

Practice: Approaching Discernment through Memory

Our memories preserve, along with many other things, a personalized record of moments in which God has blessed, supported and guided us throughout our lives. This prayer opens us to recall one or more moments of God's support and guidance related to our present decision. The connection between then and now may be subtle and require some pondering, so take your time, especially when you get to steps 5 and 6.

1. Prepare yourself to listen to the wisdom brought to you through your memory by becoming still—outside and inside. Gently noticing your breathing may help you come to a deep quiet. Take as much time as necessary to come to this place of quiet.
2. Offer this time of remembering to God. Ask God to speak to you through your memories, and tell God of your desire to be available to God through them.
3. As you think of the decision facing you, allow your memory to surface a particularly graced event or period in your life. The memory may but need not directly resemble the issue you face at this moment. Relive that event or period and remember it in all its textures.
4. Notice how God was "laboring" on your behalf during that time. Notice, too, how you responded. Remember the grace of the moment. Capture in your journal the highlights of the grace and your response.
5. Notice the similarities and contrasts between your experience then and your issue now. Record the salient points in your journal.
6. As you relive that graced moment in your past, examine what it suggests about the decision before you now, thanking God for God's constancy.

Israels

Practice: Approaching Discernment through Intuition

Accessing your intuition can be as simple as being quiet, patient, and welcoming. Your intuition may present hints about your call through images, sounds, colors, or other sensations registered in your body, in order to see the big picture, these clues need to be considered alongside those you receive from other entry points. Sometimes intuition offers a clear sense of exactly what's at stake and what you should do. Neither vague nor clear intuitions is better; they are just different. Welcome whatever comes, and then look at it in light of your desire to follow God's call as it unfolds.

1. Remind yourself that God can speak through your intuition. Offer to God this time of paying attention to the voice of your intuition. Ask specifically for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
2. Become quiet, inside and outside. Rhythmic breathing may assist you in stilling yourself. Take as much time as you need. Allow your consciousness to be open to your depths.
3. Wait in openness. Does some option, sensibility, or sensation arrive whole, delivered to you as if from another? Describe it in your journal and then proceed to step 4.

OR

Permit images to float freely (they may or may not be visual). Write them down as they come to you, returning to the silence after each one. When the images or the sensations seem to stop, proceed to the next step.

4. Does one sensibility or gut feeling or image seem to embody the decision you face better than others? Which one(s) has a rightness? a freshness? an energy?
5. In your journal, write about what options this sensibility or gut feeling might suggest to you. What does a tentative decision look like in light of your intuition?
6. Return to your desire to follow God's call. Speak with God about what emerges from this process. Record the outcome of this prayer in your journal.

In this chapter, I introduce the terms "felt sense" and "body sense." The phrases are interchangeable and refer to internal bodily awareness, literally, the body's registering a sense of a particular problem, situation, or experience. These sensations can be quite subtle and take some practice to notice and learn to interpret—or, like the headache I typically get when my computer breaks down, they can be glaringly obvious. Still, unless their revelatory power is taken seriously, the wisdom they offer goes unclaimed.

This entry point on the body follows intuition because they provide an interesting contrast to each other; however, there is no reason that you need to use them in this order for your discernment. But in whatever order you use the various entry points, do bring the results of all your previous prayer with you as you begin a new entry point. With each additional exercise, the information becomes richer, and eventually patterns will begin to form. Some things will fade in importance, while others grow in significance. All the while, you are listening to God's call as it comes through the various exercises.

Practice: Approaching Discernment through the Body

If your body could talk, what would it say to you about your discernment? This prayer sets up a dialogue between you and your body. The language your body will use is the sensations that arise as you do the exercise. I refer to these sensations as "felt sense" or "body sense." Does adrenalin hit your bloodstream and fill you with energy? Perhaps your stomach knots up. Your shoulders may tense up or relax; you may frown or smile. Are you filled with a sense of well-being or with a vague foreboding that locates itself somewhere in your body? These are examples of body senses. When, in step 5, the directions invite you into a dialogue with your body, you might say to your body, for example, "Would it feel different if I got someone to help me instead of trying to do it by myself?" We begin, as we do all discernment prayer, by renewing our desire to meet God through our discernment.

