

SHOW ME THE PATH

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Cultivating a Life
of Discernment

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To Discover and Respond

To discern means first of all to listen to God, to pay attention to God's active presence, and to obey God's prompting, direction, leadings, and guidance.

HENRI NOUWEN, *DISCERNMENT*, P. 5

I invite you to join me on a journey. It is a journey that can be taken no matter where you live or what you do. All kinds of people set off on this journey every day, and its path leads through the ordinary affairs of life. This journey is for anyone and everyone who is willing to embark upon it.

What do you need for the journey? Well, it requires curiosity, a sense that there is more to life than meets the eye. A willingness to go out of your way a little bit can be helpful. A listening ear

will help. A quiet and prayerful heart is a must. Kindness and a genuine interest in the well-being of others is likewise essential. And all travelers must be eager to learn and grow along the way.

This is the journey of spiritual discernment.

Let me explain by telling you a little bit about what I do and how I came to be a participant on this journey. By vocation I am a minister, now serving as a chaplain who visits dying people and their families in their homes. I seek to bring them a word of encouragement and the promise that God is with them and cares for them in their time of need. This means that every day finds me going new places, meeting new people, hearing their stories, and learning how I might befriend them in their particular season and circumstance of life.

Every day brings something new. And that means I must keep my eyes and ears wide open. Open to learning something new about life, others, and myself. Something new about God and his love. Each day, I find myself on a journey of discovery.

A wise teacher once taught me that my job is not to bring God to people. Instead, it is to recognize that God is already there ahead of me, and that God has been working among these folks all along. My job is to try and figure out what God has already been doing. Then it is my privilege to respond by cooperating with God's actions in their lives so as help them grow in faith, hope, and love. In other words, I have had to learn (and am still learning) to practice spiritual discernment.

But chaplains and people with religious vocations are not the only ones on this journey. *The practice of spiritual discernment is for every person.* Christian faith teaches us that God has given the Spirit to each one of us so that we might walk in the way of Jesus. The Spirit has come to make us wise, discerning people who can

perceive the world around us with sensitivity and understanding. The Spirit strengthens us to respond with loving presence, words, and actions that can help mend the torn fabric of life in our world.

I believe the Spirit wants to lead *you* on this path of discovery and response as well. Your way through the next twenty-four hours of your life is a blank slate. You never know what path you might find yourself on, what circumstances and people and needs you will encounter. But a few things are certain:

First, you will find yourself in places and situations in which you will have to make choices about how you will act, what your attitudes will be, and what you will say (or not say).

Second, you will find yourself among people that you are called to interact with. These are the “neighbors” God calls us to love as an outflow of loving God with all our hearts.

Third, God has already gone ahead of you into those situations, and God has already been at work in the lives of those people. You will be entering God’s playing field, as it were, where God has already been at work, long before you ever got there.

Fourth, your mission (should you decide to accept it, as the old TV show said) is to discern how you can best cooperate with God in those situations so as to bring God’s love and shalom to light. Yours is a journey of discovery and response. A journey of learning how to participate in the life and mission of God in the world.

Author Christopher de Vinck tells the story about the day when he, a teenager, was looking through a family photo album. His father joined him, and as the young man came to a certain page, he said, “You see that picture, Christopher?” It was a photograph that looked out over water, with buildings in the distance.

“What do you see?” his father asked. “Look there, on the land, behind the fence.”

“I see people. They’re very small.”

This picture had been taken from a ship departing a port in Europe. Christopher’s father asked him to look closely at those tiny people on the shore and notice something about one of them.

“There is a man raising his arm above his head,” the boy observed.

“Yes, that is my father waving good-bye to us as we sailed to America. It is the last time I ever saw him.”

Christopher de Vinck comments, “I believe you can build an entire existence upon a single gesture passed from person to person” (*Only the Heart Knows Where to Find Them*, p. 47f).

Today, there is a path for you, a way that might include reaching out your hand in a way that will touch another person’s life forever. Who knows what you will discover God doing this day?

Now, the thing about journeys is that they must be taken. The path into today lies before you and it must be walked. Spanish poet Antonio Machado reminds us that we cannot know ahead of time what we will discover or how we may respond. We will only know by taking the steps.

Traveler, your footsteps are
the way, and nothing more.

Traveler, there is not a way;
the way is made by walking.

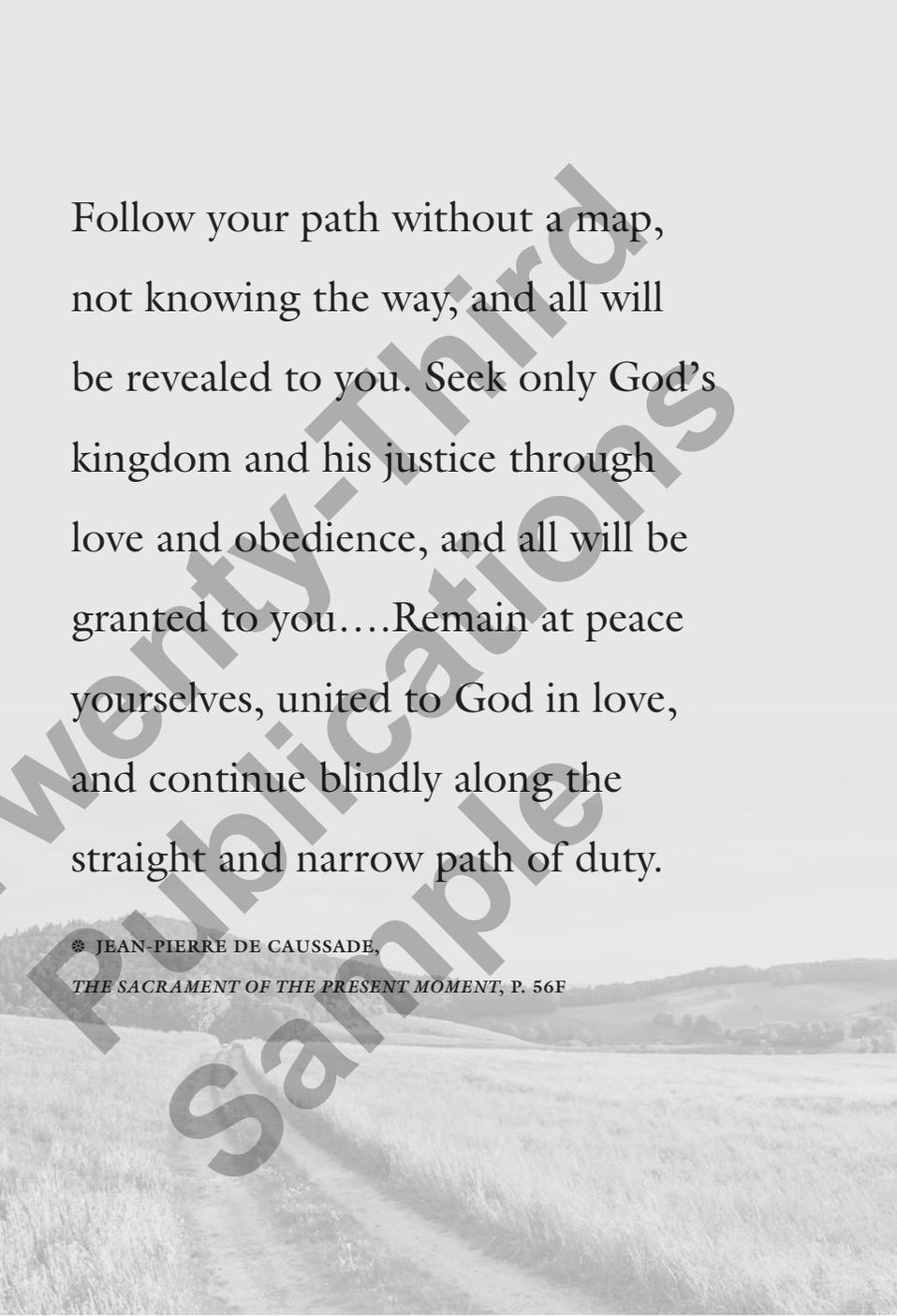
Reading this book won't make you discerning and responsive. I hope it will help you know a bit more of what that means. I hope that it will encourage you to want this kind of life. But in the end, "the way is made by walking."

What do you think? Does this journey sound intriguing to you?

