



1. Opening Prayer: Giving Gifts

Opening Prayer

Use the following statement as directed by the prayer leader to center yourself:

God loves me unconditionally
just the way I am.

Giving Gifts

When prompted, spend a few moments reflecting on or jotting a few thoughts about the following.

- How did your relationship with the recipient contribute to the choice of gift?
Why?
- What is the most powerful gift you have ever given someone?
To whom did you give it?
- How did your relationship with the recipient contribute to the power of the gift?
Why?
- Why was it so powerful?



2. Stories

1. How do we see?

The members of the congregation came to the Rabbi and asked,

“What are the criteria for determining
when it is dawn
and time for the morning prayer to begin?
Is it when we can discern
the outline of the trees against the sky?
Is that the time to begin the prayer?”

The Rabbi replied,

“No!”

“Well then,
is it when we can distinguish
the form of a horse from that of a cow?”

The Rabbi again replied

“No, no!”

They went on suggesting this or that referring
always to the clarity of daylight.

To each of their suggestions, the Rabbi replied

“No!”

Exasperated, the members of the congregation
pleaded,

“When, then, can we begin the prayer?”

The Rabbi replied,

“The dawn has come
and you may begin the prayer
when you can see in the face of every person
the face of your brother and sister.”

Questions for Discussion

The Rabbi invites his congregation to “see
differently”:

How am I invited to change the way I “see”?

What is my reaction to the way the Rabbi’s
congregation reacted?

What similarities are there in this with the way
I respond?

How easy or difficult is it to see your brother and
sister in the face of every person?

Why?

2. The Monastery

The Abbot of a monastery of aging monks was chatting with his friend the Rabbi. The Abbot spoke of his concern for the future of the abbey as the number of monks was declining and those who were there had become contentious and narrow-minded. No new members had joined them for some time.

“From your experience, do you have any advice for me and my monks?” the Abbot asked his friend.

“Ah,” said the Rabbi, “it is a great problem and it would be sad to see the monastery close. But I have no advice. I can tell you only this. I am convinced that the Messiah dwells there in your community. The Messiah is one among you.”

The surprised Abbot hastened home to let the brothers in on this amazing news. Of course, they asked who it might be, but the Abbot could not tell them as the Rabbi did not know.

The monks began to look around at the possibilities and, since they could not determine any particular one who merited this designation, they began to see each one in a different light.

The resulting change in behavior among the monks who began to see their brothers differently brought new life and new members to the monastery.

Questions for Discussion

Notice how it is someone from outside the monastery who serves as a catalyst for change. How open are we to “outsiders,” who can shake up our presumptions and highlight new ways to focus on things?

And yet, in the story, there is nothing external to the monastery that changes; the change is in the way the members of the community became aware of the others, in the light of ‘looking for the Messiah.’

What am I looking for in life, and how does this influence or condition the way I relate to others (for both good and perhaps for ill)?

The community seems to have become blind to the presence of God in all of life. What about my life makes it difficult for me to see God?

3. Lost?

A Rabbi was lost in the woods. For three months he wandered, searching for the way out, but with no success.

Then one day he met a group from his congregation, who were also lost in the woods.

They ran to meet him, saying “Rabbi, thank goodness we came across you! You can lead us out of the woods!”

The Rabbi replied, “I’m sorry, but I am just as lost as you are. However, I can tell you this: I’ve had more experience than you of being lost, and can tell you a thousand ways *not* to get out of the woods! With this experience, and working together, perhaps we’ll be able to find our way out together.”

Questions for Discussion

Do I take the time to reflect on where I am in my life? Am I aware of times when I am “lost”?

Acknowledging what I do not know can be a first, sometimes major, but always positive factor in a process of discernment: do I take due account of it in my decision-making?

Admitting I need help opens me to others, their expertise and experience. A healthy discernment always tries to go beyond just my perspective on things. Who are the people who have helped me along the way, who I feel I can turn to?



3. Discerning Gifts and Desires

*God loves you unconditionally
just the way you are!*

Discerning Our Gifts

Naming your gifts is part of the process of coming to know yourself better and can be quite helpful, indeed necessary, to discernment. When you are aware of your gifts, your skills, and your body, you can best discern what is right for you at a given time.

Common gifts include things like: compassion, listening, understanding, teaching, leading, organization, etc.

Often we focus too exclusively on our **skills**—things we can do but which do not give us the same reward as our gifts. Using your **gifts** brings joy not just in what is done, but on a deeper level.