1. Prayerfully renew your desire to follow God's call. Ask God to let this desire itself be more important than any specific outcome. If at any time you find your spiritual freedom fading, return to this prayer. Repeat it as often as necessary to help you remain indifferent to any particular outcome.

2. Clear a space inside you. Allow yourself to become aware of your body, all its parts and organs. Notice the blood flowing and the muscles going about their work, your organs functioning without you attending to them.
3. While attentive to your body and its responses, present to it your discernment question in some detail and pay attention to everything that happens in your body as you do.
4. What do you sense in your body with respect to your question? What is the quality of the felt sense? Write it out in your journal in some detail.
5. Carry on a dialogue with your body about your discernment question. If your body sense shifts, follow where it takes you.
6. Ask this body sensation what message it might bring about a decision. Record any new awareness about a potential decision that comes through your body.
7. Return to your desire to follow God's call. Place your new awareness before God and notice what happens. Record this outcome, too.

THE BODY AS A SOURCE OF REVELATION

I believe the body is an avenue into the wisdom we seek in discernment, and that we can access wisdom coming through the body as part of our prayerful approach to decision making. I do not know, however, if you found this exercise easy or difficult. Both responses are common. On the positive side, I've had people say, "I was pretty skeptical about having a conversation with my body. It seemed so hokey. But I tried it, and, you know, it worked!" I've also heard, "I had no idea that my body had an opinion at all so I was quite surprised that there was a definite shift in my body as I posed different possibilities."

Perhaps you made some discoveries as a result of the exercise. Sometimes people register surprise that their body may not be in sync with their mind: "My body says the opposite from my head, and now I have

1. Renew your prayer for spiritual freedom, asking for the desire to follow God however God may call. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit through your imagination.

2. Center your attention by whatever means is useful for you. For example, take deep, rhythmic breaths or repeat a one- or two-word prayer and let it drift off into silence. Rest in the silence for a few moments.

3. Recall the situation or issue you are discerning. If more than one possibility has occurred to you, imagine how each of these alternatives could work out, one at a time. Let your imagination construct scenarios that do not yet exist.

OR

Visualize a possible scenario that could arise from your decision.

4. Now imagine yourself actually choosing what you imagined or visualized. Put yourself into that scene as an active participant. Notice what happens when you do. Write down the outcome.

5. Imagine yourself taking a different path. Write about what that path opens up.

6. Begin to assess the options by answering the following in your journal:

Which course of action flowed most freely?

Which one excited you the most?

Which seemed "right" to you?

Which has the most connection with your personal history?

7. As you imagine yourself following this freer, more right, and more integrated path, how does the option feel to you? What have you learned about your tentative decision? Offer this learning and your tentative decision back to God.

BEFRIENDING THE IMAGINATION

"I don't have any imagination, so I can't do this exercise." How often I hear that! It is surprising how many people believe they do not have any imagination. I used to think it of myself, having internalized this judg-

WORKING WITH A CENTRAL IMAGE

Another potentially helpful way we can employ imagination in the service of discernment is to work extensively with one image for the wisdom it contains about our direction. A core image may arise from the inner wisdom lodged deep within us and offer important pointers to major changes we are being invited to make. Like a raft floating from one shore to another, the image carries the wisdom from the unconscious to the conscious mind. The conscious mind can then ponder the image, unlocking the wisdom.

Elizabeth-Anne Vanek reminds us that the authentic image is real, not a fabrication but "a piece of life" that speaks to us about a particular experience, even a state of being. Images can come to us in a variety of ways, including during ordinary activities. They can surface in our dreams and fantasies, or while we're reading Scripture, listening to music, or watching a sunset, for example. We can invite them in our prayer. An image may be exciting, freighted with various emotions, puzzling, or even repulsive, but it also may very well contain something of significance to our lives. A core image is a creation of each unique person. It contains something already known deep within, a wisdom that cannot come from without.⁹ The following exercise may help you welcome and work with core images.

