THE CLEARNESS PROCESS

A Way Opens

Alan Kolp

'WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY.' How often one hears this idiomatic phrase and feels pressure rather than hope. Or else one simply thinks, 'No way'! These seem like words for the courageous rather than the faint-hearted, and they are often meant to summon will-power. But what if our issue is not solely a matter of will? This is where one might turn to the clearness process in order to discover how a way opens.

Long a part of how Quakers discern, the clearness process offers contemporary people a compelling model for discovering, discerning and deciding a course of action. Predictably, in our lives there are those junctures when we know a new, or maybe just different, course of action is needed. But we do not know the way; and it is not simply a matter of will-power. The clearness process does not give us the solution, but it does provide a viable model for arriving at a solution. It offers a proven means to engage a life crisis or simply approach one's desire to live or work differently.

Parker Palmer has written helpfully about this process, especially in the form of clearness committees.[1] Since the Quakers originated and developed as a religious body without ordained clergy, some kind of structure was needed to assist members of the community, and those beyond the community, in dealing with life problems and choices of direction in life. The 'clearness committee' is a group of people who agree to gather in a spirit of worship and seeking to sit with the 'focus person'. The goal is simply to help him or her discern God's desire, either for a particular concern or for a general direction

[1] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), see especially chapter 8.

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in life. So one simple way of understanding the clearness committee is that it functions much as a priest, pastor or spiritual director would.

Palmer explains how such committees are formed and work, and affirms that the clearness process 'is less about problem-solving than about drawing close to true self'.[2] Authentic living is possible only when one lives from one's true self. David Lonsdale, writing on contemporary Ignatian spirituality, makes a similar observation:

> Today we are more ready than we have been in the past to acknowledge that being a Christian is more of a search for genuine truth and love than a secure position of certainty from which to survey the world and pass judgment.[3]

There is much in common between the Ignatian and Quaker perspectives on discernment. And yet for all their commonality, there remains a distinct 'style' that characterizes each one.

In true Jesuit fashion Lonsdale describes the quest for authentic living as a quest for truth. Being a Christian, he says,

> … means seeking honestly for the most authentic truth; not just the knowledge that can be learned but makes little difference how we live, but also the deeper gospel truth that makes little sense in fact until it becomes the truth which governs our lives.[4]

Lonsdale's words have powerful resonances for Quakers, particularly the idea that the spiritual quest is to change lives, not change minds. So many modern men and women know that they are not living authentically, because they are either not in touch with their true self, or are not able to live and work from this true centre.

This is not the place to develop an essay on our true self. Suffice it to say, most of us know it as our 'heart' or 'soul'. Richard Rohr puts it graphically in the opening words of his book *Everything Belongs*. He says that, 'We are a circumference people, with little access to the centre'.[5] This vocabulary is a familiar one for Quakers. The classic words of

[2] Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 138.
[3] David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 89.
[4] Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 89.
[5] Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 15.

Thomas Kelly say it best. Early in his book *A Testament of Devotion*, Kelly acknowledges that, 'Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Centre, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return'.[6] Using these poignant metaphors, Kelly points to that reality each of us has and which we can access. This is the metaphorical place from which clarity will come—clarity about who we are and what we should do. It is to this place the clearness process is designed to lead. It is a spiritual place; and there is no indispensible religious roadmap to lead us to it. Too many of us modern people 'know about' the soul without 'knowing' our souls. We would like to be engaged in 'soul work', but often do not know how. And 'soul work' might be an apt way to describe the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. The words that Ignatius uses in the First Week are well known, when he declares that humans have been 'created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save [their] soul' (Exx 23). Obviously, many humans choose not to live lives of praise, reverence, and service. But what if humans wanted to change their lives? Ignatian spirituality offers a way. The clearness process is also a way to get started. Both spiritualities hear and follow the words of Ignatius: '… desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we were created' (Exx 23).

We would like to be engaged in soul work, but often do not know how

In describing the clearness process, I shall use six characteristics. In some sense these characteristics form a circle: there is no real beginning point, but rather the six are simultaneously in play as the process unfolds. At any particular time, one or two characteristics might be emphasized, but that does not mean they are more important. But we must begin with one characteristic, so we begin with *trust*.

To enter the clearness process—a process of discovery, discerning, and deciding—is to trust the process. Some people seem naturally or easily to trust. Others of us find it difficult. Trust is faith. It is the opposite of control or manipulation. The clearness process is designed to bring us to a place that we cannot know ahead of time. Control does not lead; rather, it tends to force, sometimes coercively. To those willing to trust the process of being led to clearness, the words of Anne Morrow Lindbergh in her classic book, *Gift from the Sea*, are appropriate:

[6] Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), 29.

'Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith.'[7]

'Patience' is a difficult word for those of us in a hurry. But if we feel compelled to make a decision—and, often, to make it fast—then we are unlikely to make that decision from the clarity of our true self. It is more likely that it will be motivated by the ego. Or it will be made for us by someone else. But clearness demands some time and necessitates that we trust the process.

Even though Quaker and Ignatian spiritualities do differ in emphasis, there is agreement that the processes of clearness and of discernment bring us to a place of experience, which is a kind of knowing. Hence, one of the reasons we need both time and trust is our need to become aware of our assumptions. *Assumptions* are the second characteristic of the clearness process. Doubtless, there are many assumptions we bring to the clearness process. Here we should deal with two central assumptions which are at the core of that process.

First, we assume that there is a God and that God has a desire for us. We use the language of 'desire' here rather than God's 'will'. For many of us, there is no difference in the two terms. However, for some others, the language of 'will' seems harsh and often conjures up images of a controller or manipulator. We do not imagine God's nature and

[7] Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea* (New York: Vantage Books, 1978), 17.

action that way. And hence, we prefer the image of God desiring something for us.

The second assumption builds on the first one. Not only does God have a desire for us, but also that desire is knowable. And this is precisely what the clearness process is about: coming to know God's desire for myself. If I already know it, there is no need for a clearness process. However, often we simply do not know who God now intends for us to be or what God next desires for us to do. This does call for some kind of process of discovery and discerning.

We focus on these two assumptions as characteristic of the clearness process because these assumptions differentiate this process from other ways of making a decision. For example, one could simply turn to another person and ask for advice. Or, in the military—and in some businesses—one is given an order! But a clearness process delivers neither advice nor orders. Instead, one trustingly enters a process in order that one might discern God's desire.

And it will be the discerning of that divine desire which inevitably leads one to the true self for a decision. For it is only in one's true self that the divine desire and human desire meet. This then will become the cradle of authenticity. And in this place we find an identity with meaning. From this place emerges our work in the world, work which has purpose. This anticipates the third characteristic of the clearness process, namely, *intentionality*.

As we engage in the process of clearness, we need to bring to it intentionality. I have cited Lindbergh's caution that patience is usually required; but patience is not passivity. One aspect of our intentionality is to be quite active in the clearness process. To simplify, I suggest that there are two related intentionalities we bring to the process. The first, key intentionality is to be open. This is one reason why we need to be aware of our assumptions. Often our assumptions block true openness, for example, by making us focus too narrowly. If we can open ourselves to the process of clearness and all that might happen within it, then we give ourselves the best chance for real clarity about who we are to be and/or what we can do.

The related facet of intentionality is that we are open in order that we might 'see'. To be open is preparatory: seeing is the result. Sometimes, seeing comes with the immediacy of an 'Aha!' Or it may come more like the dawning of a new day: gradually, the light

increases—through information, understanding, perhaps, revelation—enabling us finally to say, 'I see'.

This focus on intentionality parallels what one finds in Ignatian spirituality. Near the end of the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius says

> In every good election, as far as depends upon us, the eye of our intention ought to be simple, only looking at what we are created for, namely, the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of our soul (Exx 169).

Ignatius is correct; the pure and simple eye is directional. We do see where we want to go.

It may well be that 'seeing is believing', but seeing is not yet doing. Just because we come to clarity does not yet mean that we have done anything. This neatly brings us to the fourth characteristic of the clearness process, our *responsibility*.

Our responsibility in the clearness process entails two aspects, which can be labelled the *temporal* and the *terminal* aspects. The temporal aspect of responsibility is that we pay attention. How many times do we find ourselves in a conversation and suddenly realise we have no real idea what is going on, because we have not been paying attention! It is like driving down the motorway and realising that you have gone fifty miles, with no recollection of having done so. It is crucial in the clearness process that we pay attention. It is necessary to listen to what is said—and to what might not be said.

Gerald May offers a very helpful description of what paying attention does for the individual. Paying attention, he says, is focused awareness:

> Attention … requires a certain—usually rather high—level of alertness and a limitation or restriction of the range of awareness, a shutting out of so-called distractions.[8]

Essentially, the clearness process is an exercise in paying attention. Everyone involved brings to it an intention of paying attention—to one another and, especially, to where and how God self-discloses. And the intentionality is linked to responsibility.

The terminal aspect of our responsibility is finally to act. Assuming clearness does come to a person, at that point the clearness process has finished. Now the question is whether the person will act on the clarity which has come. In classical Christian terms the issue is no longer discernment, but now becomes obedience. And we all know that 'Yes' is not always our response. Obviously, one can become clear about something and choose not to do anything about it.

Lonsdale understands this by acknowledging that discernment and discipleship must be integral. He says,

> … discernment is at the heart of discipleship, because when we walk a disciple's path we are constantly faced with changing situations in which we have to discover how to be faithful to the gospel and the leading of the Spirit, and true to ourselves.[9]

This is why I call this particular characteristic of the clearness process a responsibility and not a requirement. Coming to clarity does not automatically lead to action. But discipleship calls for action, not simply knowledge.

The fifth characteristic of the clearness process is the *communal*. Far too many modern people try to figure out problems or solve dilemmas all by themselves. We assume that we are bright enough, will be lucky enough, might somehow receive some insight—or something. The clearness process is designed to get the individual into a communal context so as to benefit from that experience. It is not too bold to say, indeed to insist, that this is always better than going it alone.

[8] Gerald R. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 47.
[9] Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 108.

The communal aspect of the clearness process should provide two invaluable benefits. The first is the wisdom to be gained from having others present to focus on the person and the issue in question. But this wisdom should not come in the form of advice. Normally, a question has more power to open someone to his or her true self than any piece of advice. Beginning to be opened to my inner truth does not mean immediately understanding it. But being open does bring me to the doorway of discernment.

This is where each of us needs others. Palmer gives three good reasons:

> The journey towards inner truth is too taxing to be made solo ….
> The path is too deeply hidden to be travelled without company ….
> The destination is too daunting to be achieved alone.[10]

Each of us walks our own spiritual path, but we do not have to do it alone. Many eyes are better than one eye; the same goes for ears. The dominant metaphors for the destination of our Christian journey are communal, too: kingdom, banquet, city.

The second benefit of undertaking the clearness process in a communal setting is the gift of other people's good will. How many places in the world can we go and presume that there is a select group of people whose only commitment for a period of time is to us, and that all their good will is directed solely towards our welfare? The communal clearness process creates such a place.

However, the clearness committee is not simply a group of good women and men who wish the focus person well. In fact, there is an implicit ecclesiastical presupposition underlying the communal gathering, namely that in that place at that time people gather with the expectation that God's Spirit is present in their midst. Furthermore, the gathered group is confident that the desire of God is discernible and will lead the focus person to clarity. The specifics of this discerning process may well be distinctively Quaker, but the process itself not uniquely so. Lonsdale describes,

[10] Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 26.

> … one of the central features of Ignatius' approach to discipleship: the process of discernment of spirits as a means of having the mind and heart of Christ in the circumstances of everyday life.[11]

A Quaker might say, 'wanting to do in everyday life what God desires me to do'. But the convergence between the two is striking.

The final characteristic of the clearness process is *hope*. People who participate in the process have every reason to be hopeful that good things can happen. This is not to say they will happen; hope is not a guarantee; and the process is based on trust and not control. It is also important to note that we can be hopeful about the process itself. There always is a double trust. First, we trust that God does have a desire for us and it is knowable. And secondly, we trust the process of clearness as the discerning means of knowing that divine desire. Clearness works; but it does not always work the way we expect it to. That is one of the great lessons learned by participating in this process. Taking the time to listen for our inner teacher, hearing the questions of our communal partners, sitting in periods of silence when we are not always filling the space with our own words—all this is designed to release us to be present and attentive to the inner teacher which each of us has. To hope that we will come to know is a powerful and legitimate hope.

Clearness works, but not always in the way we expected it to

Obviously, there is a relationship between our hope and all the other characteristics of the clearness process. These six characteristics form a circle, which is the process. Our assumptions often focus our hopes. Hope certainly relates to intentionality. And that implicates our responsibility. And all these relationships are affected by participating communally in the process.

The process of clearness brings a person to clarity, yes. But more importantly, clarity typically emerges as a *leading*, what Kelly calls 'persuasions'. This means that clarity comes as something different from a purely rationalistic solution to a problem. And this leading sets us up for the vital next step. As Kelly eloquently puts it,

[11] Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 181.

> Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life.[12]

At this point, perhaps we are finally in a place to know and say, 'where there's a will, there's a way'.

Alan Kolp is Moll Chair in Faith and Life and Professor of Religion at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. His books include *Fresh Winds of the Spirit* (Friends United Press, 2007), *Canopy of Light and Love* (Friends United Press, 1993), and *Integrity is a Growth Market: Character-Based Leadership* (with Peter Rea; Atomic Dog Publishing, 2005). He is active in the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. He is a lifelong Quaker and a Benedictine oblate. He was recently a Visiting Fellow at Kellogg College (Oxford) while on sabbatical.

[12] Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, 29.