

DIMINISHING GOD'S HANDIWORK: BLOCKS TO DISCERNMENT

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DISCERNMENT is a process of discovering the contemplative penetration of the creative presence and activity of the Spirit of God within the journey of life. Woven into the fabric of this process is the deep experiential reality that 'life is lived either violently or contemplatively. I live violently if in any way I diminish God's creative handiwork in the human person or in any creation. I live contemplatively if in any way I enhance God's creative handiwork in the human person or in any creation.'¹ With this distinction as its basis, this article will focus on ways in which we diminish or block the contemplative penetration of the creative presence and activity of the Spirit of God in the journey of life. Written from an experiential point of view within a ministry seeking to integrate spirituality and psychology, this article will offer reflections centred on that experience as it unfolds in the lives of men and women who firmly believe that 'the Word of God is something alive and active . . . and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart' (Heb 4,12). Specifically, this article addresses major patterns blocking this 'alive and active' presence of the Spirit of God in our lives.

These past twenty years have witnessed a proliferation of material on a variety of aspects and dimensions of spiritual discernment. Workshops, books and articles have carefully articulated both the tradition and experience of discernment. Cutting across these rich resources, two questions have emerged which have facilitated identification of two distinct but related levels of reality operating within the life-prayer of any individual or group.

The first of these questions, 'what is happening?' seeks an accuracy in reporting the data of the facts and feelings surrounding an experience. Fundamental as it may seem, we must not be naive in assuming that this data is, in fact, accurate. Rather, it is imperative to recognize the dramatically different skill of perception of each personality type responding to a particular situation. Multiple and helpful tools have increased and sharpened our

awareness, skill and development in this area; we need to become proficient with these tools so that we can help unlock the blocks.

It is through the perception of these 'happenings' that we are led to the second penetrating question, 'what is really going on?' This is the discerning question which focuses our contemplative gaze on the deeper unfolding of the Spirit of God. What is really going on is that the Christ is being formed in a human person in much the same unique manner as the first Incarnation and in a most unlikely place and time. When we destroy or even diminish this formation we live life violently. This diminishment may be conscious or unconscious, but it goes on. Concretely we enter this process of diminishment when we lose the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of our ordinary life. Unless it is an experience of great intensity, it is not usually an isolated experience that causes this rupture in our connections of life. Ordinarily it is a recurring pattern of lost interconnectedness which effectively constitutes a significant diminishment or block undermining a way of becoming a more whole and holy experience of God's word.

These patterns of diminishment operate in all areas of our lives. However, I have chosen to focus on key issues emerging from the following four areas: physiological, psychological, theological and sociological. When these 'systems' function in a significantly unhealthy manner, one experiences distortion at the level of 'what is happening' which in turn blocks or diminishes the discernment on the deeper level of 'what is really going on'.

Physiological factors affecting the integrity of discernment

The mystery of the Incarnation makes the very clear statement that God chose the human body to be the special dwelling for the Son. Nevertheless, influenced by the negative approach to the body made in the name of both culture and religion over the centuries, each one of us needs to evaluate seriously her own present attitude towards this original blessing. Health spas and diet clinics, designed to help each person re-evaluate personal attitudes, point to a new and positive trend. But does that attitude actually prevail in our lives? In many cases we need to re-examine our own personal attitudes toward the body in general and our health history in particular.

The first prevailing block that needs to be carefully scrutinized is chronic physical fatigue resulting from repeated overextension. Before canonizing this excessiveness as 'laying down one's life', it may need to be more accurately labelled 'misguided generosity'. And co-dependency might be a more honest way of looking at our lack of necessary boundaries rather than declaring ourselves open and flexible ministers.

It is frequently this same intensity of ministerial life that covers the neglected reality of serious chronic ill-health. We are simply too busy to notice and the cumulative effect may go by many names: diabetes, cancer, hepatitis, thyroidism, allergies, heart disease and high blood pressure, to name a few. Unattended, they distort our perceptions and decisions and become a serious deterrent to finding God.

