

THE POWER OF DISCERNMENT

HELPING YOUR TEEN HEAR GOD'S VOICE WITHIN

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I lovingly dedicate this book

to

Eleanor Sheehan, CSJ,
who taught me to discern,

and

Kathy Root,
who discerns with me

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INTRODUCTION

DISCERNMENT. That should be easy enough to explain. We use it all the time: I *discern* a tad of sarcasm in your voice. She's very *discerning* when it comes to people's characters. He was horrified when he *discerned* the taste of chili powder instead of cinnamon in a cookie from the same batch he had taken to welcome the new neighbors. All we have to do is flip to the *D*'s in that fat dictionary on the shelf to find a tidy definition of discernment, with references to perceiving, observing, noticing differences, and utilizing keen understanding and insight.

But *discernment* can be a churchy word, too. "Discernment of spirits"—these words fly throughout religious establishments with the grace of a dove. We discern God's will. We discern good from evil. We discern what is of God and what is not. Now the word *discernment* takes on a whole new dimension, a spiritual one. We observe, notice differences, and develop keen understanding and insight to perceive the difference between choices that fill us with life and those that drain life from us, so that we can live healthy lives in harmony with God's vision for us. The simple, three-line dictionary definition of discernment, now infused with faith, takes on deeper meaning. And because it involves human nature interacting with the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit, it also becomes more complex.

This is a book meant to encourage parents to empower their preteens and teens to discern the presence and action of God in their lives. Yet when I was a teenager I had never heard that expression, discernment. In fact, it wasn't until I was in the throes of raising children that I

first became aware of what, for me, was a thrilling concept: that God communicates divine will directly to me. Discernment is the gift of the Holy Spirit that I use to listen to God's voice. Teenagers don't have to wait as long as I did. They have the gift, too.

Our Church has always taught that our individual, well-formed conscience is at the heart of moral decisions. This is only possible because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose gift to us is discernment, the ability to hear with clarity God's direction for our lives. Our faith informs us that God's revelation is ongoing and that God communicates with us from within. Therefore, we have the ability to hear God if we but listen.

It gets even more exciting. The good news is that God is not inviting us to a dirge, a standing order of suffering and sacrifice, a castor oil spiritual life. Instead, God is drawing us forth into fullness of life, one marked by peace, love, joy—and freedom. To help us along, God has given us the Holy Spirit, complete with the gift of discernment.

What I'm eager to share is that understanding this spiritual gift can be a tremendous support to us in our parental responsibilities. What I can't wait for teenagers to discover is that God really does want us to have freedom—what Bernard Häring calls “the greatest risk God ever took.” This is not the anything-goes, let-anarchy-reign, no-boundaries kind of freedom that is, in fact, an abuse of God's gift to us. Instead, God's freedom is spiritual and emotional liberation from those attitudes, habits, and fears that confine us, bind us, and block us from fullness of life. Whether we can accept this gift of freedom hinges

on learning to listen to that loving, encouraging, wise voice within.

One of the strongest insults believers can receive—at least, it seems, in the eyes of the one serving it up—is, “They're nothing but cafeteria Christians,” meaning they pick and choose only what they want to believe. Such a slanted oversimplification of the intricate and sacred process of listening to God's voice! In my thirteen years of practicing spiritual direction and giving retreats, eleven years of teaching intermediate and high school students, and twenty-five years of raising five children, I've seen that life is laden with choices. The spiritual journey is abundant with choices, and God calls us to make decisions that are moral, loving, and life-giving. The menu is varied—at times unappetizing, at times enticing—but God is the bread of life, and that above all is our staple as followers of Jesus. Indeed, God has given us a divine utensil for making those healthy decisions: the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment. Our role as parents is to teach our children to use discernment, to make decisions that nourish their bodies, minds, and souls.

This theme of teaching families to discern burns in my heart because of the hunger I've seen in people I've known in spiritual direction and on retreats who so genuinely seek God's will in their lives but who are bound by “shoulds” and external expectations. The transformation in these people when they realize that we are truly free beings, centered in a God who loves us unconditionally, who wants nothing more than our greatest good, our utmost happiness, is a miracle indeed. And one I must share.