For example: someone may cook for his/her family in order for the family to eat a healthy, balanced diet—perhaps even following a rotating menu (if it's Monday, it must be meatloaf). Another person may find joy in cooking new dishes or improvising with what is on hand or in using local fresh foods. The first person may indeed have the skill of cooking, but, the second person would more likely have the gift of cooking.

This distinction works in other areas too. We have all heard music that was technically fine but had no “soul” or “heart”—that would be skill. Other times we have heard music, perhaps even the same song, that was powerful and touched you deeply whether or not it was technically good—that is gift.

Listing Gifts

- List the things you love to do; would have loved to do; have loved to do
 - As a child
 - Since childhood
 - Now

- List things that have brought you joy (especially those things that give you energy, about which you are enthusiastic)
 - Accomplishments
 - Activities
 - Jobs
 - Hobbies
 - Relationships
- What gifts are indicated by these things?
 - Match gifts up with these accomplishments, joys, etc.
- Which gifts recur in your list?
 - These give clues as to your strengths

Listing Skills

- List those things in which you have acumen or ability
- List things you can do but which do not engage you

- List things which you actively dislike doing
- List things you can do that make you angry, bored, or fatigued

Naming Gifts

Your list of gifts from above is a good beginning, but there is more to recognizing and living your gifts than just listing them. A good exercise is to look at your life right now and determine what percentage of it utilizes your gifts and what percentage utilizes your skills. It is not possible to control everything about your life to use only your gifts, but, most people find themselves happier and less fatigued when using their gifts more often than their skills.

The same analysis can be used in discerning a job, a lifestyle choice, a direction, etc. Does the choice play to your gifts or your skills? How will that impact you in the long run? What can you do to change the balance?

Further Work

If you have trouble recognizing your gifts or if you want to go further with the process of uncovering your gifts, you may find the following exercises helpful:

- ask others (family, friends, etc.) what gifts they see in you—their responses may confirm your original thoughts or they may challenge you; spend time reflecting on their responses; sometimes others see in us things that we do not see (or perhaps even deny) in ourselves
- look at your dislikes and the things you do

not like about yourself or others—this is sometimes called “the shadow side” of ourselves; if we look into it, we may find that our gifts are reflected in the negative by our “shadow side”; this can work in several ways:

- if it irritates you when people treat others rudely, you may have the gift of compassion because you understand how the rudeness affects the person who is treated poorly
- if you are bothered by those who are doing something “that I could do better,” you may be jealous that they have an opportunity to use a gift that you also have
- if you are impatient with those who need further explanation of concepts, you may have the gift of understanding things easily

The Wisdom of your Body

Our bodies often “notice” things before our minds; being attuned to the natural responses of your body can aid you in discernment and help guide you in determining how you are responding to situations in your life.

Knowing how your body responds to stress, fear, excitement, resignation, joy, etc. is a good place to begin. Think about how you physically feel these emotions and make yourself aware of how you feel at each of these times.

Several physical responses are generally more negative:

- Tightness
- Pain
- Fatigue
- Headache/Backache
- Shallow Breathing
- Depression/Resignation
- Feelings of Stress
- Cold Hands/Feeling Cold

Other physical responses are generally more positive:

- Excitement
- Energy

- Smiling
- Warmth
- Comfort
- Sense of Well-Being
(Happy with the world)
- Relaxed

An exercise in the wisdom of your body

Take a few minutes several times a day to “check-in” with your body

- How are you feeling?
- How is your body responding?
- What are you doing or what brought on these feelings?

You may find it helpful to journal what you find. Over the course of time, patterns may emerge—note them.

- When are you most alert?
- When are you most productive?
- What ordinary activities bring about positive responses? Negative ones?
- How are my perceived gifts affirmed/denied by these patterns? My skills?
- What do these patterns have to say about my choices in life?

Continue to “check-in” each day and to use the wisdom of your body to inform your choices, areas of concern, and areas of affirmation in your life.

Over time by being aware of your body’s own natural responses to things in your life, you can improve your capacity to discern God’s will—the paths that will make you happy and allow you to use your gifts.

Clearness Committees

Clearness Committees were developed within the Society of Friends (Quakers) tradition.

Clearness Committees are groups of people gathered to help whenever someone needs to gain clarity and deeper understanding in order to make important decisions. This method is used by those who recognize the value in having outside help in determining the questions and discerning issues surrounding a decision—the group does not make the decision for the person, but offers whatever clarification they can to the person making the decision.

The group gathers with the express purpose of helping someone to look at and weigh all options prior to making a decision. Those who are gathered ask clarifying questions; they specifically avoid leading toward or suggesting answers. They help the person focus on himself or herself, and on God within. The answers come from the person seeking clarity, and from God moving within him/her.