A third area, which I call the body-image syndrome, characterized by its destructive malcontent with one's personal physical body, represents a prevalent and pervading block in our process of discernment. It operates simply but destructively in its basic non-acceptance of one's body in such areas as weight, height, colour of skin, hair, eyes. The fantasies which arise and dominate in order to compensate for this unacceptable reality tell the devastating effects that this gnawing syndrome can have. It creates a nothing-is-ever-quite-right attitude which results in excessive attention on 'physical perfection'. None of this will hopefully be confused with the healthy attitude towards our body as a special blessing of creation which deserves the attention and care of proper exercise, diet and rest that speak clearly of a deep reverence for God's incarnate love.

Psychological factors affecting the integrity of discernment

At work in each human person is a unique psychology. Children though we are of a particular age and culture, we soon come to realize that we carry all cultures in our collective unconscious. All of us are called to endeavour to make as much conscious as is humanly possible. But there is always the influence of unconscious motivations of the consciously perceived data of experience.

Frequently experienced or overheard from individuals or group sharings is the remark, 'Well, it is only my perception'. This could of course be an indication of psychological openness or even a declaration of poverty of perception. On the other hand, it is frequently the hallmark of a defensive, limited and self-opinionated viewpoint. Unfortunately one is condemned to exactly that—only that person's perception of a particular life experience. Additional and contrasting perceptions are barred from qualifying the original perception thus impeding not only dialogue, which it does, but ultimately a deeper awareness of truth which is the fruit of many contrasting perceptions, ideas and imaginings. A biased perception is clearly self-defeating because it blocks the challenge of a dialogue of perceptions from which springs a greater clarity of reality.

There are others who are impeded in their discernment process because of a habit of procrastination. They do not have enough

possibilities from which to choose; or there is not enough data about the possible choices; or the necessary time is not available. It is simply inopportune on every level. One needs to look closely to determine the root cause of this habit of procrastination.

Endless possibilities present themselves for incarnation. Among these we are called to choose one of the ways and then to work creatively with all that issues from this basic choice. The Creator had endless possibilities for redeeming humankind. Jesus was the choice. As a consequence, God lived and worked with all that followed speaking Jesus to humankind. Nowhere does God indicate regretting that choice, although others did not applaud it as the best; nor is there any suggestion that there really was an alternative word that 'might have been'. God simply did not waste energy on excluded possibilities. Whatever its cause, procrastination deters us from taking responsibility for incarnating life in the best possible way at a given time. God is more present that we realize in this particular place, time and situation.

Perhaps one of the most serious blocks for our age is the lack of imagination. Since in fact we live at a time of re-imagining life at every level of existence, this failure to 'imagine' could become a serious limitation. Certainly it is this failure of the imagination that is at the heart of the void we experience when we consider the prophetic nature of Jesus's call to discipleship. Jesus was always imagining things differently: where there was law, he showed love; where there was harsh judgement, mercy; and ultimately he was wounded in order to heal.

Is it not the special quality of new inner imagings that make Jesus such an attractive prophet? Every religious tradition seeking continuity amidst great discontinuity today will have to be open to a reverent re-imagining if a lasting and integrating reorientation of the conscious and unconscious is to be effective. John reminds us: 'You can tell the spirits that come from God by this: every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God' (1 Jn 4,2). Helen Luke comments: 'In modern psychological language this is to say that we are justified in speaking of the spirit of God only when it leads to an incarnation in us, however small, of the spirit of truth within'.² The bridge to this truth is our imagination. In her powerful chapter, 'Faith and the imagination', Kathleen Fischer comments:

The imagination enables us to live in a multi-leveled, multi-colored truth, and to receive the truth which is pervaded by mist and mystery. It is also the human power that opens us to possibility and promise, the not-yet of the future. In all these ways, the imagination is essential to Christian faith.³

This reassuring and encouraging study sketches for us the important role imagination plays in the development of an enlivened Christian faith.

