

## **“Discernment”** David Dubbeldam

One evening this summer I entered the hospital room of a mother that had just given birth to a child that had died in her womb. The mother was sitting up in bed with the baby cradled in her arms. Around the room were gathered several family and friends. Although I had received warning and had done some preparation, I now found myself momentarily frozen, unsure of what to say or what to do. Then a sudden clarity came over me. I realized I could not see the baby and somehow knew that for the mother I needed to acknowledge the child and see its beauty. I asked to come around the bed and smiled and told her how beautiful her child was even though it was not a completely pleasant sight for me. Eventually it came time to pray for the child and the mother. We all joined hands and I and another family member placed our hands on the mother’s shoulders. Even though I had just stumbled over some Bible verses, a prayer now just flowed out of me. It was beautiful. I felt its healing power. While speaking the final words of that prayer a tremendous warmth entered through the top of my head and flowed through every muscle in my body down to my feet.

Yesterday, at the board retreat, we had an opportunity to draw a meaningful religious experience and I drew a picture of me conducting the prayer. However, just above my head I drew a flaming dove descending onto the top of my head. You see, just before this experience I had visited the hospital chapel to pray. I prayed that all the fear and anxiety I was experiencing was removed and that I be used as an instrument of comfort and healing for this mother and her family. That drawing reflected the interpretation I have come to place on that experience: That I was experiencing a baptism by the Holy Spirit by fire, an interpretation drawn from my own Christian heritage. I felt drunk in the Spirit that evening.

Such an interpretation may be challenging for some of you. Perhaps my experience was simply psychosomatic? But for me, it was more than that. I can’t simply dismiss it outright as

just some feel good experience. If I had to compare it to something else, I would compare it to the sensation of chills down your spine while listening to some beautifully performed piece of music. That also may be a psychosomatic experience but it is also an indicator of a fine musical performance; a performance penetrated in a way most sound does not.

Let me be clear, discernment most certainly requires both our intellect and reason. There is much that our emotions and physical sensations can fool us into thinking, but reason alone also provides only partial understanding. When intuition, if we can call it that, combines with reason, the result is doubly powerful. Discernment can be defined in two ways: 1. the ability to judge well, and/or 2. perception in the absence of judgment with a view to obtaining spiritual direction and understanding. I'd like to focus for a bit on this second definition. After my summer experiences I not only understand my calling by using my reason, I also feel it. Putting such feeling into specific words is almost impossible for me. As Pascal wrote, "The heart has its reasons, that reason does not know." The authors of *Listening Hearts*, a book for those discerning a call to ministry, write, "Discernment may be understood as 'apprehending' rather than 'comprehending.'" They continue, "Although discernment involves use of reason, the process is delicate and easily stifled by excessive analysis." The authors of this book conclude, "Discernment of call involves intuition and insight" (Farnham 26).

I will admit that I have always been someone who is ruled more by my heart than by my head. I've learned painfully the mistake of not recognizing when my emotions are clouding my ability to make good judgments. I personally began using the mantra "love tempered by reason" years ago to remind myself to check that my emotions were not getting the better of me. Where this mantra came from I'm not sure, but it has been extremely helpful.

It is necessary for an individual to do his or her own discernment. Only you can truly know your own calling, what it is that makes your heart beat the fastest, what it is that energizes you and makes you want to do more. BUT, you need others too -

In the last year of my undergraduate at UPenn, before I began my MDiv, I was struggling with the validity of my call. I'd been in school for almost four years and knew I had three more ahead of me plus internships. Was this really what I wanted to do? At the time I happened to be enrolled in a Religious Phenomena course and decided that I would use the course's required research paper to get some more perspective. Part of me wondered how ministers knew/felt understood their calling. I interviewed about a dozen Protestant Christian ministers asking them to describe their sense of call and whether or not they had experienced physical manifestations of their call - you know, like seeing a burning bush, or being blinded on the way somewhere. Most described an internal sense of calling that they just couldn't deny, no matter how hard some of them tried. Two, however, described ecstatic experiences that, like my experience, had acted as a confirmation of their call. I also contacted about a half dozen UU ministers that I know and asked them about their understanding of their call to the ministry and how they had determined their call. All of these people were very generous in sharing their experiences and I learned a tremendous amount from them.

But just talking about one's calling also is not enough. To truly discern if one's calling is true one needs experiences to measure their calling against. As Rumi stated, you do need to taste the wine. Sometimes a sip is enough to know. I had started tasting the wine during my undergraduate by volunteering with organizations like Project H.O.M.E. and Broad St Ministry. These organizations work hard to address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals from communities at risk. In working with these organizations both my interest in

ministry and in social justice are combined. But in these experiences I was still operating as a lay perspective. Although I am an advocate for the priesthood of all believers there is something different when you devote the majority of your time and effort to ministry as a professional. This is something I learned this summer during my chaplaincy internship. It was an experience on a level that differed from all of my lay experiences of ministry. Dawna Markova writes, "There is no such thing as finding one's purpose. It's about creating conditions, for six months or six minutes, where your purpose can find you. It's not about asking what is the meaning of life, but rather asking what your life means. It's being willing to receive the truth of what you hear" (Markova 124). Well chaplaincy training certainly did that for me. It is designed to create the conditions that challenge you. Before you can go looking you're faced with things you simply need to deal with. They refer to this as the action/reflection/action model. You respond, you reflect on the response and then you respond again with greater understanding and knowledge. While you learn ministry skills you also learn a great amount about yourself.

That brings me to here to this congregation. I'm here because I want to learn more. The main goal I have listed for coming here to do my field education is to discern if parish ministry is a path for me. I'm honestly not sure. There is a significant difference between being a member, even a member in a leadership position, and being the minister. I chose this congregation because I saw the right conditions for me to learn. You have a board that has fully supported me in coming here to learn, you have a talented minister who has been generously mentoring me, and you have six members who have agreed to meet with me monthly to provide me with both positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. That last part is critical. It is necessary for me to do the work of discernment for myself, but I need the

perspective and experience of others to do that fully. This for me is the purpose of being a Unitarian Universalist. I want the freedom to discover my own religious meaning but I need others to help me fully accomplish that. As my former minister Mark Morrison-Reed wrote, "The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed." Let's not just drink any old wine but be connoisseurs together, tasting with caution and when we find the purest, those unadulterated with fear or urgency about what's needed, let's fully experience them together (Rumi)

#### Sources:

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Broad Street Ministry - [www.broadstreetministry.org](http://www.broadstreetministry.org)

Project H.O.M.E. - [www.projecthome.org](http://www.projecthome.org)