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## Discerning Experience

*HOW DOES COMMUNITY FACILITATE one's discerning among possible interpretations?*

When I awoke by the Michigan fountain, I did not consider it a religious experience, nor did I realize how it would impact my life. The fountain and the area around it became more beautiful—and that attracted me and engaged my curiosity. At the beginning, other areas of the town looked the same. My apartment and car looked the same, but the fountain looked different. I suppose if I were to have fixated on that one place as beautiful, I would have eventually revered it as a holy place.<sup>1</sup> However, after spending time around the fountain and learning to notice the quality of beauty there, then as I walked farther and farther away from the fountain, I could gradually see the physical beauty elsewhere in the world, and that beauty guided the development of my intuition. I slowly shifted my focus from an awareness of the fountain and the birds and flowers surrounding it to an awareness of how I responded to the beauty and how my way of responding to the world shifted. I began to interpret Nature differently and shift my awareness of the world in light of my religious understanding (i.e., I began interpreting the beauty of the world within the idea of God).

Discerning an intuitive sense that leads to Life can be a risky and dangerous—if not impossible—task. I could have acquired a superficial attraction to beautiful places and made an idol of the feelings they evoke. But through prayer, I was able to strive to accept the desire for life as a gift that would strengthen my faith. As I wandered, I learned to follow

1. The primatologist Jane Goodall describes how chimpanzees she studied would demonstrate what she interprets as awe as they arrive at a waterfall in Kakombe Valley, and that resonates with how early humans might have developed nature-based religions. Goodall, *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe*, 241–42.

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my intuitive sense toward growth and away from fear, and to distinguish the desire for life from the desire to hide in fear. The danger in following my intuition was that I would never know for sure whether a particular idea led to life or death. I had a hunger for knowledge and valued the knowledge to which discernment would lead but could not see the frame that would support that discernment. As I walked around the Michigan campus and the town of Ann Arbor, I did not believe God had any preference where I walked, but I practiced trusting and following my instinct with the hope that I was developing a skill that God could eventually use. I could not yet see the mediating frame between my developing will and God's love captured in the shared wisdom of humanity.

One day my intuition led me into the occult section of a used bookstore. I had decided years ago that exploring the occult did not lead to life, so I left. Another day I wandered through the religion section of another used bookstore, felt anxious, and left. As I reflected upon that experience, I realized my anxiety and fear led me away, and that those feelings differed from the calm intrigue and aversion that I felt around the occult. On my next visit to town, I went back and sat among the religious books until the anxiety subsided. Then, I began to wander through the books on the shelves. As I flipped through the books, I found myself in a situation with which I was familiar, but in a place I had never been. I sat in a bookstore, but no longer flipping through books on mathematics or computer science, but flipping through books I had never seen—books by William James, Thomas Aquinas, and Søren Kierkegaard: books by men who thoughtfully and carefully lived lives of faith.

I was analytically able to begin to trust my intuition. From a vague and unclear beginning of my ephemeral intuitive sense, I had wandered through an internal world of fear and intuition, back out into a world in which I was comfortable with my scientific need to know. If while trying to grow in faith, I had followed my eyes or my hearing into a situation where I discovered great books on faith, I would have believed what I saw or heard, but instead I had followed a (for me) new sense. I was learning to trust my intuition and to gain evidence that this desire for life was coming from the same God written about by William James, Thomas Aquinas, and Søren Kierkegaard.

Although my budding intuition could have led me into the occult, superstition, or self-absorption, I believe I moved in an open direction of increasing possibility because I used my shifting awareness to seek God and then selected and reinforced behaviors that appeared to lead in

that direction. Growing up in an evangelical Christian community, I had learned to be suspicious of the occult and could associate my new feelings with that old wisdom. I believed God could work with my imperfections, fears, and failures, and saw that God had given me a desire and would not abandon me in my search. Other factors helped. I was in a safe environment, attended church regularly, had Christian friends I talked with, reflected on my experiences in prayer, and compared what I was learning with what I knew. I prayed and read the Bible daily, and basically had a structured faith life. Other factors were missing that could have helped: I was not seeking formal spiritual direction (and did not know what spiritual direction was); I was not in a religious community; I did not share my wandering experiences with others or talk to a pastor about them. Fortunately, discernment is neither a human ability nor a self-taught skill: discernment is a grace that, unbeknownst to me, I was beginning to learn.

### **Hunger for Community**

*What factors distinguish between directions leading toward spiritual growth and those leading away?*

By interpreting my experience within a religious context, I could draw upon the embedded wisdom of others even though I did not realize other people had similar experiences. I could have found a fear-oriented interpretation of Christianity to confirm my comfortable and habitual way of avoiding risk, but I had learned something else from Scripture stories, churches, my childhood Bible-belt community, and friends with strong faith commitments. I learned the possibility of an open and inclusive interpretation of Christianity that challenged my comfortable assumptions in a way that overcame fear and led to healing.