The limitations that an underdeveloped imagination imposes on all of our life is especially experienced in the area of leadership in society and the Church today. But the solution to leadership 'outside' resides in our willingness to assume leadership 'inside' ourselves. To begin this work, a healthy re-imagining of ourselves is in order. When this is done we release energy that is vibrant, alive and creative. Consoling in this regard is the passage from Deuteronomy:

Things hidden belong to Yahweh our God but things revealed are ours and our children's for all time . . . for this Law that I enjoin on you today is not beyond your strength or beyond your reach . . . the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance (Deut 29,28; 30,11.14).

There are encouraging studies and practices being accomplished in the field of medical research which employ creative visualization as a respected partner in the ministry of healing. These processes engage the unconscious in its own language of image. It is this engagement which effects a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious, creating a climate of freedom and interaction within the whole person.

Seeing things differently is a fundamental law inherent in the choice of integrating the real. The principle that all life is characterized by life, death and resurrection is the faith way of saying that all life is in the process of gradual change and growth. Re-imagining helps one to cooperate and adapt to change. In doing this, it significantly supports the integration of all that is real.

Fear seems to be one of the most common psychological blocks to discerning the unique discernment of 'the Christ'. We are all familiar with and consoled by the words recorded of Mary at the Annunciation: she was, Luke tells us, 'deeply disturbed' by the visitation of the angel. And yet, it was this very fear that rendered the gift of Jesus. The fear is filled with energy which, when transformed through receptive awareness and dialogue, becomes a very special healing gift.

However, in the process of breaking through layers of resistance, suppression or inexperience, fear comes through in a multiplicity of forms and intensities. Basically, one desires to be free from fear and this may give us a very good lead in discovering the 'other side' of fear, for there is a simple psychological principle that says we are 'free from' in order to be 'free for'. If we take time to be

aware of what we really desire for our own wholeness, we will gradually open ourselves to God's truth that is endeavouring to break through. We are free to reflect on and discover our own deep needs and the desires of God for us. This is an important awareness in the process to freedom, for it is often the experience that the 'fear' operates as a type of control—actually keeping us from integrating into our lives an aspect or quality that is simply unfamiliar to us. The fear is most often interpreted as a negative factor whereas this is really the emotional resonance that comes when we are deeply in touch with a new life-giving energy that is in the process of transformation.

The deeper this energy is connected into my unconscious, the greater will be the emotion resonating as fear. Gentleness is the quality that is most needed when fear is operative. One can confront and dialogue with this energy without becoming violent. Fear has a gift to render and we need to let our whole being know that we both desire and welcome this new life with a warm and loving hospitality. Gentleness is the best conveyor of this message.

When a part is experienced very intensely, it frequently becomes the whole of a reality. Some negative experiences of this 'part' becoming the 'whole' are: a single painful experience with an authority figure in the Church is often sufficient reason to conclude that 'the Church' is a serious problem; a very difficult relationship with a member of one's community leads to the conclusion that one could never have a joyous commitment in any religious community; a painful experience living in a severely dysfunctional family makes one suspicious that all life will be dominated by this. The intensity of each of these situations gives to this 'part' a felt experience of a much larger 'whole'.

The experience of a 'diffused or fragmented presence' in contrast to a sustained 'fullness of presence' is one which gnaws at and ultimately severely blocks the contemplative stance so necessary for discernment. This is the heart of the Mary-Martha syndrome recorded in Luke 10,38-42. One suspects that Jesus ate and enjoyed the meal prepared by Martha. The chiding that she experiences from Jesus is related, not to the preparation of the meal itself, but to her 'anxious and worried' attitude about so many things. Martha seems to have missed the point that even her cooking is meant to be a contemplative experience. What blocks this is not the work itself, but her diffused presence amidst the work. The story underlines the need we all have to reconcile and befriend the relationship of our own Mary-Martha syndrome, if we would be fully present to Jesus 'dining' with us.