While *cafeteria Christian* is a pejorative term, indicating someone has an anything-goes attitude about moral decisions, *discerning Christian* has a more authentic ring to it—authentic to our call to live in union with God. Jesus, through whom we come to know God, tells us, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). This invitation to fullness of life is precisely the fruit of a spiritual life rooted in discernment. Discerning believers expect God’s direction in their lives, listen for it, and follow it to the best of their understanding. They are aware that God dwells within and that, therefore, in addition to the Scriptures, the wisdom of their Church, and the experience of those who have come before, their own experience is the warm water in which the yeast of God’s will can grow. Discerning believers have found a better path to knowing God’s will than the prepackaged, one-for-all regimes that have previously left them hungry for an experience that confirms God’s hand in their decisions. They have, in short, chosen freedom in God.

Discernment is not some kind of glib relativism. Rather, it is a spiritually sound, Scripture-based, tried-and-tested-for-centuries recipe for living in God’s will. Discernment of spirits is one manifestation of the Spirit, and is ours to be used for the common good, the building of God’s Kingdom (1 Cor. 12:7–11).

Saint Paul advised the Ephesians, and continues to advise us, “Living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ” (Eph. 4:15). What a powerful message to instill in our youth. Growing into Christ is the path to spiritual maturity. It involves finding our truth, that is, seeking what is true and right for us

as that truth proceeds from Christ’s life in us. It is above all a process. Discernment, too, is a growing process, one that lasts a lifetime. We are all on this journey—children as well as parents.

As I’ve listened to the stories of people I see for spiritual direction, particularly their sacred realizations of God’s presence and action in their lives, I’ve wondered why we can’t begin at an early age teaching children to discern. I recently gave a retreat for a group of young adults, all giving a year of service to poor people. As I spoke with many individually, the same theme kept surfacing. “Tell me more about discernment,” they begged. “How can I know I’m doing the right thing?” These were sincere followers of Jesus, trying to make sense of their deep inner longings, trying to reconcile them with the expectations of society, family, their peers, their Church. And with what they perceived God expected of them. The question resurfaced within me: Could we begin even earlier to start talking about discernment in families? Might it actually be possible to make such a lofty-sounding principle as discernment understandable—indeed, practicable—to a ten-year-old, a fifteen-year-old, a young person on the brink of adulthood? Everything in me said yes.

My high school classroom is full of young people who would benefit from being guided in their use of discernment. I often wonder why some resist, rebel, and refuse or bend and buckle, while others unfold so gracefully into the fullness of who they can be.

What is going on in the minds of teenagers who completely disengage from the learning process, refusing to do any assignments? who consistently make unwise

choices about companions and activities? who don't seem to like themselves?

What if these same young folks were on top of the world because they knew they were wise, valued, and supported unconditionally? I envision generations of young people who have this kind of emotional, moral, and spiritual confidence because families have made a commitment not to keep them in line but to help them unfold, like gardeners of rare, precious flowers. These families know the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are ours because God's Spirit abides within us. Parents choose not only to develop these gifts within themselves but also to guide their children in doing the same. In this way, family life is transformed, and souls are transformed.

The wisdom in this book comes from many sources. As much as I would like to, I can't say that I'm writing this book as the result of having systematically introduced the concept of discernment to my children, then successfully led them through the process. On the contrary, I had never even heard of discernment until I was the mother of four, and it took me several years under the guidance of my spiritual director to make discernment a way of life. So a good deal of my insight has come from my own shortcomings in parenting. Indeed, nearly all of the parents I interviewed for this book claim they've spent the better part of their parenting career figuring out the role they play in helping children make mature decisions. They stumble often, fall sometimes, pick up the pieces, and try again—learning volumes in the process. What makes these parents stand out is their sincere desire to raise their children rooted in God's will. Their gracious

generosity in sharing their learned wisdom is the heart of this book.

We parents have a challenge in using the gifts God has given us to raise spiritually healthy families. It's scary. Many of us were raised in varying degrees of authoritarian families, where we were told what to do every step of the way, and this has seemed the tried-and-true way to parent. Others of us so desire order in our lives that we see the best way to establish order is to be emphatic about how we want things done in our families. Still others of us know up close exactly what can go wrong in life, and we want to protect our children from any such harm. Something as spiritual as discernment hardly seems tangible enough to raise children with. Letting go and really believing and trusting that God will parent with us is a risk indeed.

