

selves whether our feelings are being taken into account? Or do we say to ourselves: "Let's be objective; stick to the facts and keep feelings out of this!" Women's liberation has also happily liberated men. When feelings and hunches were once denigrated as merely women's intuition—not a solid basis for making decisions—everyone lost a potentially important resource. Ignoring feelings simply makes them go underground and operate outside of reasonable control, undermining the decisions in which they were given no say. On the other hand, we need to ask ourselves whether or not we allow our feelings to drown out the other voices in that inner wisdom circle. Either case—refusing to give feelings their say or letting feelings dominate—makes for poor discernment. The proper function of reflection is not the suppression of spontaneity, wants, and feelings, but rather the liberation of wants and feelings from impulsive reactions to immediate stimuli.

THE DISCERNING HEART
WILLIE AJ + NOREEN CANNON AU

III.

SPIRIT-LED IN MANY WAYS

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

—John 3:8



THE HEART OF DISCERNMENT is being in tune with the Spirit of God in our choices and actions. This core notion of discernment stems from the earliest understanding in Christianity about what constitutes the spiritual person. In the letters of Paul, the spiritual person is viewed as one who is sensitive and docile to the promptings of the Spirit in the ordinary context of life. Paul called such people "spiritual" or *pneumatikos*, a word he coined from the Greek word *pneuma*, meaning "spirit."¹ This Pauline understanding squares solidly with what is amply illustrated in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. For Luke, the Holy Spirit is the gift par excellence that God bestows on believers (Luke 11:13). The Spirit fills and animates holy people like Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist (Luke 1:41, 67), and sways the Baptizer's own life "even before his birth" (Luke 1:15). Jesus is conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35) and is himself filled with the Spirit, who leads him into the desert (Luke 4:1). In Acts, the Spirit's activity remains prominent: the Spirit

empowers the disciples to preach the gospel (Acts 2:1-17), guides the emerging church in expanding its mission (15:28), and directs the missionaries on their journeys (16:6-7). Acts illustrates how God relies on the disciples to embody the real, though imperceptible, presence of the risen Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus is given flesh and blood reality in the lives of his disciples: in Peter, who cures the paralytic at the Temple gate called Beautiful (3:1-10), and in Stephen, who prays that those putting him to death will be forgiven (7:60). Peter's cure of the lame beggar and Stephen's prayer of forgiveness both trigger vivid memories of Jesus' own words and actions. In this way they convey the Lukan theme that the Spirit of Jesus continues to be active in history—but now embodied in the lives of his disciples. In short, faithful followers of Jesus are those who are led by the Spirit.

A WIDE VIEW OF HOW SPIRIT LEADS

In her research on spiritual discernment, psychotherapist and spiritual director Nancy Reeves narrates the discernment stories of seventy-eight people (fifty-seven based on her own interviews and the rest taken from published works). Based on what she discovered in her survey of the discernment practices of a broad range of believers of various faith traditions, she argues for the need to approach discernment with "a wider vision" of the diverse ways our lives can be influenced by God:

Some of the discernment methods presented here will remind you of your own graced history. Others may intrigue you or invite you to sample them. A few may seem so foreign or weird that it seems unimaginable

how they could be valid. But an infinite God can contact us in unlimited ways.²

A sampling of what Reeves discovered in her study concretely illustrates her conclusion that God leads people with different strings of love.

In the story of Tanya, Reeves illustrates how someone was led to honor the wisdom of her body, more specifically, her sexual energy. Tanya started off by saying that God speaks to her in many ways such as devotional reading, other people, dreams, and so on. Then she went on to describe an intense religious experience that revealed to her a new way of detecting God's lead. At a time in her life when she was not feeling her sexuality very strongly, she woke up around 3:30 in the morning feeling surprisingly intense sexual arousal. Finding this experience strange and disturbing, she initially suspected that her body was acting up to expose how unspiritual she really was. But when she took these uncomfortable feelings to prayer with the hope of receiving some divine illumination, she found an astonishing thing: "The more receptive to God I became, the stronger the sexual feelings grew." With her image of herself as a spiritual being above all "animal urges" threatened, she felt miserable, though strangely her body "was zinging with life and energy." The sexual sensations continued through the morning. She was embarrassed about feeling so sexual and felt ambivalent about keeping her afternoon spiritual-direction appointment. She wondered to herself how her spiritual director, a celibate nun, could provide any help. In the end, she kept her appointment, thinking that perhaps Sister Jo might be the best person to talk to after all, since she must have had experience of getting rid of sexual feelings:

