

Key Discernment Principles and Corresponding Questions

by Teresa Blythe (teresa@teresablythe.net)

1. Discernment hinges on a concrete life question; a choice between two or more options. *What is the question I need to discern?*
2. Christian spiritual discernment is steeped in prayer. *How am I praying about this question? What emerges as a result of my prayer?*
3. Good discernment listens to one's truest and deepest desires. *What is it that I most want in life? How do these options satisfy those "great desires?"*
4. To discern well, one needs to listen carefully to the "movements of the heart" in daily life. *What events, moments, decisions give me deep peace, gratitude, energy, love and joy? (consolation) What events, moments, decisions give me anxiety, chaos, despair, deadness? (desolation)*
5. Good discernment leaves the outcome open and in God's hands. *Can I be at peace with whatever God shows me in this discernment, regardless of outcome? If not, do I at least desire to be open to God's revelation in this matter? If the answer to that is "no," then pray for the desire to be open.*
6. One must be spiritually free (from fear, addiction, compulsion) in order to discern well. *What fears or blocks are getting in the way of exploring this question?*
7. To discern well, one needs a thorough knowledge of the options and practical considerations. *What are the facts surrounding the question? Whose lives are affected by these options? What are the pros and cons for each option?*
8. The options under consideration must be weighed using head, heart and body wisdom. *Which option feels most rational to me? Which one speaks to my heart? Which option "just feels right?" As I consider this choice, what bodily senses am I experiencing?*
9. Discernment involves imagining yourself making a choice and reflecting on the future. *If I make this choice now, how might I feel, act or be in the future? What does thinking about this choice make me feel like now?*
10. Christian spiritual discernment always considers how the option under consideration affects your family, community and people who are poor, forgotten and hurting. *How is my choice advancing God's reign in the world? How is my choice affecting people who have fewer choices than I?*
11. Discernment doesn't go on forever. At some point, you must take action. *As I make the choice, do I feel a sense of lasting peace? Where do I feel alive? Blocked?*
12. Good discernment is evaluated later, as the "fruit of the Spirit" (or not!) emerges. *What has been the outcome of making this choice? Do I still feel consolation around the choice? Do I need to do more discernment?*

whose needs are
being met? (question to ask
if you find yourself talking)

Five Ways to Deepen a Conversation

BY TERESA BLYTHE

(adapted from my blog post: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2015/05/five-ways-to-deepen-a-conversation/>)

Spiritual directors have five conversational tools we use to help the person we are talking with share more deeply. These aren't secrets and you don't have to be a spiritual director to use them. They are especially helpful if the person you are talking with feels safe with you and wants to talk about important aspects of their life. They are "hospitality-in-action."

1. **Silence.** Listen in order to understand what the person is saying and not to develop your own witty quip or response. Allow pauses in the conversation. Sit with the person when they become quiet.
2. **Gentle prompts.** It sounds a bit corny to suggest but simply keeping eye contact and offering a few "hmmms" along the way can be helpful to the person who is sharing. One-word or short phrase responses such as "how so?" or "can you say more about that?" are much better than launching into an analysis or fix-it mode. (By the way, if you want to help someone who is sharing their story, never ever launch into analysis or fix-it mode. That is not what they need.) A favorite gentle prompt among spiritual directors is to notice when one word is used several times and repeat that word back as a question. For example, if the person says "ever since that day I've felt terrified," you respond with "terrified?" It's a simple way of asking them to say more about their feelings.
3. **Summarize by paraphrasing.** After someone has finished telling you their story, it can be very helpful and nurturing for the listener to paraphrase what was said. A short summary using different words—so you aren't parroting—tells them you heard them. And even if you get it wrong, they know you were *trying* to understand. Do keep it short. No one needs to hear their whole 20-minute story told back to them in intimate detail.
4. **Make simple observations or reflections.** In the spiritual direction business we call this *contemplative listening*. Refer to a part of the story and share only what you noticed or felt within yourself as you heard it. You are observing something about the story or the person telling it and reflecting it back to them. For example, you might say "when you told me about your experience of feeling terrified, I noticed you

* Lets take a few moments of
silence and we can start whenever
you are ready

put your hand to your heart." Or, "when you spoke about your disagreement with your sister, I got an image of a blocked roadway." So the basic template is: "When you said _____, I felt/noticed/saw/heard/received an image of _____." Resist temptation to go any further than one sentence. The beauty of contemplative listening is its brevity.

5. **Brief honest open-ended questions.** Questions are the most invasive of all conversation techniques but they can also be among the most helpful. When you are listening to someone share their story and you want to ask a question first ask *yourself*—is this question brief and to-the-point? If you have to give a big speech before the question to set the stage, then it is not brief or simple. You want the question to be simple, succinct and understandable. Also, ask yourself, is this question really a question—or am I trying to get them to see things my way? If you have no idea how the person might answer the question, then it is what we call an honest question. If you really want to make a statement of judgment or opinion but are couching it as a question, then you are being dishonest because it's not really a question. Attorneys call these "leading questions" and judges put a stop to it. So be your own judge and make yourself adhere to the discipline of asking only honest questions. Finally, make sure the question is open-ended. We want our questions to be invitations to greater conversation, not show-stoppers. An example of a classic open-ended question in a serious conversation would be "what is your desire in this situation?" Questions that begin with the word "how" are frequently open-ended.

Try these communication techniques out the next time you and a friend have a deep conversation and see how well they work. You may even want to schedule times with a friend for spiritual conversations where both of you use these listening techniques as guidelines.

For more about spiritual direction and deep listening, check out my blog on Patheos at www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101. You may also contact me at teresa@teresablythe.net.

The slow work of God!
Spiritual direction: "Amplify" when God is at work!