One day when walking around Ann Arbor, I met someone I knew from a campus ministry group that I had been attending at a local church, which met every Thursday for a brief worship service, simple meal, and discussion. As we chatted, we discovered that we had more in common than we had realized (including an interest in the same young woman who caused us similar confusions). Although that friendship might have formed during the group, it had not; and I wonder if the increased openness I felt while wandering facilitated our mutual curiosity that day. From that forty-five-minute conversation emerged one of my closest friendships—it would have been a great loss if I had remained closed to that possibility.

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The campus ministry group became close over the next couple years: we had retreats, canoeing and camping trips, and service projects, and I formed several close friendships within that group as we hung out; played tennis, pool, and cards; and took trips together. At the end of those couple years, several of us felt attracted to intentionally forming a more intimate community. Although we were relatively vulnerable and emotionally intimate in our individual relationships, somehow the group as a whole lacked a comparable level of emotional and spiritual intimacy. The desire for a deeper level of intimacy and vulnerability in the group seemed to be a call to community, which was something we only partially understood. We discussed how it would be nice if we could be in community, speculated on reasons we were not, and tried to find ways to form community and increase the social cohesion and warmth of the group, which was the “family” for those of us far from home. Although we were close friends, we thought we just were not vulnerable enough in the group to have community, as we understood it. The intimacy needed for community did not seem to be present.

I recall the last retreat we had before I moved away. A couple friends had already moved, and new people were joining. Some of us were frustrated with the lack of connection and spiritual depth in a group we knew was capable of much more (because we knew each other). One or two people had read M. Scott Peck’s *The Different Drum* on community making. Peck describes the stages of community as pseudocommunity (where everyone is nice and fakes community), chaos (where fighting and struggle take place), emptiness (surrendering expectations and barriers to communication), and finally community (with its vulnerability and intimacy).<sup>2</sup> We saw that we were in pseudocommunity, and there were obstacles to community. There was also a prologue in Peck’s book that did not make sense to us in the framework of the book, though one person recognized that the prologue seemed to say more.

The prologue reads:

There is a story, perhaps a myth. Typical of mythic stories, it has many versions. Also typical, the source of the version I am about to tell is obscure. I cannot remember whether I heard it or read it, or where or when. Furthermore, I do not even know the distortions I myself have made in it. All I know for certain is that this version came to me with a title. It is called “The Rabbi’s Gift.”

2. A colloquial description is “fun, fighting, farting, and friendship.”

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. “The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again,” they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

“No, I am sorry,” the rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well, what did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could

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he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had

once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.<sup>3</sup>

As we discussed community, our relationships, and what the prologue might mean, I felt frustrated and resentful because this was my last retreat. I was leaving soon and believed I had missed an opportunity to be a part of community. Some harsh words were spoken, and the retreat ended with most people feeling confused and empty.

Reflecting on that time, I see that retreat of frustration, despair, and disappointment as a more intense community than our interpretation of Peck's stages led us to believe. Although from his model, we might have seen that retreat as a possible beginning of community, it was, in reality, the conclusion of a year of a great community.

We were frustrated because we could not experience greater vulnerability and intimacy within that collection of people. That meant we had reached the greatest intimacy we could gain in that group. We were immersed in community and did not know it. My problem was that I had expectations about what a perfect community might look like, saw how each of us was more vulnerable in certain situations than others, and hoped we could all be completely vulnerable always. But that is not human, and community is composed of humans—where we are with our wounds, limitations, and potentials. Not where we could be, but where we are. Reflecting back, I see the only thing that we needed in order to turn the existing group into an “ideal” community would have been to change our interpretation of community to respect where each one of us was, and to accept fully that we were in community together. The story seemed to identify that community depended upon how we saw each other, but we did not recognize that shifting our interpretation of each other (and ourselves) would have a transformative effect. We thought we knew what community looked like, and that expectation masked the subtler emotional connections of community that had already formed. The growth of community had already begun, and many of us continue to maintain those connections years later, but until we (or at least I) could let those expectations die, we could not become aware of the emptiness where real community was already in full bloom. By attending to each other's limitations rather than each other's possible manifestations of Christian love, we missed feeling the warmth of friendship in the community and missed realizing that loving respect would probably have pulled us closer. But that is where we were (and where I was), and by accepting that limitation and

3. Peck, *The Different Drum*, 13–15.

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misperception now, I am able to see that it was community just the same, and hold that community in my heart.