When Sister Jo and I met, I looked at her welcoming face and felt my own face turning red. How could I start? I said, "God is very creative." She nodded and waited. "I mean, really, creative." She waited. "And, um, very, kind of, sexual." "Ah," she responded quite matter of factly. "Are you having experiences of making love to Jesus?" "Oh no!" I replied with horror. (Pause) "It feels like the Holy Spirit. And we're not making love. I just feel this intense sexuality and the more I open to God, the stronger it gets."

Following an explanation of how the mystical tradition of Christianity tells of men and women having similar experiences, Sister Jo encouraged Tanya to be open to enjoying God in this way. Even with her spiritual director's support, it took Tanya months "to become easy with this aspect of Holy Mystery." Reflecting on what she has learned about discernment, Tanya comments:

My body is often more truthful about a need than my mind is. I saw how I was judging my body. I thought the way to God was through my heart and mind.... Then I realized that God wanted me to use this sexual energy for discernment.... When I ask for direction, and hold various choices in my heart and mind, there will often be more sexual energy around one of them.

Reeves concludes the story of Tanya by citing psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May, who says in his *The Awakened Heart*, "Sometimes [God's Love] is felt and expressed in ways that are undeniably sexual: yearning, embracing, excitement, fulfillment, and resting so deep and physical that one can never again doubt the fullness of divine incarnation."³

In relating the story of Adele, Reeves illustrates how physical disability has gracefully introduced a new way for Adele

to experience God's lead. When driving on a mountain road, Adele had a car accident that has permanently changed her life. She was unconscious for some time, and she suffered extensive physical damage. While newly invented surgical procedures saved her life and partially restored her ability to walk, the head injury she sustained greatly affected her mental capacity. She experiences extreme fatigue and struggles with concentration, abstract thinking, short-term memory, and understanding in general:

Before the accident, if I wasn't sure whether the Lord wanted me to go with "A" or "B," I would hold each in my mind and wait to see which was accompanied by a feeling of deep peace and "rightness." That's the one I'd go with. Now I can't keep the thoughts in mind long enough to get an answer. I often forget what the question is.

Faced with the reality of her impaired state, Adele "wondered how I would know God's will since the old discernment way did not work." A woman of deep faith, she was grateful to discover a new personal way of discerning:

One day, to help me remember, I held out my hands, palm up, and said, "Lord, 'A' is in my right hand and 'B' is in my left. Which do you want me to do?" And you know what? One hand heated up! It is so clear which way to go. I do that frequently now. Sometimes the answer comes immediately and sometimes I have to wait for awhile. For me, now, it has to be clear and concrete.⁴

Two more stories related by Reeves serve well to stretch our understanding of the multiplicity of ways in which individuals experience God's guidance. At a discernment workshop conducted by Dr. Reeves, a woman named Candace

spoke of a time when she was "sunk deep" in contemplative prayer:

Candace experienced a "rich, refreshing" taste in her mouth. This taste recurred quite frequently, at first in prayer and then during her daily life. She knew this taste was of God. One day, she was trying to decide between two options that seemed equally appealing and beneficial to her. As she thought of one, she experienced the taste. When she thought of the other, it disappeared. Candace took this as a sign to start down the first path.

In a similar way a woman named Laura shared how she felt God's guidance through her physical sensations:

Since I was a little child, I have had a physical sensation of the Holy. God speaks to me in a combination of sensation and awareness. I know the path God wants me to take when I experience a marvelous enlightening feeling that makes my body seem larger. Frequently, there is an electric current that starts at my feet and radiates through my body. This is accompanied by an awareness that I feel in my heart. This discernment is most common for me in nature.

