

A photograph of a forest path, heavily overlaid with a light green color. The path is covered in small white flowers and leads into a dense forest of tall trees. The overall mood is serene and natural.

IS THAT YOU, GOD?

Cultivating  
Discernment as  
a Way of Life

BY LOIS A. LINDBLOOM

## SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

*The process of  
Paying prayerful attention  
To one's own life  
In order to be clearer about  
And more cooperative with  
God's activity.*

# Is That You, God?

In ancient Israel when Eli the priest was an old man, young Samuel served as his assistant and learned from Eli's experience. Samuel was alert to Eli's needs and responded quickly when he called for him. Eli, nearly blind, taught Samuel from his long years of service to God and the people.

One night Samuel heard someone calling him. He assumed the obvious: Eli needed him. But, Eli had not called. Even Eli did not immediately recognize the source of the call. When he did, he encouraged Samuel to pay attention and to willingly respond.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie

down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." – I Samuel 3:1-10 <sup>1</sup>

Few, if any of us, have heard God speak in an audible voice. In that regard it is difficult to identify with Samuel's story.

In other ways we may be able to stand in Samuel's shoes. Something awakens us, gets our attention, or breaks into our pattern of life. It may seem ordinary or unusual, expected or alarming. It may appear suddenly or gradually. Eventually, perhaps guided by the insight of another person, we begin to consider where God is in this part of our own story. We might ask, as I imagine Samuel did, "Is that you, God?"

# Cultivating Discernment

Much of my career as a psychologist in college counseling centers was invested in young adults who were sorting through the concerns that face college students. Who am I now that I did poorly in a class? Does my identity still include “good student”? How can I choose a major when I have strong interests and aptitudes in several areas? What if the occupational path I have imagined for myself is not what I really want to do? These questions always came in the middle of other issues—papers due, upcoming exams, the ending of a romantic relationship, concern for a roommate, parents losing a job or receiving a promotion or getting a divorce, an international study opportunity, a weekend party, financial strain, a world of injustice and war.

Currently, as a spiritual director, I primarily listen to folks who have moved through the young adult years into mid-life and beyond. People seeking spiritual direction invite me to join them in watching and listening for the presence of God in the complexity of their lives. They have experienced fulfillment and disappointment in their work and personal lives. They have used the gifts and talents developed in earlier years; they have discovered ways in which those are inadequate for this stage of life. They face challenges and opportunities unimagined in their youth. In spiritual direction, our goal is not to resolve particular issues. Our goal is discernment. My part is to be prayerful, to listen carefully, and to create an accepting atmosphere in which the person seeking the Spirit’s direction can become more aware of and responsive to God’s presence.

As I listen, I bring with me all that I learned with college students. I recall the questions that seemed to support their explorations and those that did not. As I listen, I am aware of the ways of discernment that have been helpful throughout my own life. As I listen, I am rooted in the Christian tradition, informed by the Scriptures and other resources that shape that tradition.

These words from Jeremiah describe for me the process of discernment:

Thus says the Lord:  
Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
And ask for the ancient paths,  
Where the good way lies;  
And walk in it,  
And find rest for your souls.

– Jeremiah 6:16

It is often at the crossroads of life that we are aware of the need to discern, to pay attention to our desire for God’s direction. A decision needs to be made; a loss occurs; something changes. It is at the crossroads that Jeremiah invites us to be aware of God’s presence with us, to take time to be there, to look carefully, to ask for guidance. Then, with the benefit of prayerful discernment, we are to “walk,” to respond, and also to notice where there is peace, freedom, and “rest for your souls.”

## *Thus says the Lord*

Jeremiah’s words declare at the outset that we are not alone. We stand at the crossroads of our lives in the presence of God. The Apostle Paul described God as the one “in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Jesus promised his followers they would not be alone when he left them. He said, “... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,

will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) The Spirit of God dwells within the human heart as a teacher and reminder of God’s way. We are not alone.

## *Stand at the crossroads*

The crossroads may need to be clarified. I often get involved in an idea, a dilemma, a concern that seems very important to me. As I stand or walk along the road, I entertain potential next steps, planning how I will choose to go. Then, in a quiet moment of prayer, my vision gets clearer, and I recognize that the decision with which I have been wrestling is not mine to make. Perhaps the issue is a choice in one of my children’s lives—their decision, not mine. Perhaps my attention has been kidnapped by a distraction that pulls me away from the core direction of my life in God. The issue about which I am fretting may be too small, unimportant.