As the session concludes, the questions are brought to an end, and the group makes observations about the answers and/or affective responses of the person who is seeking clarity. At no time do the members of the gathered group share their opinions or make suggestions.

These Committees are not for the everyday concerns of life. Apart from anything else, they demand too much intense work and energy from too many people, and they are called upon only for major decisions, where the person feels the need for clarity in discerning.

Before attempting to implement this kind of discernment assistance, it is imperative to understand it fully and completely. Begin by reading and studying the following:

- *The courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* by Parker J. Palmer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998)
- *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (revised edition) by S. G. Farnham, J. R. Gill, T. McLean, and S. M. Ward (Harrisburg, PA.: Morehouse, 1991)
- *Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment* by J. Hoffman (Philadelphia: Twelfth Month Press, 1996)
- *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goals of Clearness Committees* by P. Loring (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992)



4. Method: Some Suggestions

I. STOPP Method

Situation

Define the situation or decision in its simplest terms

- Avoid slippery slope arguments
- Answer the question:
 - “What it really boils down to is...”

Think it over

Explore the pros and cons of the choice and alternatives.

Do I have sufficient information about the matters which are relevant to this decision? Do I have information for both sides of the situation in question?

- Avoid loading the desired answer
- Answer the questions:
 - “The best argument for ...”
 - “The best argument against...”

Others

What do others think (both objectively and subjectively)? Also foster an awareness of God's word as it comes through the concrete events of daily life

- Avoid leading others to support your position
- Answer the questions:
 - “My faith would lead me to ...”
 - “My loved ones think ...”
 - “Where is God in ... news, events, opinions of others ...”
 - “An alternative view is ...”

Pray/Ponder

Spend time with your expected decision (“try it on”).

Note, interpret and reflect on the feelings and desires you experience within the framework of prayer and awareness of God

- Avoid falsely convincing yourself of undesirable position
- Answer the questions:
 - “Does this lead to good? Is this helping me to live a God centered life?”
 - “What will be gained/lost by choosing each of the paths before me?”
 - “What excites me about the options? What do I dislike?”
 - “What are my motivations? Am I running to this or avoiding something else?”
 - “Where is God in this decision?”

Proceed

Does the decision bring a sense of peacefulness, joy, love, or feeling at one with all that exists. Or, on the contrary, does it prompt tears of anger at injustice, sorrow at past wrongs.

Does it bring consolation, or desolation (which can include listlessness, boredom, unhappiness, anxiety)?

Feelings of consolation always put us into deeper relationship with God.

Feelings of desolation, in contrast, separate us from God.

We should also test the decisions we have made against the message in Scripture, the messages

of our body, and the opinions of our communities.

- Answer the questions:
 - “This is leading me toward ...”
 - “God is present in ...”
 - “How am I benefiting from this?”
 - “How are others benefiting from me in this?”

Obstacles to Discernment

Here are some of the key obstacles that can hinder us or even completely block us in our discernment.

Selective Hearing

- Listening only to those who agree with me.
- Listening clouded by pain, prejudices, cultural bias.

Partial Participation

- Failing take into account the experience of all.
- Only the powerful speak or are heard.

Authority granted

- Decision made on the basis of an authority rather than truth as I perceive it.
- Greater weight is given to someone in authority—and simply because they are in authority—than to others .

Manipulation

- Diligence needed to avoid manipulating truth of others to bolster my choice.
- Truth and honesty of others must be heard.

