Spiritual Discernment in Chaplaincy Practice: Seeking Guidance in Life's Choices

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Abstract

This reflective essay emerges from hospital chaplaincy practice. Through bedside encounters and conversations with families, spiritual discernment is explored as a slow, relational process shaped by presence, listening, and accompaniment. It honors vulnerability, shared meaning, and human dignity.

Keywords: Spiritual discernment, Chaplaincy, Presence

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a tuning fork. Spiritual discernment is much like tuning the heart toward love and the mind toward wisdom. This process is described in different ways across religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions, but the desire is shared: to live honestly, compassionately, and in alignment with what matters most.

I write as a Christian pastor and hospital chaplain, formed by Scripture and prayer. That perspective shapes how I make sense of discernment. At the same time, I serve daily in a pluralistic care setting where I meet people in the hospital from a variety of backgrounds. Again and again, I have found that each patient, family, and staff member is looking for meaning and purpose. In that context, religious traditions, ethical frameworks, and secular values often play a very important role as guideposts.

This essay reflects on discernment as I have come to know it through hospital chaplaincy: a lived, relational practice that unfolds slowly through presence and listening—especially when answers are unclear and control is limited. When I use the word "we," I am referring to all who seek moral clarity and purpose—whether grounded in faith, conscience, or a commitment to human dignity.

DISCERNMENT AT THE BEDSIDE: LIVED ENCOUNTERS IN CHAPLAINCY

Much of what I have learned about discernment has come not from books but from standing at the bedside or sitting in hospital rooms. Discernment is not abstract. It has a face, a name, and a story.

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ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

I remember visiting an elderly woman who had spent most of her life as a nun. She spoke easily about her years of service, the places she had lived, and the people she had known. At one point, she turned her head away and whispered, "But now they're all gone." In that moment, I felt the weight of her words, but I really didn't know how to respond. Thankfully, something in me did—not my thinking mind but something deeper. I closed my eyes and simply said, "You feel alone."

She looked at me, and her face softened with a relief I will never forget. "Yes," she said, "that's it exactly." Without planning, it was my heart more than my mind that understood the moment. Discernment took the form of attentive listening and naming the feeling, rather than giving advice or answering too quickly.

Discernment takes on a unique importance in near-end-of-life situations, when people face exceptionally difficult decisions and unresolved questions. I recall a patient who asked, "Chaplain, do you think God will forgive me?" On the surface, it sounded like a theological question, but I sensed something deeper—a desire for reconciliation and peace. My role was not to provide a yes or no answer but to be present, to listen with compassion, and to help her be aware of the healing presence already at work within her. That healing may not have been how she had hoped or planned, but it met her where she was. It was the beginning of a spiritual healing of the pain in her heart. In that moment, discernment wasn't about finding the right words but about staying with her long enough for clarity and peace to be felt.

Simply staying with someone—without rushing or trying to fix things—can be very comforting. It reminds them they are not alone. So often I am asked to recite the words of Psalm 23 to affirm a presence that walks with us through every valley. I'm grateful to find this sentiment echoed in other religious, spiritual, and humanist voices.

Different words are used in various faith and belief traditions, but the message is similar: we are not abandoned in times of fear, suffering, or uncertainty. In Islam, "Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God." In Buddhism, "Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened." In Hinduism, "Wherever there is Krishna, there is protection." In Native American wisdom, "We walk with those who came before us and those yet to come." And in secular and humanist voices, "When someone really hears you without passing judgment, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good."[1]

As Mother Teresa of Calcutta taught in her care of the dying, love is most powerfully expressed through faithful presence.[2] Physician and spiritual healer Rachel Naomi Remen also reminds us that healing at the end of life comes not from fixing but from deep listening, companionship, and honoring a person's story.[3]

I recall the situation of another family who struggled with whether to continue life support for a loved one. The family members held different views. My purpose was not to resolve decisions for them. I was there to help create a space where care, honesty, and reflection could be honored. I invited each person to speak without interruption, listen

carefully, and allow moments of silence. In that spirit, through conversation and shared discernment, a space opened for them to gradually reach a decision they could all agree on.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF DISCERNMENT

In chaplaincy, discernment is often felt in the body and the heart, not just reasoned in the mind. People don't simply think their way through difficult decisions; they sense them. It's almost like trying to find a light switch in a dark room. Discernment involves the whole person—mind, heart, memory, and body.

Research in psychology and neuroscience has helped shed light on this process. For example, psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Gerd Gigerenzer have shown that decision-making is shaped not only by intellect but also by understanding which is rooted in real-life experience. [4] Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has likewise shown that emotions and what we feel in our bodies play an important role in making meaningful choices.[5] Other research in positive psychology and mindfulness suggests that slowing down or pausing through prayer, silence, or attentive presence can help people respond with greater clarity and compassion.[6]

For the hospital chaplain, this means paying attention not only to people's words but also to their body language. I remember sitting with a patient who was deciding whether to continue aggressive treatment. He understood the medical facts, but he still felt uneasy. As we talked, he noticed that imagining more treatment made his body tense, while imagining time with family brought a sense of peace. His discernment became visible not from analysis or intellectually grasping the situation but from listening to what his whole self was communicating. Discernment, I learned, is less about thinking harder and more about paying careful attention to the whole person.

DISCERNMENT IN DIVERSE AND COMMUNAL CONTEXTS

While my understanding of discernment is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, my daily work takes place in diverse settings. Some people speak openly about God; others speak of conscience, inner peace, or what feels humane and right. As a hospital chaplain, I understand that my role is not to translate these experiences into my personal framework but to offer inclusive spiritual care that respects the beliefs, traditions, and backgrounds of the patients, families and staff and how they seek meaning and clarity.

Another point about discernment that I've found is that it's rare that it happens one on one. It often unfolds within families facing shared uncertainty or when care shifts from cure to comfort. I recall a family meeting in the ICU in which adult children were struggling with how best to care for their mother. The emotional temperature in the room was high—tears, strong language, frustration, and anger were all present. As always, I was not there to make decisions for them or act as a referee. My focus was to help create a space where everyone could speak and be heard. My hope is always that my presence

and my prayer—spoken or silent—will serve as an anchor and provide a calming influence. In this situation, as the conversation slowed, shared values began to surface: love, gratitude, and a common desire to honor their mother's dignity. Eventually, the family reached a decision they could support together. The important lesson is that clarity did not come all at once; it emerged gradually through shared listening, patience, and trust.

CONCLUSION: DISCERNMENT AS ACCOMPANIMENT

Discernment is something we grow into over time. It isn't only a skill; it's an intentional practice that encourages us to slow down, listen more deeply, and remain present when decisions matter most. It isn't about certainty or quick answers; it's more about accompaniment—being with someone long enough and close enough for clarity and peace to reveal themselves.

At its heart, I would say discernment is a practice of listening—often in silence. Whether shaped by prayer, reflection, conversation, or quiet attention, discernment invites and requires humility and patience. It asks us to notice what we think, feel, and value and what calls us toward dignity and care.

As a chaplain, I have seen discernment take shape at the bedside, in family meetings, and in moments of deep uncertainty. Often, the decisions and outcomes in such situations are not immediately clear, but it's been my experience that eventually something meaningful emerges—a sense of alignment between heart, mind, and spirit. Like a tuning fork, discernment doesn't guarantee harmony, but when we intentionally listen for it—within ourselves and others—a resonance is created.

In closing, I would say that discernment is not a formula, a step-by-step guide, or even a magical solution. It's a holistic and deeply important tool in the chaplain's tool kit—one that grows out of listening, presence, and hope. Over time, it helps reveal the good, the better, and, hopefully, the best way forward.

NOTES

[1] Qur'an 2:115; *The Dhammapada*, attributed to Gautama Buddha, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri Press, 2007), 57; *Bhagavad Gita* 18:78, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Three Rivers Press, 2000), 179; Joseph Bruchac, *Native American Stories* (Fulcrum Publishing, 1991), xii; Carl R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 5.

[2] Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path: Mother Teresa* (Ballantine Books, 1995), 37–38.

[3] Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal* (Riverhead Books, 1996), 24–26.

[4] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 27l; Gerd Gigerenzer, *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (Viking, 2007).

[5] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994).

[6] Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Oxford University Press, 2004).