

*be
encouraged
to reveal
what
is being
kept secret
in the depths
of the heart*

When the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who understands his deceits and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows the he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his evident deceits have been revealed. (Spiritual Exercises, 326)

Like the young man in this incident each of us is caught up in the process of choosing, day in and day out, in small matters and in big. The issue at stake is always how consciously and deliberately I appreciate, analyze and involve myself in the process. Do I make positive decisions by chance or because I have engaged in planned and recognised steps?

Recently I was involved in a discernment process myself which felt very much like a tug of war and which taught me the importance of overriding my personal boundaries of secrecy on such an occasion and speaking to someone else about my private life. It took me a long time, during which I felt helpless and depressed. I found myself struggling, and I only regained my peace when I eventually listened to the voice that was saying, "Damn all consequences, and break that spell of secrecy cast on you." I responded to the voice which was saying, "Come, break through. It will not hurt, rather it will be relieving and helpful." Then I felt really strong. The outcome was terrific, totally different from my anticipated fears and reservations.

I look back now and I know that God struggled at my side in that experience. It has given me a realistic and empowering assurance that, however hard the tug of war, God's abundant grace always enables me/us to break through if we are well-disposed and determined. Certainly, it will never be a walk-over but it will always come out fine by God's grace.

Discernment: A Balance at Equilibrium

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DAVID WHYTE, AN American poet, tells the story of joining an expedition in the Himalayas. At one point he separated from his companions and arranged a point of meeting. Walking at an altitude of 11,000 feet he came to the bridge crossing a deep chasm. One of its steel cables had collapsed and most of the wooden slats had slithered into a bunch in the middle. The alternative route would take several days and he would miss the rendezvous.

A very experienced rock climber, he describes how he sat by the bridge, afraid to go across . . . fifteen minutes . . . half an hour . . . an hour . . . an hour and a quarter. It was as if by gazing long enough at the broken cable he would find it had repaired itself spontaneously!

Suddenly along the path limped a little, old Tibetan lady. Carrying a huge straw basket on her back, she was collecting dried yak dung, valuable fuel for cooking. At their encounter she bent low with joined hands in traditional fashion. "Namaste!" ("I greet the God in you!") He bowed. "Namaste!" By the time he raised his eyes she was on the precarious planks and in seconds, without thinking, he had followed her.

One day the hero
sits down,
afraid to take
another step,
and the old interior angel
limps slowly in
with her no-nonsense
compassion
and her old secret
and goes ahead.
"Namaste!"
you say
and follow.

*the part of us
that limps
is the part
that takes us
across
the abyss*

I think Ignatius would have liked that story. He knew that when there is a choice of direction neither way is a simple option and that the ground is holy. At such moments we are faced with more than an external dilemma; our ways of perceiving God, ourselves and our world are all called into question. Our usual competence is of no avail. The young David Whyte learned that all his male strength, courage and acquired skill could not help him here. The 'hero' had to sit down. Years later he reflected on the gift of the wizened face of wisdom — traditionally depicted as feminine — that came to his rescue. The part of us that limps is the part that takes us across the abyss.

Presumably you, like me and many others, have sometimes spent long hours, days or even months, considering seemingly perilous alternatives in the hope that the reality before us is not what it is! Perhaps it is a very necessary phase during which a lot of hidden readjustment is taking place. Learning is going on deep in our soul and we need patience with ourselves and others. Only after this period of outer paralysis are we open to God's leading "in ways that are level and smooth." (Ps 143)

Anne Wilson Schaefer reflects on the same issue from a slightly different angle:

Our most important decisions are discovered not made. We can make the unimportant ones but the major ones require us to wait with the discovery. We often push ourselves to decisions that have not ripened and are not ready to be made. We castigate ourselves for being indecisive and others share this opinion of us. We believe that if we were just wise enough, intelligent enough, or clear enough we would know what we want. We do not respect that maybe the reason we can't make a decision is because *we don't know yet*.

Wisdom meanwhile is engaged in the daily gathering of fuel. In the Himalayas, as in many other parts of the world, this is the task of the elderly and the children. Working with individuals and groups I am often struck by the way in which the forward thrust eventually arises out of a dogged fidelity to the essential business of community living (in its

widest sense). I think we can accept that, on the whole, but what always seems to bother us is our limping vulnerability.

Most of us have been so well educated into thinking that we will survive by our strength that we take reluctantly to being led not only in but also by our weakness and fear, in spite of the constant message of scripture magnificently summarised in the letter to the Hebrews. Christ — the bridge, its builder and the one who goes before us across it — is "beset with weakness" and "in the days of his flesh offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear." (Heb 5)

In my training as a counsellor and facilitator I had to discover again and again that fear, in myself, the other or the group, is a most valuable tool for discernment. It usually makes us halt on our egocentric path and purifies us for the saving encounter. I imagine that the adventurer/poet would have followed the Tibetan lady across the bridge or back along the trail. The important decision was to obey his then unconscious knowing and later to learn from what he had experienced.

Can we look back and identify our own 'interior angels', those people, circumstances, dreams or events that showed us the way beyond our fear? Sometimes they themselves are veiled in shadow as the priest and writer, Jim Cotter, reminds us:

Drink deep of the chalice of grief and sorrow
held out to you by your dark angel of Gethsemane;
the angel is not your enemy,
the drink, though sharp, is nourishing,
by which you may come to a deeper peace
than if you pass it by.

Most of us need to be taught how to greet these more sombre angels with respect and gratitude. "*Namaste!*"

I think we can see clearly in Cornelia both the traveller waiting in godly fear before difficult choices and the wisdom figure who steps lightly on to the bridge. Throughout her life she personified the description that Ignatius gives of the discerning person:

I should be like a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to either side, that I might be ready to follow whatever I perceive is more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of my soul. (Exx 179)