Theological factors affecting the integrity of discernment

Fundamentally at work in each of us since birth is the image of God that we contemplate in the depths of our being and which radically affects the discernment of God's Spirit at work in our lives. Many of us are beyond identifying and locking God into the image of a stern judge or proficient bookkeeper; but there is operative in us an image of God as a mind-reader, which says, 'What I need is known by God so why should I ask?' This image sets up a relationship with God that denies the human need to sort out the things of value in my life for which I wish to become responsible with God's help.

Equally unhelpful is the image of God as the great controller. This image of God blocks my personal responsibility for making significant choices in my life. The image makes a very strong suggestion that God 'just might' retrieve the precious gift of freedom given so that we might make choices which use power creatively, that is, effecting change through life-giving response.

A third image that dominates our thought processes is that of God as a demanding executive. This image justifies all of our workaholic tendencies by projecting onto God the image we have of ourselves and the demands of self and others.

It is well to become aware of the images at work within us that block our recognizing and claiming the 'real' images of God that enhance all of life. God's self-revelation is the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World—the Bread of Life!

A static theology that is out-dated or one-sided negatively affects the on-going reflection that is a necessary constituent of a healthy theological process. New theologies need to be critically evaluated in the light of a vibrant and enriched theological perspective. Therefore, to ensure that this is a vital component of one's spiritual background, a dedicated commitment involving time for regular reading and study is essential. In short, it requires the serious asceticism inherent in any professional life.

Sociological factors affecting the integrity of discernment

What society says and responds to sets up a certain orientation or norm. The one that frequently affects and blocks discernment is the norm addressing the arbitrary versus the absolute. Most often this distinction comes from a value system that undergoes revision as part of lived experience long before it becomes defined enough to articulate. In this regard, there is much that is in progress and process and we need to respect it as that: arbitrary. Some norms, established and recognized as such, will, by their existence, encourage us to accept and respect the arbitrariness of

our lives; other norms will encourage us to hide, neglect or undervalue it. Birth, family, education, ministry and relationships are arbitrary. Having no necessity of themselves they could have been very different, but as such are in God's providence. We need to respect the rootedness of our past and integrate each aspect of it as it is into the love that God has for us, which alone is absolute and unchanging.

Many of the really painful experiences in the Church or society today come out of a confusion and actual conflict between what is purely arbitrary and what is absolute. While one needs to be very reverent when working with situations and attitudes that are in fact arbitrary, one should not allow the aura of absoluteness that surrounds these issues to impede forever this delicate and necessary confrontation.

Spiritual factors affecting the integrity of discernment

Prayer is the context of discernment, and as such needs to be a deep and free interchange and communion with our God. Prayer that becomes rigid or closed is an illusion of prayer. Since a great deal of reverence is needed for one's personal life journey in prayer, it is essential that one have an understanding of the spiritual theologies and classics of one's religious tradition. This fuller comprehension ensures a greater cooperation with the action of God as revealed in one's experience. The dynamic of spiritual direction is the integrating component of this whole and holy process. The knowledge, skill and personal spiritual experience of the director is integral to bringing to deep unity these essential elements.

The contemplative penetration of the creative presence and activity of the Spirit of God is the journey of life and the enhancement of God's handiwork.

NOTES

¹ Kieran Flynn R.S.M., from a conference on healing delivered at Our Lady of Peace Spiritual Life Center, Narragansett, Rhode Island in 1987.

² Luke, Helen M.: *Women, earth and spirit: the feminine in symbol and myth* (Crossroads, New York, 1981), pp 9-10.

³ Fischer, Kathleen R.: *The inner rainbow: the imagination in Christian life* (Paulist Press, New York/Ramsey, 1983), p 7.