The crossroads may present an external choice—to resign or to stay at a job, to leave or stay in a marriage which no longer seems alive, to leave or stay in a community of faith which is no longer nurturing one’s spiritual life. The choice could also be to find ways of approaching the same situation in a different way, to be open to the ways in which we may be changed in and through the situation. College students sometimes chose to transfer to a different college when dissatisfactions arose. Others chose to stay, gradually finding satisfaction in the college they had first selected.

Take time to be here at the crossroads. Sit down under a tree, in your prayer chair, by the ocean—in your imagination or for real. Go to that place where you have been most aware of God in the past. Spend time in prayer. Be alert to the information that is available to you. What do you notice in the inner landscape—thoughts, feelings, desires, memories? Watch and listen. Honor

your observations, perhaps by drawing or writing them down. Consider talking with someone you trust about what you see and hear and think and feel.

The discipline of spiritual direction is one spiritual practice that honors standing at the crossroads. Approximately once a month the participant who wishes to pay attention to the direction of the Spirit in his or her life meets with a spiritual director or in a spiritual direction group. The participant sets aside the hour and “shows up” to reflect upon the outer landscape and the inner landscape of her or his life. Together they ask, where is God in this part of life? What happens when you pray about it? What comes to you in that deep place where you are alone with God? What seems to come from the Spirit of God who teaches and reminds you of God’s way? What seems to come from some other source—family messages, cultural expectations, childhood patterns, personal willfulness?

## *And look*

Discernment requires comprehending clearly and perceiving differences. This is a process of collecting information and sorting and sifting it in light of one’s own life and desire for God. Here I draw from my experience with college students and other adults, as well as my own journey, to offer some tools of discernment. At any given crossroads, one or more of these may help us see more clearly the differences in the choices and in our own responses to them.

### **A. Look back from the future**

One way to become clearer about our own desires is to imagine looking back from a future time in our lives. A college student

anticipates going home for winter break. She feels uneasy about the visit. She wants it to be good. What would a “good visit” mean? The student might try imagining that she is on the plane, returning to school after three weeks at home. As she reflects on that time, she remembers what she did that she hoped to do. She recalls relating to her family and others in ways that honored herself, them, and their relationship. She gives thanks for those memories. She also notices what she does not see as contributions to a “good visit.” She considers what she might have done differently. In the loving presence of God, she allows her grief to be present and allows God’s love to embrace her. Imagining a “good visit” helps her to name her desires and perhaps to make those desires come to fruition during the actual upcoming trip to her home.

Ignatius of Loyola, writing on the subject of discernment in the 16th century, suggested imagining yourself looking back over your life from your death bed.<sup>2</sup> From that perspective, think about the part of life you are now living. How does the long view of your life inform the decisions you are now making? Do they seem congruent with your desire for God, with your best self in relation to God?

### **B. Try on the options**

When faced with more than one choice, it may be informative to live into each of them for a trial period of time. This can be done in the imagination by deciding to live for a few days as though the decision had already been made for option A. Then, try on option B for the same length of time. Notice what you learn about each pathway and your own reaction to it. This approach to discernment was also recommended by Ignatius of Loyola over four centuries ago.

College students often try on an occupational possibility in an internship. They volunteer or secure employment in the field which they wish to explore in order to learn more about it, their own aptitudes, and whether they like the work or not. Another version of this is “shadowing,” in which a student spends a few days following a person who is already immersed in a vocation, thereby observing a sample of what life is like in that line of work.

In my fifties I completed the Red Cross training and application to be a mental health support person for volunteer workers in disaster situations. I enjoyed the preparation and looked forward to being called to a national disaster site such as a hurricane or flood. One day I was walking past the fire station in a neighboring town just as the siren blew and the trucks rushed out to a fire. I tensed up and immediately thought, “I don’t want to go where they are going.” There was something about the reality of those trucks that helped me imagine myself in a situation of trauma and know I didn’t want to be there. All the classroom preparation, the videos, and the stories of other volunteers had not elicited this reaction. Somehow, the siren and the trucks brought me to a new level of understanding this path, and I withdrew my application from the Red Cross shortly thereafter.

### **C. Say “Yes” and “No”**

Whenever we say “Yes” to one thing, we say “No” to others. Conversely, when we say “No” to something, that makes room to say “Yes” to something else. Making our Yeses and Noes explicit can help us discern more clearly. If we say Yes to staying at work for an extra hour in the day we say No to something else—a walk, a relaxed meal with a friend, or helping with a community project. When we say Yes to giving, we say No to keeping; when we say Yes to complaining, we say No to gratitude; when we say

Yes to someone else's agenda, we may say No to our own inner voice. The problem is not that we have trouble saying No; the real question is to whom or to what do we say No? When we make the choices explicit, they may not be any easier, but they can be made in the light of more reality.

A professional in his early thirties reported that he often felt discouraged at conferences where he met others who did the kind of work he did. He compared his own career with their accomplishments. They had completed their advanced degrees; he had not. They had published articles; he had not. Returning home in the evening, he gradually recalled what he had chosen to do instead of what his colleagues had done. He had spent time with his ailing father in the last two years. He had coached his daughter's soccer team. He still felt grief about what he had not done, but for him naming and reaffirming the options to which he had said Yes also brought him peace.

When we are guided by a clear sense of who we are in God, listening to our life and paying attention to God's Spirit within us, our Yeses and Noes come from a deep place of knowing ourselves and trusting God's guidance from within. We may say No because we know what Yeses are to be said. We may also say No because there is no inner nudge toward a particular opportunity.

I have several friends who are involved in a remarkable international program. I affirm them as they live out their understanding of God's call to them. But, when they say directly or indirectly, "You should come...bring your gifts here...get involved..." there is nothing in me that wants to join them. I wonder if I am being stubborn or unwilling. Then I take comfort in the words of Thomas Kelly, a Quaker writer: "... when we say Yes or No to calls...we have no reason to give, except one—the will of God as we discern it."<sup>3</sup> Thus, I continue to say No to this opportunity

while saying Yes to the ones that fit who I am and seem to resonate with the promptings of the Spirit within me.

#### **D. In the fog, take note of what you do know**

The crossroads of change and choice can be a very confusing place. At times a fog rolls in and obscures our vision. We feel paralyzed, exhausted, frightened, alone. Our hopes are shattered. Instead of being able to look down various paths, we can scarcely see our own feet, much less a path. Our ability to think is constricted. Our energy is limited. The process of discernment is overthrown as we concentrate on just surviving.

For me, after my husband died suddenly there were times I was not sure I would survive. He was fifty-one; I was forty-nine. Our sons were sixteen and nineteen. In the days that followed his death, I saw myself standing on a dark, narrow, wet pathway with a deep precipice on either side. I held a flashlight that projected just enough dim light to illumine one step at a time. The steps were small. I would awaken in the morning and realize I had slept through the night. One step. It was eight o'clock. A friend had promised to come at nine. I could make it for one hour. One more step. My friend came for two hours. One more step. A card came in the mail with words of compassion and prayer. Another step. One moment I had a sense that God was caring for me through other people; another moment nothing made sense. Sometimes the precipice looked inviting, but, thankfully, only briefly.

When I got beyond the darkest days, all of my life seemed up for grabs. Nothing was clear; everything had changed. In agony I cried out, "What will I do now?" One day a voice from deep within me said, "Continue being your elderly mother's daughter and your sons' mother." From my perspective today, this seems so obvious. That day it was a word of clarity that cut through the

fog. No one else could be my sons' mother or my mother's younger daughter. This was a place to stand; I could see something, even though much fog remained.

As I listen to people whose pathway is "fogged in," I sometimes ask them to consider what they *do* know. In the middle of so much that is unsettled, what *is* in place? Is there any sense of God's presence? In spiritual direction, I occasionally ask, "As you listen to what you have said and thought during this hour, is there anything that seems clear to you?" I may offer what I have heard, thus echoing back to the person something she has expressed but might not have noticed. Together we name whatever we can see while also acknowledging the engulfing density of the fog.

#### **E. What would you say to your best friend?**

As we stand at the crossroads, we often talk to ourselves. The words are usually kept as internal thoughts, but speaking them aloud to another person can be clarifying.

Here are some of the things I have heard college students say to themselves: "You must never disappoint your parents." "If you don't get all A's you are a failure." "Your whole life depends on this one decision." When the students were asked, "Is that what you would say to your best friend if he or she were in your situation?" the response was usually "No!" Considering what we would say to a best friend can help us talk to ourselves with the kind of care we give to the people we love.

Here are some things I have heard folks in spiritual direction say to themselves: "You've messed up too badly to be forgiven this time." "You must not disappoint or upset anyone." A core question asked in spiritual direction is where is God in this? Does the message we are repeating to ourselves seem to have God's voice and character in it or some other source? Even when we don't

know precisely where God *is* present, asking these questions may be helpful in sorting out where God *is not*, which is also part of discernment.