### Recognizing Community

It took many years for my understanding of community to develop. When I first recognized that something was missing in my personal development, I suspected that involved some kind of emotional, social, and spiritual growth, but I did not know what it looked like, and my science and engineering training did not give me the tools to understand what I needed. As my decreasing fear opened me to a broader range of experiences, I began to hunger for what I later recognized as community. Later I understood my development as progressing through my membership in a series of communities that each implicitly or explicitly contributed to my personal development, and gave me the tools to recognize what was happening.

For me, the East Tennessee community in which I grew up generally tended to support my mom, sister, and I as we struggled with dad's illness. Mental illness was poorly understood in Appalachia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but individuals in the community responded as best they could to the unexpected and unfamiliar change in my dad's behavior. Contemporary understanding of schizophrenia would have helped my dad as well as others who supported him, but the community (centered on the church we attended) had a readiness to respond relationally to crises in the community that at least included emotional support. I also noticed the supportive way that members of the community responded to death among its members by being present to the family (and bringing food) that eased suffering as those remaining had to learn new ways to continue their (social) lives.

While attending the University of Michigan, I had discovered that some of my dissertation work might help solve problems in genetic mapping. I became attracted to what I understood as computational genetics and moved to Houston, Texas, to work on the Human Genome Project, which was a government project to map and sequence all the human genes. I took the opportunity to leave the relatively abstract and apparently impractical world of academic computer-science research in the early 1990s to apply my skills to understand the scientific foundations of biological life. My intuitive wandering had opened up a way of thinking that seemed richer and more full of life than the mental realm I studied

within the field of cognitive science at that time. I believed I might help alleviate the suffering of many people by accelerating the search for the genetic basis of disease. I was excited that I could have fun doing what I enjoy and could help others. I took a risk to follow my intuition away from the security of familiar computer science research to the unfamiliarity of applying my skills to life sciences.

For me, the direction toward life sciences symbolized a direction toward Life. I moved away from the linear, logical process of mathematics and computer science toward the fuzzier, experimental science of genetics. Later I would discover that I had universalized the biological in my attraction to its beauty, but at the time, making the decision based on intuition was the significant step for me. I felt a gnawing prompting to consider moving toward genetics; but, at the time, the area of computational genetics did not exist.<sup>4</sup> I took the step because that seemed the direction to go. In the next few years, new fields opened up, and many people entered into the same area I had. The step of that career decision was also a step on my spiritual journey.

I had made a career choice based on intuition and feeling and a desire to follow the leading of my soul: Now, I would discover where that would lead.

## Discerning Decisions

From that career choice also began my journey to discover the relationships of my spiritual, social, and emotional life. In attempting to model the complex, dynamic relationships of biology using the logical, analytical tools of computer science, I learned that the relational aspects of community for which I longed were a better way of understanding the dynamic processes of biology than the analytical methods I had learned.

I eventually realized biological processes often orient toward sustaining themselves (and the organism or ecology which contains them), and while the tools of logic, mathematics, and computer science can help one describe those ideals and norms toward which a biological process orients, they are less effective in describing how those ideals are obtained. Those relational processes most apparent in biology occur throughout

4. The area of research eventually solidified as the fields of bioinformatics, genomics, and systems biology.

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Nature, and as humans we can understand those relations in terms of social relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next fifteen years, I increased my capacity for emotional intimacy and deeper relationships. I married, divorced, and eventually discovered the Roman Catholic tradition of community in the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). As do many other Roman Catholic religious orders, Jesuits live in community—sharing housing, meals, finances, faith journey, and lives—while working on their mission within the church and world. Along with their educational, spiritual, and social missions, the Jesuits have also set up numerous lay communities where nonordained men and women live for one or more years while studying or working for social justice. I learned about Jesuit community while studying theology at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, becoming friends with Jesuits, rooming with a former Jesuit, and living in an intentional religious community that Jesuit-trained laypeople had formed in San Francisco.

Discernment plays a central role in the Jesuits and Ignatian spirituality (the spirituality developed through Ignatius of Loyola—the founder of the Jesuits). As a central aspect of their training, Jesuits undergo the Spiritual Exercises, a monthlong retreat defined in the writing of Ignatius, where they prayerfully engage Scripture, examine their life, and learn skills of discernment. A key insight of Ignatius is that we can find God in all things. A goal of Ignatian discernment is to find God in all things and to discover where God is active. In Ignatian discernment, one first learns to identify the feelings of consolation (such as I experienced in my initial awareness of beauty at the Michigan fountain and in discovering religious thinkers at the Ann Arbor bookstore) amid feelings of desolation (such as my anxiety and fear), and then one acquires the ability to discern whether the consolations orient oneself toward the Good or eventually lead away.

