

Come Let Us Reason Together

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Tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance. ~ Albert Mays

Shedding Old Skins

The path of spiritual growth involves many stages of death and resurrection. Every time we find our box is too small to hold a new understanding about God, self, other, or creation, we undergo a death of sorts as we break down the comfort of the container we have been living in to make room for the new. Like a snake shedding a skin that has become too small, it takes work to slough off the old one.

When much younger, our son was the proud owner of a five-foot corn snake. During the several years in our care, I had the opportunity to witness the process of shedding old skin repeatedly. It is not a pretty process, but rather looks like it takes considerable energy and it appears to cause discomfort. Just before the shedding occurs, the skin looks milky and the eyes cloud over. During this time, Zippo was not safe to handle because she was hyper defensive and could easily mistake a finger for a mouse being offered for lunch. The shedding of the old skin would invariably give way to a shiny new skin underneath. Only after the shedding was complete was it safe to approach again.

Navigating relationships in the throes of the various stages of shedding requires understanding, patience, and compassion, including for oneself. Because just about everything relating to spiritual growth and big theological questions involves nuance and complexities, there is not a one-size-fits-all answer. Knowing what needs to be shed and when requires some discernment.

Prerequisites for Discernment

In Ignatian spirituality, discernment is understood as a “we” process; it is not done in isolation. As my spiritual director, Jack, often says, “I experience, we discern.” Our experience is what we sense, see, hear, feel, think, and our gut-feelings. Not all of these experiences are of God. To discern the heart of God in the midst of conflicting personal experiences requires the humility of a collective “we.” Paul states there is one Spirit and we are to make every effort to maintain a spirit of unity. Leading with humility, gentleness, and patience, we are to bear with one another in love.¹ To be sure, it is no easy task to live up to this calling, which is why we need some guidelines to help mediate the worst of our natural impulses towards the contrary.

Discernment is not the same as a conversation, a debate, consensus, or a compromise. Certainly, it is not the same as a fight. (See below about a conversation vs. fight.) Discernment takes time, intentionality, and agreement about some ground rules, without which one is participating in some other activity. Within the Ignatian tradition, there are several prerequisites to engaging the process of discernment:

- An acknowledgment that there is a God and it is not me. Acknowledgment that none of us make good gods – we humans still cannot judge good & evil without wreaking havoc.
- Participants hold to a belief in a loving God who participates in our story and invites us to participate in the ongoing story of creation.
- A willingness to enter a “we” experience (us/them thinking blocks discernment).
- A willingness to be convinced of the opposite of what I hold to be true and to seek to understand the other person’s perspective.

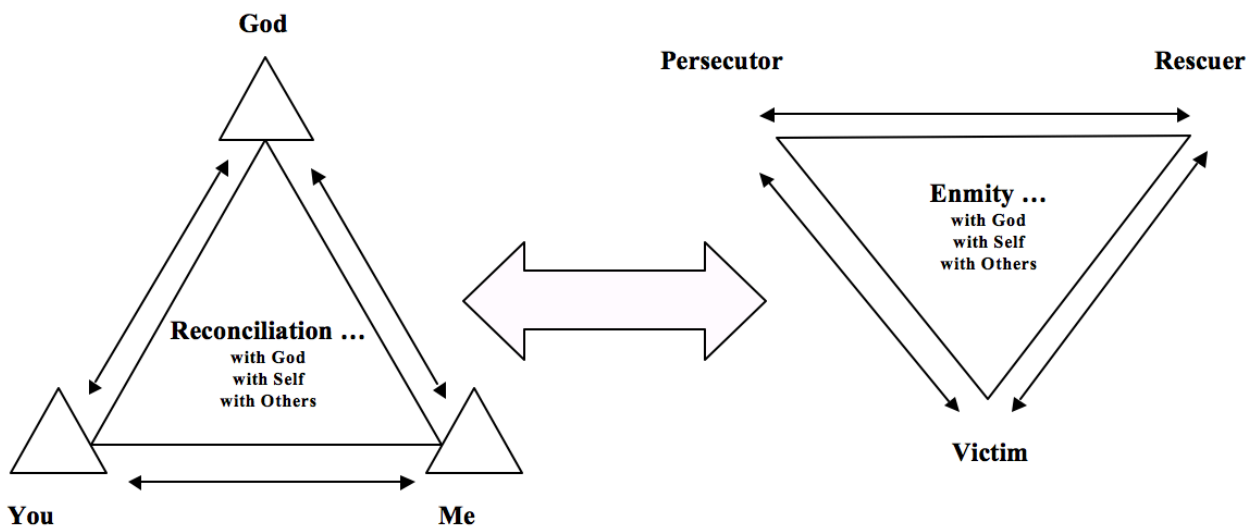
- A willingness to become indifferent about the outcome – holding all things loosely before God. (Indifference in this context does not mean “not caring.” Becoming indifferent is being free enough to seek out God’s preference. It is about not being attached to being right.)
- A willingness to acknowledge that, because we are not God, we only see in part. We all have filters, biases, and baggage that gets in the way of seeing the full glory of God. It requires the humility to let go of judgments and willing to admit we could be wrong.
- Holding a value to align with God's desire for me, others, and the world.
- A willingness to bring all things into the Light (Circle of Love/Center of the Trinity) – opinions, thoughts, desires, experience, judgments, etc. Good discernment does not happen in a place of desolation and darkness.
- A willingness to trust we all have gifts and can learn from one other.