Practice: Image Guidance¹⁰

This exercise helps prepare you to receive an image from within, and then gives some simple steps to help you unpack its significance. If you already have an image, but want to unfold its significance for your discernment, use steps 1–2 and 6–9. If you are used to working with dreams, dream interpretation processes also work well for unpacking other images; use what is helpful to you.

1. Find a quiet, uncluttered place, a place where prayer comes easily and where you will not be disturbed. Make yourself comfortable. Mentally and emotionally free yourself from immediate demands and from the need to watch the clock.

2. Remind yourself of God's presence. Ask God to speak to you through your image work.

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3. Think about how your life has been going in terms of prayer, play, work, relationships. Spend some time sifting through where you are, perhaps reading over journal entries, or remembering significant encounters or recent events. The following questions, and others like them, may guide you in this review:
- Has anything unusual happened to me recently?
—Has anything shifted inside me?
—Have I experienced God calling me to something new at this time?
—Have any unusual gifts and graces come to me lately?
—Have I been restless or dissatisfied?
—Have old issues resurfaced or new ones come to the fore?
—Do I notice any patterns in terms of my attitudes and reactions?
—Is anything upsetting me?
—Is there an aspect of my life that I would like to change?
4. When you are in touch with your own emotional climate, do any images come to mind that reflect what you are feeling? If nothing surfaces, do not force anything.
5. Relax yourself through deep breathing. Let everything go from your surroundings and from inside your mind until it is like a blank screen.
6. Concentrate all your attention on your image, if you have one; think of nothing else. If no image has surfaced, simply wait, quietly, keeping your mind a blank screen until something appears.
7. Become a spectator; watch your image unfold without analyzing it or judging it. Be aware of how you are feeling as it shifts and develops.
8. Feel free to interact with your image. Ask it what it represents and why it has come to you at this time; ask it to reveal its wisdom to you. Listen for its answer. Even if it seems to answer in your own voice, trust the words that come, provided that they call you to life.
9. When you feel that the image has yielded its gift to you, thank it for what you have learned. Spend some time in silent prayer, conscious of your new awareness.

Practice: Three Imaginative Scenarios

1. Clarify the matter about which you are discerning. Bring it to mind as clearly and sharply as you can.
2. Remind yourself that the goal of life is the praise, reverence, and service of God. Ask God, as always, for the grace to desire what God desires on your behalf.
3. Ask God to speak through your imagination about what is the better option to choose.
4. Then, without rushing, consider each of the following scenarios in your imagination. Elaborate on them in writing, if you wish:
 - Imagine that you are a trusted advisor to another person who comes to you for advice about the decision facing you. Wanting the best for that person, what would you encourage that person to do?
 - Imagine yourself at the end of your life, looking back on it. From that vantage point, which path would you have wanted to take?
 - Imagine yourself at the Last Judgment. From that vantage point, how do you wish you have decided?
5. What do these imaginative scenarios say about the decision before you? Perhaps you are ready to make a tentative decision; perhaps you have simply received more data for your discernment process.
6. Conclude with a prayer of gratitude to God for the working of your imagination.

Each of these three imaginative scenarios can help highlight what is more pleasing to God, and thus, from a spiritual point of view, more conducive to your long-term and deep contentment and joy—two words Ignatius explicitly uses in describing these imaginative possibilities.

Imagination is a versatile tool to bring to discernment. You can imagine plausible outcomes, try them on in your imagination, and see how

Reason

to light, and step 4 offers a pause to note anything new that occurs to you. The crucial verb in this prayer is "weigh" (not "count"). In God's presence, weigh what you have written in each list and, at the conclusion, frame a tentative decision.