Long accustomed to finding God's guidance through traditional church structures and activities, Laura felt a shift:

I felt the divine calling to me in every place *but* the church. I was being called out and away. But called to what?...Increasingly, I was aware of the sacredness of the beach, of all creation. Experiencing God potently in everything and every moment. I realized that I had been focused too much on God in formalized worship within a particular building.⁵

Reeves's research findings verify what spiritual teachers have long intuited: life is laced with grace, and we need to be open in diverse ways to the mysterious epiphanies of God everywhere. "Most of the people I interviewed," states Reeves, "stressed that their story of discernment was only *one* way that they were called to understand God's will for them. As they became more aware of their constant, 'hands-on' relationship with the All, they found guidance occurring more often and in many different ways."⁶ God attracts some people through the beauty of nature or the wonders of creation. Others feel the allurements of God in the emotional stirrings of their hearts or the penetrating insights of their minds. Music, mandalas, physical movement, and stillness are yet other ways that heighten people's sensitivity to God's ineffable presence.

THE THEORY OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

When we speak of God's immanence, we acknowledge that the Spirit of God pervades the whole universe and can direct our choices through the ordinary human ways that we come to know. Psychologist Howard Gardner has proposed an understanding of human intelligence that provides some cognitive basis for the wide variety of ways that Reeves's interviewees report discerning the direction of the Spirit in their lives. According to Gardner, all human beings are smart in at least seven different ways:

Multiple intelligence theory posits a small set of human intellectual potentials, perhaps as few as seven in number, of which all individuals are capable by virtue of their membership in the human species. Owing to heredity, early training, or, in all probability, a constant interaction between these factors, some

individuals will develop certain intelligences far more than others; but every normal individual should develop each intelligence to some extent, given but a modest opportunity to do so.⁷

Viewed theologically, Gardner's theory tells us that human beings are gifted by the Creator with at least seven different ways of knowing.

Challenging our ingrained views that make intelligence synonymous with linguistically mediated thought, Gardner lists the following seven different types of intelligence:

1. Linguistic
2. Logical-mathematical
3. Bodily-kinesthetic
4. Spatial
5. Musical
6. Interpersonal
7. Intra-personal

In general, the standardized tests we administer to measure intelligence and aptitude for college and postgraduate studies mainly test for verbal and math skills. These measurements only reflect linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. One might assume from these tests that human intelligence is reducible to those two ways of knowing. Gardner challenges this long-held assumption and calls us to reclaim and revalue the many other ways that human beings can be smart. People who are more bodily-kinesthetically oriented in their learning, for example, process knowledge through bodily sensation. Those who are spatial learners think in images and pictures. Music-oriented learners possess a keen awareness of sounds and are often discriminating listeners. Interpersonal learners are sharply aware of their emotional environment and read people's feelings

and intentions well. Intra-personal learners possess a keen facility to monitor their inner life.

In a technological society that so often equates intelligence with analytic and linguistic competence, we tend not to recognize that people are smart in many other ways. Martha Graham, the famous modern dancer, once observed: "I have often remarked on the extreme difficulty of having any kind of conversation with most dancers which has any kind of logical cohesiveness—their minds just jump around (maybe like my body)—the logic—such as it is—occurs on the level of motor activity."⁸ Nevertheless, the intelligence of superb dancers is undeniable when we consider how executing a dance movement precisely entails complex skills regarding placement, stage spacing, the quality of a leap, and the softness of the foot.

Actors, too, exhibit intelligence in their ability to observe carefully and then to re-create scenes in detail. Acting teacher Richard Boleslavsky highlights the peculiar intelligence required of actors when he says: "The gift of observation must be cultivated in every part of your body, not only in your sight and memory.... Everything registers anatomically somewhere in my brain and through the practice of recalling and reenacting, I am ten times as alert as I was."⁹ The kind of intelligence possessed by athletes often goes unappreciated when their excellent performance is casually attributed to bodily endowment alone. Yet, many intellectual strengths contribute to the success of talented athletes, such as the logical ability to devise a good strategy, the ability to recognize familiar spatial patterns and to exploit them on the spot, and an interpersonal perceptiveness about the personalities and intentions of other players in the game.¹⁰

Interpersonal and intra-personal intelligences are often given short shrift in our society. Yet these intellectual com-

petences are critical to satisfying relationships and personal well-being. As described by Gardner, people's interpersonal intelligence enables them to read the intentions and desires—even hidden ones—of others and to act upon this knowledge. Religious and political leaders, skilled parents, teachers, and helping professionals commonly possess a high degree of interpersonal intelligence. Intra-personal or intra-psychic intelligence allows people to have access to their own feeling life with its range of affects or emotions. Intra-personally intelligent people are able to discriminate among their feelings, name them, and communicate them. This form of intelligence is evident in people such as writers, who can write introspectively about feelings; actors, who can access the feelings and emotions a role demands; and wise mentors, who can tap into their own rich reservoir of inner experiences to guide others.

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AND DISCERNMENT

Not surprisingly, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has led some educational reformers to devise pedagogical methods aimed at playing to each student's strength or natural way of processing, and thus enhance learning. "In my view," argues Gardner, "it should be possible to identify an individual's intellectual profile (or proclivities) at an early age and then draw upon this knowledge to enhance that person's educational opportunities and options."¹¹ When applied to the process of spiritual development and discernment skills, Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences encourages us to recognize and foster people's personal, and often idiosyncratic, ways of connecting with God and divine guidance. Analogous to its application to educational reform, multiple-intelligence theory applied to spiri-

tual formation calls us to respect the personal and unique ways each of us detects the presence and influence of God. We need to take seriously our own spiritual profile or proclivities, that is, our natural "bent" in knowing spiritually what God wants of us. By doing so, we can strengthen our proficiency in discerning.

WISDOM OF THE BODY

Gardner's kinesthetic-bodily intelligence is perhaps another way of speaking about what is commonly referred to as the "wisdom of the body." In his book *Focusing*, Eugene Gendlin introduced a technique for "unlocking the wisdom of the body" by focusing on a kind of bodily awareness he calls "felt sense." A felt sense is a physical experience, not a mental one, according to Gendlin. It is "a bodily awareness of a situation or person or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about the given subject at a given time—encompassing it and communicating it to you all at once rather than detail by detail."¹² Gendlin's felt sense is similar to what is popularly referred to as intuition, an inner grasp or insight into the nature of some reality without detailed analysis. Some of the people interviewed by Reeves come to mind (for example, Adele, Candace, and Laura), when Gendlin further describes a felt sense as "a kind of taste, if you like, or a great musical chord that makes you feel a powerful impact, a big round unclear feeling. A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling."¹³ Sometimes used in spiritual direction, the focusing skill developed by Gendlin is a way of accessing the intelligence stored in the body. "The body is like a biologi-

cal computer," he states, "generating these enormous collections of data and delivering them to you instantaneously when you call them up or when they are called up by some external event."¹⁴

For Gendlin and others the body is viewed as an indwelling intelligence with its own remarkable sense of rightness and acute feeling for enlivening solutions. Gestalt therapy, for example, views bodily expressions as "truth buttons" that reveal the intrinsic wisdom of the organism. That is why Gestalt therapists make body awareness a central focus in their work with clients. In their clinical practice these therapists regularly take note of perceived discrepancies between their patients' verbal language and their body language. They ask:

Are they the same voice? Is the message unified? Or is there a split between what the person says with his mouth and what he says with the rest of himself? This splitting, when it is present, is a factor in the total crisis situation; and if the person fails to understand what the many levels of the organism express, he may remain the proverbial house divided—he fails to make peace with himself.¹⁵

Gestalt therapists aim to expand awareness so that their clients can become more "response-able," that is, able to make life-giving choices in the concrete circumstances of their lives. Their focus on body awareness stems from the belief that our body often reveals what our words conceal. One way of expanding awareness is by breaking down various forms of conditioned behavior, sometimes called hypnotic states or, according to Fritz Perls, "the state of dreaming." One form of these hypnotic states, Vincent F. O'Connell writes, is the "hypnosis of the spoken word":

This conditioned behavior is present when the person fails to realize that his verbal language may not be empirical fact, but mere verbalism.... The person creates for himself a "verbal world," which is to say a world of words and sounds in which the musical note of the organism is heard faintly, or not at all. When that is one of his hypnotic states, we need to jog his other senses, even to force him sometimes to be silent so that he can begin to hear once again the more central note of the organism.¹⁶