Discernment is about listening for God’s invitation - for direction, guidance in big decisions, making shifts in major perspectives, and taking important actions. It is about choosing among two right things; it is not about a right and a wrong - that doesn’t require discernment. Neither do we have to discern about whether to choose vanilla or chocolate ice cream. If it impacts my relationship with God, others, myself, or creation in some big way, chances are discernment is needed. Examples of some things that need to be discerned are: change in career, major affiliations of various kinds, moving across country. For example, *Do I stay or do I leave?*

Is this a conversation or a fight?

Not everything needs to be discerned, but we are still called to live by the Spirit in all things. Engaging in honest conversation is not the same as the process of discernment, but there is a lot of cross over in the ground rules. In all situations, we are admonished to speak the truth in love, lest we become like “children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.”ⁱⁱ We can end up in machinations of the unholy drama triangle.ⁱⁱⁱ

**Right-side Up or Upside-down?
Genesis 1 vs. Genesis 3?**



Tree of Life:
Relationship – Win/Win
Responsibility for own crap
Restorative Justice - Renewing

Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil:
Rules - Zero Sum
Resentment – Blame/Fault
Retributive Justice - Punishing

One of the keys to keeping a conversation from turning into a fight is to recognize the difference between the two. At a ten thousand foot perspective, fights happen when we turn from the Light of the Triune relationship and operate from an unholy drama triangle.

Real conversations can only happen when we stand in the Light, humbly before God. They are characterized by openness, transparency, and a desire for truth. Karen Armstrong describes the essence of a conversation as a hopeful expectancy of something shifting or changing inside of me because I have truly listened to the other.^{iv}

In contrast to the accusations and blame that is the driving force of the drama, real conversations are guided by open and honest questions. An open question is non-binary, one that opens up possibilities; a yes/no question is a closed question. An honest question is one in which I do not know what the answer is or “should” be. “Don’t you think this passage means _____ ?” is an example of a dishonest question because it is already answering the question.

Operating in drama may not look like a fight outwardly because it doesn’t always involve yelling and screaming. However, it does usually involve the need for certainty. This lack of nuance may not be a “deliberate removal,” as the definition of tyranny above suggests. Often it is the naïve or ignorant participation in the removal of nuance. In the earlier stages of spiritual growth, we are unable to hold the tension of paradox and the subtleties of nuance. Instead, we are driven by the illusion of control and the need for certainty.

The chart below compares some of the characteristics of a conversation and a fight:

Conversation	Fight
Honors the Imago Dei in each other	Sees other as enemy to defeat
Seeks win-win	Zero Sum Game: Winner-Loser
Open and honest questions	Loaded & Dishonest Questions
Curiosity for the other, willingness to learn from the other.	Closed-minded, closed heart, closed fist.
Steel Man: willing and able to articulate other’s position honestly	Straw Man: distorting other’s position to a ridiculous and extreme degree
Humility of Side-by-side functioning: level playing field	One-up/one-down posturing
Willing to be convinced of the opposite	Unwaveringly convinced of own rightness
Able to embrace nuance, paradox, and mystery.	Rigidity, certainty, black/white, all-or-nothing.
Trust that both people desire truth & acknowledge both can be deceived.	I know the truth. The other is deceived.

Because they are ripe for misunderstanding, when trying to engage a conversation that is theological or spiritual in nature, some questions you might want to explore are:

- Do we trust each other to hold a high value of scripture, even if we disagree in our understanding at this time?
- Can we agree to disagree?
- Can we agree on some guidelines for approaching scripture? For example, Sarah Sumner suggests

the following:

- Every line in scripture means something.
- God knows what it means.^v

If the answer to any of these questions is no, beware. You may be entering into a fight instead of a real conversation. To do so is to cast seed upon parched and hard ground, hoping that it will grow.

What is the condition of my heart?

Though we have no control over the condition of the other person's heart when trying to engage a conversation, it is important to pay attention to your own heart in the process. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to check the condition of your heart:

- Is my heart open or closed toward the other?
- Can I bring the person/situation/belief into the Circle of Love? Am I willing to see the other from God's perspective?
- Do I trust the other is in search of the truth?
- Do I trust both of us are doing the best we can with what we have at this time?
- Do I trust the other loves God and desires to follow God?
- If not a professing believer, do I trust they are seeking truth, beauty, and goodness?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, I need to get myself in the right Spirit before engaging in a conversation. Otherwise, I risk violating the two premises of the Hippocratic oath: *First, do no harm. Second, do some good.*

¹ Ephesians 4:1-4

² Ephesians 4:14

³ For more understanding of the Drama Triangle, see *Paradox Lost* <https://www.amazon.com/Paradox-Lost-Uncovering-Identity-Christ/dp/0985310405> or watch True Identity Series: Living Upside Down <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v61wINGhPo8>

⁴ Armstrong, K. *The Case for God*

^v Sumner, S. *Men and Women in the Church*