#### **F. Is there another way of looking at it?**

Is there a gift in the pain of this experience? Is there a down side to this wonderful opportunity? Is there something I am not seeing?

Sometimes a casual comment from a friend or acquaintance or stranger catches our attention and helps us look at the crossroads from a different angle. At other times we may ask someone else to tell us how they see the situation. The purpose is not to give our process of discernment to another person but to help us stay alert and open to perspectives we alone may not be able to see.

In the Quaker tradition an individual or couple may call together a small group of trusted friends to form a "clearness committee." The person facing a decision describes the crossroads and what he knows about it while the group listens. Then, for two or three hours the members of the committee ask honest, open questions, inviting the focus person to explore the issues more deeply. The committee members do not give advice. Rather, through questions and listening, they help the person discern more and more of his own truth.<sup>4</sup>

#### **G. Remember other crossroads**

As you stand at the crossroads, consider the ways of discernment that have been part of your journey thus far. Think back to other crossroads in your life. Recall what seemed to help you pay attention, to look, to sort and sift the information. What wisdom do you bring with you from those times?

## *And ask for the ancient paths Where the good way lies*

The ancient paths of God's way have been looked for and followed throughout the centuries by pilgrims who have preceded us as well as by other pilgrims who now share the journey with us. For Christians, God's way is most clearly revealed in the life of Jesus and in God's presence and guidance in the people and writings of Scripture. The church and the individuals who form it reveal God's way even as we live out the brokenness of the human condition. As we look for God's way, these questions may point to the ancient paths, where the good way lies.

### **A. When reading Scripture, what word or words “shimmer” for you?**

In the ancient Benedictine monasteries, where the monks gathered each morning to hear the reading of a Psalm, the hearers were instructed to listen for the word or phrase that stood out for them, connected with them, seemed to be God's word for them. If no word “shimmered,” they chose a word. When each monk had received his word, he was to leave the room, return to his cell, and meditate on that word or phrase for the rest of the morning. The Psalm was read and reread until the room was empty. In the conversation called prayer, it was assumed that God spoke first and that the hearer's part was to listen and respond ever more deeply to how that word connected with his life. As the monk moved on to the rest of the day, the word could continue to direct him to God's way in his thoughts, choices, and relationships.

Psalm 23 is one text that has directed me to the ancient path of God's way. Holding a word or phrase from the Psalm for several

days or months, I have been nudged away from anxiety toward trust (“The Lord is my shepherd”) (“I shall not want”) (“I fear no evil, for you are with me”), through steps of healing (“he restores my soul”), to quiet moments of listening (“he leads me beside still waters”), into new places of vocation (“He leads me in right paths for his name's sake”).

When my friend was in the hospital facing the crossroads brought to her by leukemia and its threat to her life, I invited her to listen for God's word to her in Psalm 23. After hearing the Psalm she said simply and weakly, “comfort.” In the weeks that followed, she let me know she was holding that word and that God's comfort was sustaining her.

In addition to Scripture, that which “shimmers” may also come from a song, liturgy, nature, or the daily news.

What word or image catches your attention? What does it find in you? How does God meet you there?

### **B. Who may be your companions and guides in this part of your journey?**

At the crossroads of life, there is a sense in which the choices are ours alone. In other ways we are not alone. God's Spirit is with us as Teacher, Comforter, Light, Companion, and Guide. Other people are also with us—those whom we know, those whom we have known, those about whom we have heard or read, those who are available whom we have not yet met.

In my own darkest days of grief, my primary companions were people who were grieving with me and who cared about me. They stayed with me in my place of pain and loss. They did not try to minimize or explain away or find solutions for my condition. They helped to make Jesus' words believable to me: “And remember, I am with you always . . .” (Matthew 28:20)

Nearly fifty years earlier, around the time of my birth, my own father had faced a health crisis which left him physically handicapped for the rest of his life. Those who knew him said he “told God,” “If I can ever work again, I will not complain about anything.” In the twenty-eight years I knew him, he consistently lived with thankfulness for what he did have rather than bitterness or greed for what he did not have. He continues to be one of my guides.

During recent years, a frequent guide for me has been the boy who offered his lunch to Jesus and his disciples in the story known as “Feeding the Five Thousand.” (John 6:8-14) I imagine the youngster did not think his lunch of five loaves and two fish would make much difference in meeting the needs of the huge, hungry crowd. Still, he offered what he had. God meets me in this story when I am inclined to keep what I might share because I think it is not worth offering, especially when compared with someone else’s “lunch,” or because it won’t make much difference anyway. Again and again I am reminded that my part is to offer what I have and to trust God with the results.

A companion or guide may be someone who has walked a similar path, a friend, a therapist, a spiritual director, a small group. As you stand at the crossroads, who might be with you?

Think back to other crossroads in your life. Recall how you recognized the ancient paths where the good way lies. What Scripture was important to you? Who were your guides and companions? What wisdom do you bring with you from those times?

## *And walk in it*

Jeremiah’s words, “and walk in it,” remind us that the goal of discernment is not just insight. The goal is to cooperate with God’s activity in the world, to be instruments of peace, to live in the Truth, to say Yes to the stirrings of God’s Spirit within us, to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds and our neighbors as ourselves. (Matthew 22:37, 39)

## *And find rest for your souls*

The process of paying prayerful attention to our own lives in order to be clearer about and more cooperative with God’s activity is never completely clear. It occurs in the middle of the busyness and pressures of our daily lives. Our personal paths are intertwined with the complex web of other individuals, groups, and the systems we form. Sometimes we are quite sure we are willingly saying Yes to God. Sometimes we are clearly saying Yes to some other path. Often we are not sure which path we are walking. Meanwhile, whole systems of which we are a part may seem to be saying No to God’s way.

Jeremiah’s words suggest that when we walk in God’s way there will be rest in the core of our being. Love replaces fear. The urge to compare ourselves to others—better or worse—is melted into humility in the presence of God’s love for all. There is freedom to see our own brokenness and giftedness, to accept forgiveness and to forgive. At home in God, we begin to see ourselves and the world more and more from Love’s perspective. Our sources of joy and sorrow become those which gladden and break the heart of the Holy.

# A Way of Life

The ancient practice of the *examen* can help us notice when the core of our being is or is not centered in Love. The *examen* is another way of paying prayerful attention to one's own life in relation to God. It guides our attention in two directions.

First ask, for what moment today am I most grateful? Where did I experience the most life today? Where did I notice something of God—in myself or outside myself? For these, thank God.

Then ask, for what moment today am I least grateful? What diminished life? Where did I notice myself and others turning away from God? For these, pray for help.<sup>5</sup>

The *examen* takes just a few minutes and can be done nearly anywhere.

The late Henri Nouwen's biographer, Michael Ford, wrote that Nouwen was greatly influenced by *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the story of the Jesus Prayer. The book describes a peasant who walked through the countryside of Ukraine repeating the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Ford wrote, "The prayer gradually moved from his lips to his heart until it had become one with his breathing. Wherever the peasant went, he radiated love and goodness and saw how people's lives changed through meeting him."<sup>6</sup>

The practice of repeating the Jesus Prayer began with something he did, perhaps only occasionally at first. Gradually it became a way of life and steadily transformed him from within. From there, it began to transform the world around him.

Our discernment practices may begin at specific crossroads in our lives. Like the Jesus Prayer, the practice of discernment can also become a way of life. We say Yes to God's loving, transforming presence in the unique persons we are. With other companions and guides we radiate God's loving, transforming power in the world around us. This is how Love changes the world.

# Endnotes

- 1 All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
- 2 Anthony Mottolla, Tr., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (New York: Image Books, 1989), 86.
- 3 Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), 124.
- 4 Parker J. Palmer, “The Clearness Committee: A Way of Discernment” in *Weavings* (Vol. III, No. 4, 1988), 37-40.
- 5 The daily *examen* is described further in these two resources:  
  
Richard Foster, “The Prayer of the Examen” in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 27-35.  
  
Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1995).
- 6 Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 11.

## Acknowledgments and Credits

Thanks to Carla Dahl, Rune Engebretsen, and Pam Schwandt for editorial contributions to this project.

Cover photo by Lois A. Lindbloom: The Green Road, County Wicklow, Ireland.

Design and production by Nancy Ashmore, Ashmore Ink, Northfield, MN, [www.ashmoreink.com](http://www.ashmoreink.com).

---

Published October 2004, Northfield, Minnesota USA

Lois Lindbloom practices spiritual direction in Northfield and Minneapolis, Minn. Her writings have appeared in “Shalem News,” *Presence* (An International Journal of Spiritual Direction), and *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press, 2003).

Email: [lalindbloom@earthlink.net](mailto:lalindbloom@earthlink.net)