A personal experience illustrates well how the body can quickly point out a liberating truth that the mind was for months reluctant to accept. In 1972, a year before completing my doctoral work at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I agreed to my Jesuit superior's plan to assign me to Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose to serve as an assistant principal for curriculum and faculty development. Though my superior offered other options, I thought that working to bring about creative educational changes at Bellarmine was what I wanted to do and should do. About six months before the date scheduled for my official arrival, I visited the school, met the faculty, and saw my new office. During the course of that day of orientation, I noticed that my back got increasingly tight; by mid-afternoon it was in a painful knot. My aching back signaled a problem and led eventually to my "backing out." This sudden turn of events came as a big surprise, not only to those who counted on me, but also to me, because I had, until then, a reputation for being steady and dependable.

Months of previous conversations and correspondence contained no hint that going to Bellarmine would be problematic for me. It was my aching back that finally forced me to face the truth that I did not want a career in secondary school administration. Clearly, my verbal language and

body language were saying different things! Reflecting on what led to such a flawed discernment, I was able to identify two factors: one, an unconscious guilt stemming from my enjoyment of doctoral studies in the luxurious surroundings of Santa Barbara, while five of my newly ordained Jesuit classmates toiled tirelessly in our high school two hours away in the inner city of Los Angeles; two, my unconscious tendency to please authority figures. In retrospect, that painful and embarrassing no was graceful in that it freed me to say yes to a more life-giving ministry in the spiritual formation of Jesuits and yes to an emerging self that was autonomous enough to withstand the disapproval of others.

LETTING THE BODY CHOOSE

Sometimes the mind can so entangle us in analyzing options that long periods of deliberation can muddle rather than clarify our choice. A sophistic chorus of inner voices seems to argue effectively for each of the alternatives before us. At such times, calling for clarification from the body can be beneficial. A technique used both in spiritual direction and psychotherapy entails letting our body choose. It is often used after months, possibly years, of talking that has not led to a clear choice. The process is quite simple: First, clients are asked to visualize different points in the office as representing each of the options that are under consideration. For example, the door might represent option A; the desk, option B; and the floor lamp, option C. Clients are then given ten seconds to choose by walking to the place representing their final decision. No matter what they do, the results are always illuminating. For example, some people will immediately bolt out of the chair and walk directly, without hesitation, to the place represent-

ing their preference. They surprise themselves by knowing exactly what they want, even though their words have consistently expressed confusion and ambivalence. Others might find themselves, by the end of the count, pulled, for example, between options A and C. While no definitive answer has come to them, the exercise has narrowed the focus of discernment by eliminating option B. If, as sometimes happens, clients find themselves paralyzed and unable to get out of the chair, we know that an impasse has been reached and further work is necessary to uncover its meaning.

While famous philosophers and writers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence have acclaimed bodily wisdom, it is also common to hear testimonials to the wisdom of the body in ordinary life. A spiritual directee in the midst of discerning whether to take on a new position of responsibility, for example, said:

In my body, my experience of this yes was very different than other times in my life. I had a keen awareness during the final days of this discernment of my body's energy. I could recognize with certainty where I felt positive energy, and where the energy felt depleted or absent. I became confident that my experience of that vitality was what would lead me to my best decision. I decided I would not say yes unless I felt it.

Another example of reliance on bodily wisdom comes from a graduate student reflecting on a recent decision regarding purchasing a home. His account makes clear how awareness of his body guided him in the process:

After we placed an offer on the home we thought we wanted, I experienced a sick feeling in my stomach—especially in the mornings—that made it difficult for me even to eat. I am familiar with this sick feeling in

my stomach. I experience it when I am dealing with something difficult or stressful. I also experienced a lack of creativity and a preoccupied mind during the time when we were waiting to see if the offer on this home would be accepted or rejected. When my wife and I decided to remove our offer on the above mentioned home and place an offer on a different home, the discomfort in my stomach went away immediately. Also, my creativity returned immediately. I was able to accomplish in a five-hour afternoon the work I had been trying to do continuously for one week with no results. It appears that I was feeling desolation about the first home and consolation about the second home.