5. In exploring “Nature as Life” while learning and doing research in biology, I noticed a similarity between the networks of molecular processes in biology and robust social networks. Learning about the beauty of biological processes from biologists not only taught me the beauty of nature in life, it also gave me a foundation to see the beauty in “Nature as Life,” in which Nature metaphorically grows, reproduces, and evolves (i.e., emerges). Other relations in Nature include molecular interactions that resist annihilation of physical objects, relations between neural assemblies in decision making and interpretation, and relations between interpretations in forming culture and spirituality. These relationships constitute the source domains of Nature as Existence, Nature as Mind, and Nature as Community. Seeing “Community as Organism” and “Organism as Community” informs both “Nature as Life” and “Nature as Community.”

In discernment, I learned to consider my regular decision making in a broader context. I not only evaluated my options in the current situation, I learned to allow my emotions to influence choices in terms of who I am as a whole person. I could then consider whether my rational decision making was Good in light of religious teachings. If I were to evaluate my choices using only religious and ethical guidelines, I might interpret those guidelines in a way that supported my desire; but by reflecting upon what I considered valuable in making those choices, I could separate my decision making from my values and compare my values with those ascribed to by the religious communities influencing me. I could then decide what to do about any differences I noticed and investigate from where they came.<sup>6</sup>

As I grew in my capacity for human relationships, I learned to accept my own and others' weaknesses and strengths. Although relatively easy to find dynamics that challenge my relational capacity, I generally try to approach those opportunities for healing and growth with an open heart. Realizing that most people usually make the best connection they can with their filters, conditions, and tendencies helps me to accept and overcome self-isolating dispositions to move toward treating myself with respect. Although I could choose situations that minimize my limitations and vulnerabilities, I continue to explore and seek out situations for growth and healing, and try to remember that my wounds can sometimes contribute in ways that my strengths cannot.

I have learned to see community not only as a collection of individuals but also as a potential readiness for relationship that I see some people embody (often much better than I). (Similar to how some minds have a readiness to interpret, some communities have a readiness to relate.) The readiness and will to relate can open one up to brief moments of vulnerability, intimacy, and spiritual awareness regardless of whether other conditions for community exist. As one person interprets another as a human being in need, one can respond with love and compassion. In addition, in some of those moments of possible community, one can also find commitments to shared values that can sustain continued communal relationships.

As many people who have made long-term commitments can attest, the reasons one keeps a commitment usually differ from the reasons why one originally made the commitment. After several years with a

6. According to the systems model of chapter 7 for analysis, the religious and ethical guidelines are a cultural system, and thus depend upon an interpretive process I do not completely embody.

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commitment, the desires and goals one used in making the decision have usually shifted, and one finds different desires or goals that honor the same values. The ideal of any human institution generally differs from the reality, and mature human development takes those discrepancies into account. In a community, one commits to something that transcends the mundane and impoverished, yet an essential aspect of that grounding community is its flawed humanity. Community grounds spirituality within the relationships of imperfect people and yet still may hold values that transcend what the members could individually embody. Although I shifted my affiliation among different churches and academic institutions, rather than taking me further from the ideals of each, somehow the progression of communities took me deeper into what each one valued as I became both a better Christian and a better scientist.

The will to relate includes both a commitment to values of some community and a willingness to interpret one's experience with another in light of those values. The Christian value to love one's neighbor as one's self constrains one's possible decisions and interpretations about others to be oriented toward this value. Similarly, in the Buddhist *brahma-viharas*, the values of loving-kindness, compassion in the presence of suffering, and joy in the presence of happiness support equanimous response to others, which constrains one's decisions and interpretations of others to be oriented toward that value. Those constraints not only lead to the development of new individual habits; they also help define tendencies of Nature that give rise to phenomena identifiable as spiritual.

### Summary

My wandering experiences at that University of Michigan fountain led from a development of my intuition to an awareness of community and its role in my learning discernment. Engagement with community guided my greater social development, emotional healing, and intellectual understanding, and gave me a foundation for understanding relational aspects of Nature.

## Additional Material

### Questions

*When have you experienced the warmth of community?*

*How did the social engagement change you as an individual?*

*What attracts you to relationship?*

*How does receiving an opportunity for relationship make you feel?*

### Exercise

Take five minutes to sit and remember those who have reached out to you in relationship. Is there someone you know whose capacity and readiness for relationship you admire? Wish for (or pray for) their happiness.

### Further Reading

Gandhi. *An Autobiography; the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. London: Phoenix, 1949.

Levy, Jacques. *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa*. 1975. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Both Cesar Chavez and Gandhi demonstrated notable readiness to relate and transformed that readiness in others as proponents of nonviolent resistant within collectivist cultures.

Peck, M. Scott. *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. Peck describes stages of community formation that he learned organizing communities as a psychiatrist.