So we're embarking on an adventure creating healthy lives from healthy choices. Using discernment to raise children and teaching young people to discern God's truth may be uncharted waters for many, if not most, of us. But it's a method of parenting that is centered in God. It's our best shot.

We can be assured we'll not drown, even when the waters rage. God, after all, is with us through it all.

BECOMING A DISCERNING ADULT

IT WAS DURING a thirty-week directed retreat—an extended seven-month commitment to daily prayer and weekly guidance of a spiritual director—that I first heard the concept that God could communicate directly to me. I was thirty-six, and it knocked my socks off. Many adults, I’ve found, are as clueless as I was about listening to the stirrings of God’s Spirit within us. I was blessed. I spent eight months meeting weekly with a spiritual director who mentored me in the process of discernment.

The first time I met with her changed me forever. What had prompted my initial visit was a nebulous feeling of inner disorder, which I figured must be spiritual. My director and I talked about my religious history, about who God was for me, about the Holy Spirit’s gifts of peace, love, and joy that filled me—or didn’t. Soon I found myself talking about a predicament that was causing me deep turmoil within. I was afraid it wasn’t spiritual enough to talk about in this setting, but my gentle guide wisely encouraged me to continue.

Here is the story: I had made friends with a single mother of four young boys. I particularly enjoyed this woman’s friendship because we connected in a spiritual way. From time to time, she would ask me to care for her children while she met appointments, which I was glad to do. But as time went on, I realized that her “appointments” were actually activities that conflicted directly with my values. She knew this, of course; hence, the deceit.

As I look back on this relationship, I see it with different eyes. But at the time, I believed that helping this woman was charity. I thought it was virtuous to be there for her even as she acted from a different, seemingly misguided, value system. As a sincere follower of Christ, I was certain that God was calling me to put my own needs and desires aside and give, then give some more. I was sure I was doing the right thing, even though it felt horrible.

My spiritual director saw something quite different. I expected her to affirm what I was doing and to give me a theological verification along the lines of how good it must be because I was feeling so bad. Instead, after hearing me describe my inner turbulence, my confusion, disorder, and chaos, she asked, “Do you *want* to be her friend?” I answered that I felt I *needed* to be her friend.

She repeated the question: “But do you *want* to be friends with this woman who has used you, lied to you, and disregarded your values?”

When she put it that way, it was easier to answer.

“No!” I shouted.

“Then that’s your answer,” she replied quietly.

My spiritual director, in her wisdom, could see that I was extending myself from an unhealed place and that I was ignoring my intuition, my own inner wisdom, which was speaking to me loud and clear through my feelings of distaste for the situation. She initiated me into the practice of discernment, which, much to my surprise, was not something “out there” but was, rather, as grounded in real life as well-worn sneakers, frayed laces and all.

The fruits of discernment, begun that day, were far-reaching. Because I was now able to discern, I could pass on this sacred legacy to my children. And I could do so with great excitement and conviction.

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT?

I have a sneaking suspicion that most of us have already had numerous experiences of discernment, but have never given it a name. Let’s think back to the plethora of decisions we’ve already made in life: The house search that culminated in the day we walked into what we knew with certitude was “our” house. The job interview that triggered repulsion, causing us to turn on our heels practically before the interview was over. The times we knew exactly when to say no and when to say yes to all those requests for our time. Why we told one child no and another child yes. The book we couldn’t get into years ago, but now speaks to us on a deep level.

Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit through which we come to know God’s will for us. We can also think of God’s “will” in different terms: God’s desire for us. God’s hope for us. The dream God shares with us. Wisdom is the foundation of discernment, which is based on our faith that God is continuously communicating with us. God can choose to convey divine insight through a number of instruments: the Scriptures, the wisdom of the Church, spiritual reading, spiritual directors, music, nature, spouses, friends, children, parents. When I gave directed retreats, people often asked how I chose the Scripture passages I assigned them. They were amazed at how specifically God spoke to them in that particular text. I smiled to myself, knowing that I could have thrown in an article from the *Rocky Mountain News*, and the Spirit still would have spoken. That’s how powerful and how personal the Holy Spirit is.

God’s Spirit works through varied avenues, but many people are surprised to hear that God also communicates