

I don't think I had ever heard the word discernment before my time in seminary. Discerning, yes, but not discernment. During my time in seminary and during my early years of ministerial development—I say early years of development because I've discovered ministerial development continues long after graduate school, years of training and even years of settled ministry. During seminary I gained some understanding of this thing called discernment.

When I first learned the meaning of the word, it made sense to me. It seemed familiar, similar to other learning processes I had gone through before. At some point however, I realized that learning the meaning of that term was not the same as understanding what it meant.

I think it was during a class on Unitarian Universalist theology we were discussing what church meant. What did we think, or believe, UU congregational life was about? Was there something about our congregational life that was of particular importance, unique even?

This wasn't the first time I had given thought to such a question. I believed our UU community was a place where we could bring our full selves, where we were *encouraged* to bring our full selves, to be *fully* who we were. I felt comfortable that it wasn't just a belief, I could point to our principles to substantiate my thoughts.

Inherent worth and dignity of every person; acceptance of one another, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning---my truth and my meaning. There it was in ink on paper, there it is on the back of your order of service. It's right there in black in white.

Over time we moved on to try to deduce the implications of our beliefs for our ministry. Initially I felt comfortable, even proud that I would be in a position to encourage people to bring their full selves to the congregation. As I thought about what that would look like, I couldn't avoid looking at my own behavior within my home church.

It wasn't long before I became a little queasy. As I looked at my own behavior, it was clear that I hadn't brought *my full self* to church. More to the point, I realized I wasn't willing to fully disclose my full self. There were things I was not comfortable sharing with the larger community. In truth, there were things I was not willing to share with most folks, close friends included.

I had to wrestle with that awareness, face that reality. And what it meant for me as a minister, for my ministry? I thought about it intellectually, I thought about it emotionally, and I thought about it morally and spiritually.

It became clear that I could not ask others to do what I was unwilling to do. I began to understand that those principles I mentioned earlier are aspirational, and are not necessarily meant to be taken literally. They are not sacrosanct—they require deep thought and reflection. We need to seek where Spirit lies, not just adopt a legalistic interpretation.

Yes we should endeavor to bring our full selves to our faith community. Yes we should endeavor to be more fully who we are. But it's unreasonable to expect me or people in general to share all our failures, disappointments and shames. We all need to maintain a private life.

Having a belief in honesty does not mean we will never shade the truth, be misleading, tell a little white lie or what's further out on that continuum, a big black lie? As McKinney told us in our reading this morning:

“Sound rational analysis based on the best available information is crucial to good discernment. Yet spiritual discernment goes beyond the analytical to engage our senses, feelings, imaginations, and intuition as we wrestle with issues. It often points toward a decision, but it is not problem-solving... It bids us to let go of preconceived ideas so that we can be open to new possibilities with a readiness to view things from new perspectives.”

Spiritual discernment is not the same as secular discernment. To be discerning typically refers to the use of judgment, having the ability to judge well. It implies using keen insight in order to employ good judgment. And that good judgment is relative to finding a good answer or solution. Its focus is on the outcome, the destination.

Spiritual discernment works differently. It requires we set preconceived notions aside. Which, in turn, requires conscious intention. Egos do not sit on the sidelines of their own volition. They need to be nudged, they need to be managed, they need to be held in check, even if they are never fully mute.

There is much in the process of discernment that runs counter to our enculturation. It is not about being right or having the right answer. It's not about adopting a superior position. It's not about winning.

Discernment, as a spiritual matter, requires time and patience. It works on it's own time schedule. It requires that we go slowly and address issues and questions from a number of different perspectives. It asks that we be willing to sit in the void and allow discovery to come to us. Discernment, spiritual discernment, is about the discoveries that reveal themselves to us as we journey. Like a walk in the woods, scenery presents itself...we don't create it.

This in not the way our fast paced, drive through, get it done and move on society encourages. Sitting in a yoga position, quieting the mind, is not what is valued, in our product for maximum profit culture.

We have to go against the tide in order to engage the process of discernment. We need to be intentional. It requires a different orientation. Discernment is more about deep listening... to Spirit, God, mother nature; to "that voice still and small, deep inside all". Listening even when we may not be comfortable with what we hear.

Do Black Lives Matter? Or is that statement primarily aspirational? Might it be both at the same time for us humans, who live with duality? If we take an honest assessment of our behavior, does it track with one statement more than another?

Do we act as if Black Lives Matter? Or do we act as if All Lives Matter? Is there a difference in meaning; is there a difference in our behavior? Do we treat one or the other the way we would a stray dog or cat, as we would a lost child or someone with cancer? Are we willing to go out of our way in service of our belief?

Or alternately, are we willing to go only as far as not being inconvenienced, not putting something of genuine value on the line... a friendship for example or our standing in our work place? Are we willing to call out misbehavior, put some skin in the game as they say? Or does it matter only if it doesn't cost me more than writing a check or signing a petition or agreeing with what we read in a book? Where we come down does make a difference.

Referring to our reading again: "discernment is distinguishing the voice of God (or Spirit) from other voices that speak to us: the voice of our parents echoing from years past, the voices of friends, voices of urgency or fear." And I would add, the voice of individualism, of ego which assigns labels of me and us, in-group and out-group.

Spiritual discernment requires that we set individualism aside. It requires that we consciously be willing to give up some aspects of self, in order that we might experience some aspect of genuine us-ness, known as "we".

We can not discover the deeper meaning of interconnectedness from the vantage point of me, myself and I. This holds true whether we are talking about co-workers, friendship, partnership or citizenship. It holds true whether we are talking about Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter.

And it is true when we talk about our particular faith community. We can not experience the deeper meaning of "faith community", Unitarian Universalist, from the primary perspective of me as an individual. We all need to be willing to give up some part of who we are in order to become a we, as opposed to a collection of Me's and I's.

In order to experience a deeper meaning of membership in the UUFP, we each need to be willing to sacrifice some amount of "me-ness" in order for there to be a genuine we-ness. And again the question arises, what are the ramifications in terms of our behavior?

Does a greater or lesser sense of we-ness affect my relationship to this place? Will a deeper sense of we-ness affect how I feel and behave? Will it affect the way this place feels. Will it impact how we operate, what we are capable of? Will it impact how the larger community in which we live experiences us?

The answer to these questions do and will make a difference. As we go about discerning the mission of the Fellowship, over the next few months, we will need to sit with these questions and with each other. We will need to listen to our own inner voices and hopefully be able to distinguish between the various voices in our head, hearts and minds.

May we be gracious enough to listen, hear and honor the voices of our co-travellers. If we can do this, we will discern the mission of this congregation, one that includes us all. We will genuinely be able to talk, think, pray and live our “we-ness”.

Here’s to the value and power of we-ness.

Amen