1. Prepare yourself to be in the presence of God. Renew your desire to follow God's call once it becomes clear to you.
2. If you haven't already done so, try to frame your discernment issue in the form of a simple question that can eventually be answered by yes or no.
3. Make two columns in your journal or on a piece of paper; label one "pro," the other "con." List in the pro column as many reasons as come to mind for your potential decision. In the con column, list reasons against proceeding in that direction.
4. Reflect on each list in turn, beginning with the cons. As you think of other pros or cons, add them to their respective lists.
5. Notice how the issue appears in light of your reflection. Write about what you notice.
6. Weigh the lists carefully, looking for significance over sheer numbers. In light of this weighing, frame a tentative decision.
7. Renew your desire to follow God's call. Now hold your tentative decision together with your desire to follow God's call. Notice what happens. Record it in your journal.

*pro/con
of doing*

*pro/con
of not doing*

SEEKING GOD WITH ONE'S MIND

~~✓~~ There is no one right way to enter into discernment. Western culture prizes rational processes to such an extent that many people equate knowing with the results of reasoning and ignore or downplay other kinds of knowing, such as through the body, intuition, imagination, and feelings. Each way of knowing offers different data to bring to discernment. Similarly, each process reveals some aspects of the issue you

1. Allow yourself to become aware of God's presence, God's love and care for you personally. Rest for as long as you wish in the sense of God's love. Renew your desire to follow God's call as it unfolds through your decision.
2. Review all the options you are considering, noting all the feelings they arouse in you. Record the feelings in your journal, taking care not to overlook ones that you don't like or that seem off-base.
3. If you were going to make a decision just on the basis of these feelings, toward what are you inclined? How do you feel about that possibility? Record these feelings as well.
4. Sit with the tentative decision that is forming, along with all its accompanying feelings, to see what it produces in you.
Does it produce consolation? a sense of increasing faith, hope, love, peace with God, others, and oneself? a rightness that is deeper than just feeling good?

OR

Do you sense desolation? a lessening of faith, hope, and love? restlessness, discouragement, heaviness, disinclination to proceed, a sense of wrongness? (God may indeed call us despite our fear or hopelessness or other negative feeling; if so, the sense of rightness will be deeper than the sense of discomfort.)

5. Revise your tentative decision based on this sense of consolation or desolation. Note in your journal your tentative decision and the inner movements that led to it.

BEFRIENDING FEELINGS

Approaching Discernment through Feelings invites us to notice our feelings, and then to focus on two, which Ignatius of Loyola named "consolation" and "desolation." But perhaps you don't know how you feel, on the one hand, or are overwhelmed with feelings and can't think straight on the other. Some context for using feelings in discernment may help with both responses.

The language of faith is, in large part, the language of feelings. Spir-

1. Go outside. Walk or sit in a place where you feel comfortable.
2. Seek, once again, the inner freedom to desire what God desires and follow it once it becomes clear.
3. As you walk or sit, notice your surroundings. Let your attention be drawn to something natural in the environment, living or non-living. Be present to it as completely as you can. Allow it to be just what it is without trying to change it or use it for your purposes.
4. In the presence of that natural object, restate the decision you are discerning, without describing it in detail or rehearsing its aspects. Simply let your discernment question be present alongside you as you ponder this natural object.
5. Wait, in the presence of this bit of nature, listening for what it might share with you. Note it in detail in your journal.
6. What does your experience of being present to the natural object suggest about your decision?
7. Bring any new awareness about your decision back to your desire to follow God's call. Notice what happens to your thoughts and feelings. Perhaps an image comes to you. Does your decision feel different from this perspective? Record in your journal any shifts.
8. Offer your tentative decision to God.

SHOULD A CHRISTIAN LOVE NATURE?

Some years ago, I read a short essay by theologian Sallie McFague entitled "Should a Christian Love Nature?"¹ It seems like a simple and straightforward question, easy to answer in the affirmative. But surprisingly, many Christians over our long history have not loved nature, and many still don't. Christianity's ambivalence about nature and its place in the spiritual life is not surprising, once one looks at the history of Christian thought.

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