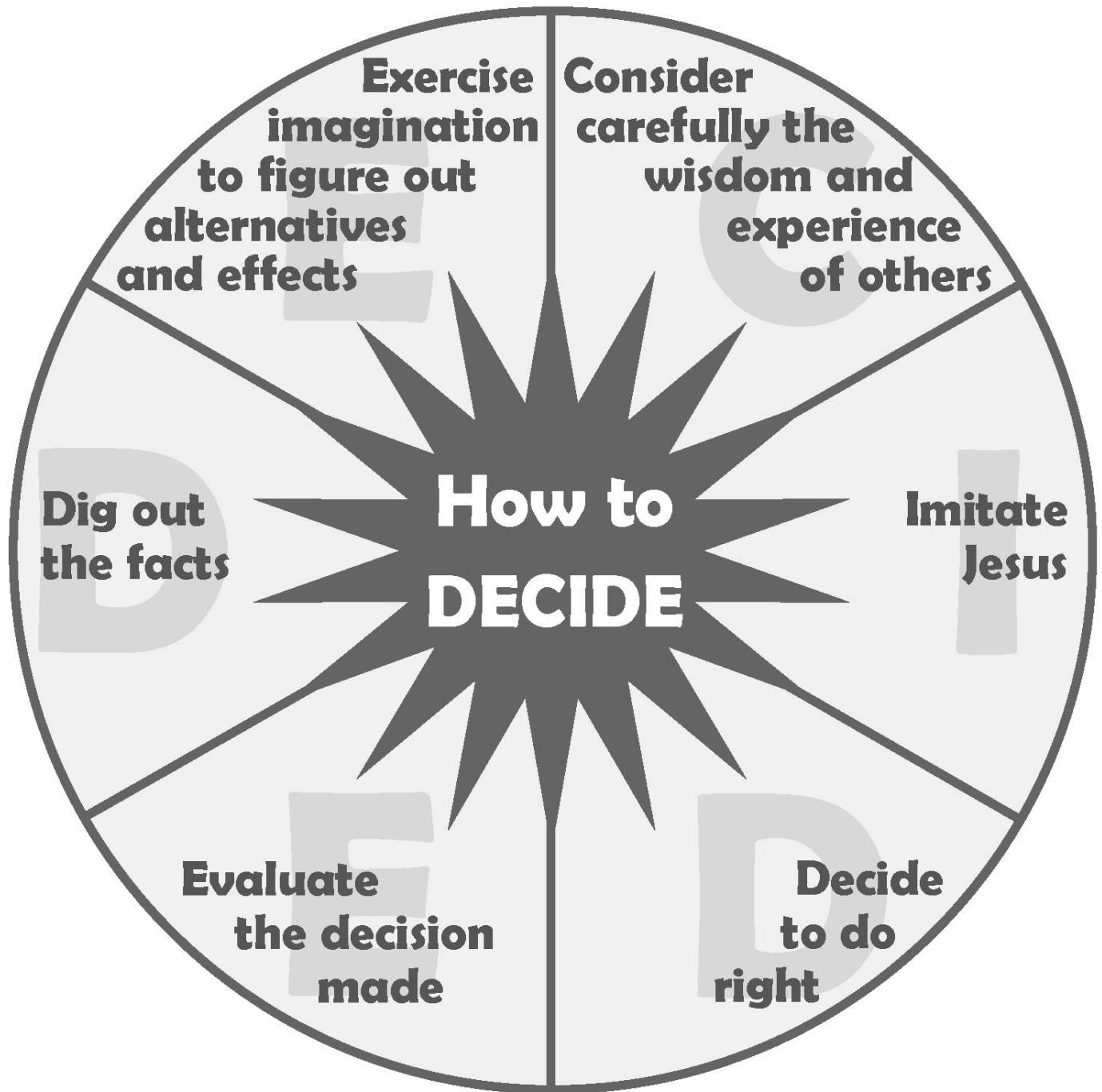
II. Essential Steps for Making a Stable Decision

*Michael I. O'Sullivan, SJ**

1. Confrontation with threat or opportunity and evaluating if it warrants effort
2. Seeking out various alternatives
 - Objectives and values considered
 - Inertia—most people stay current course unless change is evident
3. Carefully weigh advantages and disadvantages of each alternative
 - Reliable information gathered from wide variety of sources
 - Possible outcomes evaluated in terms of both utility and of how likely they are to facilitate values and objectives
 - Tentative decision reached
4. Devising plans to implement the decision and to inform others of choice
 - If controversial, giving intimate family and friends some idea of direction
 - Strategies to avoid disapproval
 - Social tactics and contingency plans to counter opposition
5. Stays with decision despite negative feedback
 - “Honeymoon” period gives way to negative feedback or obstacles
 - If decision was made diligently, only temporarily bothered
 - Stability of decision depends on:
 - Amount and intensity of negative feedback
 - Capacity to tolerate negative feedback
 - Vigilance of decision maker in conscientiously reaching decision

Summarized from Father O'Sullivan's article “Trust Your Feelings, but Use Your Head; Essential Steps for Making a Stable Decision” in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (The American Assistancy Seminar), 22/4 Summer 1990.

III. The Wheel of Good Decision-Making





5. Closing Prayer: Examen of Consciousness

*After quieting yourself,
and placing yourself in the presence of God ...*

1.

Give thanks to God for today ...

2.

Ask for the grace to recognize
and to change your shortcomings of today ...

3.

Look back over your day,
being aware of your gratefulness for the day,
“finding God in all things” in your day,
and seeing how you responded
to people, places and things today ...

4.

Ask God for forgiveness
for the times you have fallen short today,
and ask for help in understanding these times ...

5.

Make a plan for tomorrow,
and ask for God’s help in living it out.

Adapted from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola