinged with the touch of heaven.

Consider the story of Ruth. Had she been dancing with discernment dualism, she would probably never have left her country of Moab to follow her mother-in-law Naomi into Bethlehem. The only "positive" on Ruth's list for going with Naomi was that she loved and trusted her. The "negative" list was much more detailed. To follow Naomi, Ruth would have to leave her family, leave her faith, live among a people and culture that was unfamiliar and foreign to her, take on responsibility not only for herself but for Naomi as well. In other words, she had to choose to abandon the life she had, knowing she would probably never return to it.

By staying focused on the potential of the moment rather than on the past or the future, she was able to make a decision that allowed potential to flourish. God had more in mind for Ruth than she could ever have imagined. Certainly, God was abundantly able to transform the negatives into positives. This is the revelation that is as real as our own name. God always has more in mind for us than we can imagine, more than we would ever believe is possible, more than we could ever hope for or anticipate. The way to discover that "more" is to stand on that razor edge between the past and the future. It is to see what this moment is trying to tell us. The negatives are often vestiges of the past, and the positives are often our hopes for the future, but we have no certainty that what we believe to be a positive will remain so, or that a negative won't be transformed into something fulfilling beyond our wildest dreams.

This makes discernment a much more inclusive, all-embracing exercise than we might like it to be. It's much more manageable as an activity

that we take out of our spiritual toolbox when we're at a point of choice making. Living with discernment as a familiar, ever-present companion requires attention, awareness, hearing, reflection, processing, then more reflection, hearing, reflection, processing . . . It's counterintuitive because it's a lived prayer that is always slightly messy, but nonetheless leads us into a depth of being we could not have reached by relying only on the items in our toolbox. In this entwined relationship with discernment, the moments of our lives become full and potent. It is the way we hear in those moments, the voice of heaven calling us to re-direct ourselves, to re-imagine a way of being in the world, to re-new an older pattern in life, to re-lease an unhealthy habit. Ultimately, a life of discernment is a life of trust and it is most surely the way we incarnate the words from Proverbs: "It is your own face that you see reflected in the water; it is your own self that you see in your heart." (Proverbs 27:19) When our souls are brought into that place of stillness through a life of discernment, clarity and truth shine as clear as a full moon on a starless night.