These examples are popularly referred to as gut feelings. Based on their own past experiences, many people have come to trust the reliability of these gut feelings in guiding their discernment.

GUT FEELINGS AND THE BRAIN

The work of Antonio Damasio, M.D., professor of neurology at the University of Iowa School of Medicine, has suggested a clear neurological explanation of the nature of our gut feelings. In his book *Descartes' Error*, Damasio shows how bodily states and emotions are indispensable to our rational decision-making process. He builds his theory around the idea of somatic or bodily markers, which are like marked cards buried in a deck. These markers take the shape of bodily responses such as our gut tightening in fear, our back knotting up in anxiety, or our chest warming in contentment. Events that trigger such intense bodily reactions are encoded in positive or negative memories that affect our intuitive responses to everyday situations, though

they are largely subliminal. When confronting decisions, the emotional brain flags specific options as desirable or repulsive based on information retained in the brain from past emotional experiences. By doing so, it enables us to narrow down the possible options in any given situation. In other words, bodily states and emotions become associated with certain outcomes and thus influence our decisions. In this way somatic markers steer us toward a certain decision.

Damasio first recognized the importance of emotion in decision-making when working with patients whose emotional centers had been damaged by strokes, accidents, or tumors. For example, patients with frontal lobe damage failed to generate the normal skin conductance responses in reacting to emotional slides.¹⁷ According to Damasio, "All these people shared one common trait: their emotions were compromised.... They were flattened, compared to the way they used to be, and compared to what we normally expect from people. Social emotions—shame, embarrassment—were specifically compromised."¹⁸ Damasio suspected that his patients' inability to be emotional was getting in the way of their reasoning. Despite their intact intelligence, these patients made disastrous personal and professional decisions. They obsessed endlessly over simple everyday decisions because they had lost access to their emotional learning; those emotional likes and dislikes acquired over the course of one's experience and stored in the brain's memory; "the patients were not making use of the emotion-related experience they had accumulated in their lifetime."¹⁹ Damasio states:

Decisions made in these emotion-impooverished circumstances led to erratic or downright negative results, especially so in terms of future consequences.... Choosing a career, deciding whether to

marry, or launching a new business are examples of decisions whose outcomes are uncertain, regardless of how carefully prepared one may be when the decision is made. Typically one has to choose among conflicting options, and emotions and feelings come in handy in those circumstances.²⁰

In other words, instinctual emotional responses support efficient rational choice. Without these gut feelings, patients were prone to get caught up in endless cycles of analysis, mentally weighing infinite lists of pros and cons. "It's not that I'm saying the emotions decide things *for* you. It's that the emotions help you concentrate on the right decision."²¹ For Damasio, our gut feelings do not substitute for proper reasoning but have an important auxiliary function that increases "the efficiency of the reasoning process" and makes it speedier. "On occasion," he states, "it may make the reasoning process almost superfluous, such as when we immediately reject an option that would lead to certain disaster, or, on the contrary, we jump to a good opportunity based on a high probability of success."²²

THE IMAGINATION AND DISCERNMENT

Besides affirming the value of kinaesthetic-bodily intelligence, the notion of multiple intelligences invites us to value the importance and usefulness of the imagination in discernment. "There is no life of the spirit without imagination," state Ann and Barry Ulanov, "yet people constantly belittle or trivialize it.... Properly understood and pursued, the imagination is perhaps our most reliable way of bringing the world of the unconscious into some degree of consciousness and our best means of corresponding with the graces offered us in the life of the spirit."²³ Written in the

early 1920s, Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* captures how the imagination as a source of useful knowledge has long been regarded with suspicion:

- Robert: What did you mean when you said that St. Catherine and St. Margaret talked to you every day?
 Joan: They do.
 Robert: What are they like?
 Joan: (suddenly obstinate) I will tell nothing about that; they have not given me leave.
 Robert: But you actually see them; and they talk to you just as I am talking to you?
 Joan: No; it is quite different. I cannot tell you: you must not talk to me about my voices.
 Robert: How do you mean voices?
 Joan: I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.
 Robert: They come from your imagination.
 Joan: Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.²⁴

While most people readily agree that the imagination contributes richly to the arts, its possible contribution to the weightier matters of human affairs is generally discounted. American society has seemingly exiled the imagination to Disneyland and Hollywood and excluded its role in the serious business of decision-making in the real world.

The imagination has long been undervalued in decision-making. As children growing up, we often heard our parents and teachers telling us how important it is to "think ahead" when making decisions. While reason and foresight are valuable ways of anticipating possible consequences of our choices, the use of reason is only one means. Besides

reason, imagination has a great part to play in foreseeing the consequences of actions, and imagination can powerfully support reason in the process. Visualizing how various courses of action might end up is much more useful than merely thinking abstractly about it. Thinking only involves our head. Fantasizing, as a serious exercise in awareness, calls for inserting our whole self into a situation. By doing this, we can actually *experience ahead of time* the possible consequences of an act. For example, when considering the question of whether or not to have a certain kind of surgery done, it is important not only to *think* about the biological, sexual, and interpersonal consequences that such an operation might have, but also to anticipate, in a "head, heart, and gut" way, what subjective responses these consequences might evoke in us and in others. What effect would such an act have on our feelings and sense of self? Through the imagination we can live out, in fantasy, the various consequences of choice.

If the imagination can be helpful in discernment, we might ask ourselves whether our fantasies, daydreams, and nocturnal dreams are given a voice in our inner wisdom circle. In his autobiography Ignatius of Loyola recounts how he was able to discern God's will for his life by paying careful attention to his daydreams. He discovered that after daydreams of doing chivalrous deeds for a noble lady whose love he would win, he felt excited, hopeful, and uplifted. Then, when dreaming of imitating such saints as Saint Francis and Saint Dominic in selflessly serving God, he felt similarly inspired, motivated, and uplifted. But after a while, he noticed a psychic shift occurring. The positive feelings that once encircled his secular fantasy of knightly gallantry evaporated like dry ice, but the positive feelings surrounding his saintly ambitions remained strong and compelling. Dreaming of outdoing the saints ultimately fueled his conversion

and energized his new life of service to God. By engaging his imagination and attending to the affective aftermath of his fantasies, he acquired his first lesson in what he was later to call discernment of spirits. Similarly, when struggling with choices, we might look at our own daydreams and ask how we feel at the end of them. Are we bored and empty, or hopeful and encouraged? Noticing the affective aftermath of our daydreams is a way of letting our fantasy life provide its wisdom, as it did for Ignatius. Ignatius's suggestion that the imagination can support reasoning in the discernment process is not unlike Damasio's argument that emotions provide important support to reasoning in decision-making.

IMAGINATION AND HOPEFUL ACTION

When an attitude of "that's the way things are" dominates our consciousness, we can find ourselves stuck in painful and unsatisfying situations. Apathy results from feeling that nothing in our situation can be changed and that we have no choice but to bear with our sufferings. Unable to conceive of how things can be other than they are, an impoverished imagination leaves us stranded and stuck. Only a lively imagination can lift us from such paralysis by suggesting how things can be different. French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre highlights the important role of the imagination in fighting off apathy and fueling meaningful action for bettering our lives. "It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs," he states, "that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we *decide* that these are unbearable."²⁵ Our sufferings in themselves, according to Sartre, cannot motivate us to act. It is only when we realize, with the help of the imagination, that our sufferings are not inevitable,

that things could be otherwise, that a dramatic shift in consciousness occurs: the suffering that we once thought to be bearable now becomes unbearable. Unbearable suffering supplies the commitment and motive for change.

In what he calls "a double nihilation," Sartre delineates the process involved in this call to action instigated by the imagination. The first nihilation entails recognizing the fact that the "ideal state of affairs" that our imagination has suggested exists only "as a pure *present* nothingness." In other words, at this stage it only exists in our imagination, not in the real world. The second nihilation involves juxtaposing our actual situation with the desired change envisioned and acknowledging "the actual situation as nothingness in relation to the ideal." In short, we can break through our apathetic resignation to bad situations only when we employ our imagination to help us envision how things can be other than they are. When we value the possibilities that we perceive and then convert our perceptions into personal projects for change, we can engage in discernment with a lively spirit of hope. Sartre's process illustrates well how the imagination can restore juice to a dehydrated discernment process resulting from excessive doses of "that's the way things are."

DISCERNMENT AS UNIQUELY PERSONAL

Discernment is not formulaic; it is more like an individual art that we must develop through learning and experience. God's mysterious guidance comes to us in personal and unique ways that we must honor. We need to be aware of the idiosyncratic ways in which we are influenced and led by the Divine, as well as the personal ways we are susceptible to being deceived and misled. In discernment, there is

no general "best" path for everyone; each of us must discover—by prayerfully reflecting on our concrete experience of life—the path intended for us. Spiritual guides must also respect the unique ways by which God leads various individuals. In other words, they must watch for the error of thinking of discernment as a monolithic process, uniform and same for all.

On the positive side, we need to value the peculiar ways we find ourselves responsive to the mystery of God's presence. So, when discerning, it is important to know from past experience how God has uniquely dealt with us and to honor our individual religious sensibility. Past experience can be a valuable guide. Reflect, for example, on the following:

- In the past, when you got it right, when you "knew that you knew" how God was leading you, and subsequent experience confirmed the rightness of your discernment, what did you do? What process or approach did you follow? How would you describe the nuances and qualities of that experience?

- When evaluating any new situation or choice, you can use your past periods of spiritual consolation as a touchstone. Visualize those graceful periods when you experienced closeness to God and inner harmony, peace, and joy, as a deep well. Drop your present preference or choice into that well as you might drop a coin. If the sound you hear when the coin (your present decision) hits the bottom is harmonious and peaceful, there is a rightness or harmony between it and how you have experienced God's consoling presence in the past. If the sound you hear is jarring and discordant, your present decision is not in harmony with the way God operates in your life. What is being checked out is whether or not the new decision is congruent with past

states of consolation.²⁶ This method reflects the belief that "spiritual discernment proceeds less by way of rational analysis than by affective consonance or dissonance. One interprets the affective resonances of a given experience. The discernor 'senses' what is in accord with or in opposition to God's will. The judgment is by a 'feel' for the truth. It is judging by conaturality or affinity, much as a chaste person, for example, knows intuitively what is or is not chaste in a given case."²⁷

• Or recall a concrete peak religious experience or event when you intensely and palpably felt God's loving presence. What was that peak experience of consolation like? What did you feel? What did you think? What bodily sensations did you have? When you "dip" your present experience while discerning into that touchstone experience, do you experience resonance or dissonance? A feeling of resonance is affective reassurance that you are in touch with God's presence; a feeling of dissonance indicates that your present choice does not harmonize with what you experience when you are in touch with God.

LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

On the negative side, reflection on past mistakes can also teach us about tendencies that can lead to a flawed discernment process. An experiential approach to discernment allows for trial-and-error learning and leaves room for mistakes. Ignatius, considered in the Christian tradition as a master of discernment, is often quoted as saying that he learned how not to make mistakes by making many. Or, as a contemporary spiritual writer puts it: "Nothing in the

whole gamut of my life experience needs to be wasted. Everything and everyone can teach me something;... nothing is wasted unless I refuse to 'gather' it, refuse to let it in.... And most of those potential wastes can be avoided by the simple practice of attentiveness."²⁸ Learning from experience requires pondering such questions as these:

- In the past, when you got it wrong, when you somehow were misled, what steered you off the track? Are there particular vulnerabilities or tendencies you have to guard against when making decisions?
- Do you rely exclusively on your reasoning without paying attention to the data provided by your body and your feelings? Or do you let feelings blindly hold sway without benefiting from rational analysis?
- Do you tend to rush into important decisions without giving yourself enough time for prayerful reflection? Or do you tend to procrastinate or delay important decisions unnecessarily?
- Do you tend to rely on others too much and not pay sufficient attention to what is going on in your inner life and trust your own inner wisdom? Or do you tend to finalize important decisions without sufficient consultation?
- Does a tendency to please others result in your denying your own needs? Do the "shoulds" of others take priority over your own desires?
- Does human respect or a desire to be seen or regarded in a certain way prevent you from doing what you feel called by God to do?
- Does an excessive need for others' approval or an excessive sense of responsibility for others impede your ability to make life-giving choices?