If so, then perhaps the best thing we can do as we begin is to pray along with the psalmist:

In the morning let me hear of your mercy,
for in you I trust.
Show me the path I should walk,
for I entrust my life to you.

* PSALM 143:8



Follow your path without a map,
not knowing the way, and all will
be revealed to you. Seek only God's
kingdom and his justice through
love and obedience, and all will be
granted to you....Remain at peace
yourselves, united to God in love,
and continue blindly along the
straight and narrow path of duty.

✻ JEAN-PIERRE DE CAUSSADE,

THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT, P. 56F

Part One

MARKING
THE
PATH

A Path through a God-Soaked World

In him we live and move and have our being.

ACTS 17:28

Random Incidents or Divine Encounters?

ail and I packed up and headed for Chicago on a Friday. Our youngest son was due to graduate from college. The baccalaureate would be held downtown on Friday evening, followed by the commencement ceremony Saturday morning on the northside at the school. We'd had some work done on our larger vehicle so it would be ready to take us to enjoy the ceremonies and then retrieve our son's belongings.

The only glitch on the way—or so I thought—was a long backup on the interstate because of an accident. But then, when

we pulled into our usual stopping place to stretch our legs, use the bathroom, and grab a bite to eat before tackling the Chicago traffic, we heard a loud, obnoxious sound coming from under the engine compartment of the car. Being a guy, I had my wife open the hood so I could look under it and pretend like I could figure out what was wrong. All I could tell was that it was coming from the same area where our mechanic had recently done his work.

We called him immediately and even let him listen over the phone. He said it was related to the air conditioning. Thankfully, there was a simple, temporary fix, but I had to find a shop where someone could look at it. Fast. It was about 4:30 PM. I found a local auto repair shop that was nearby, and the mechanic encouraged me to bring the car in.

It turned out to be just the kind of shop I like. It seemed a well-run, independent operation, and the mechanic-owner explained everything carefully and clearly as we bent over the car's engine. He even printed out a picture of the damaged part and how it could be temporarily fixed so we could be on our way. Unfortunately, his shop was about to close. He recommended a larger garage down the street that was open until 7:00 PM. He knew the service manager and called ahead to explain the problem. Soon we were on our way.

It turned out the part was so damaged it would have to be replaced. The garage could fix it the next day. That meant we needed to make decisions, and whatever we decided, it would mean renting a car. The service manager set it up and offered to take us himself in his truck. We made small talk along the way and it soon dawned on me that I knew this guy! I had been the hospice chaplain for a member of his family. He was a man of

strong faith, a leader in his church, and we had discussed some of the spiritual needs in the family.

Here we were, many miles from home, directed to this man by a stranger late on a Friday afternoon, and it turned out to be someone I knew! I had helped him with some family needs a few years before. Now he was in a position to help us!

Help us he did. Long story short, we missed the baccalaureate, but made it to Chicago, had a good night's sleep, and were able to go to the graduation without further incident. Afterward, we picked up our repaired vehicle and headed home.

I couldn't help but think that God had taken care of us. We discovered our car trouble just in time, in a safe place, without incident. We found just the right shop to diagnose the problem. The mechanic directed us to the right garage to fix the problem—and it turned out to be someone I had met personally and served, a person of faith and kindness, a man who went the extra mile to make sure our needs were met.

You might call what happened in this experience “coincidence” or “good luck.” We all have to interpret the things that happen in our lives. I prefer to think that we were involved in a series of “divine encounters” that in this case led to a helpful outcome. Of course, I had to pay an enormous bill, but I guess that shows me that I still have to depend on divine provision, even when God helps me!

We have choices in how we look at life. Henri Nouwen said that we can either experience our days as “a series of random incidents and accidents” or as “divine appointments and encounters” (*Discernment*, p. 114). The faith of Jesus teaches us to choose the latter, to believe that we are living in a God-soaked world. God is living, active, and everywhere present. God is with us. God goes

before us. God helps us. God loves us and holds us in the palm of his hand.

Psalm 139 is a poetic expression of this faith:

Lord, you have probed me, you know me:
you know when I sit and stand;
you understand my thoughts from afar.
You sift through my travels and my rest;
with all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
Lord, you know it all.
Behind and before you encircle me
and rest your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
far too lofty for me to reach.

Where can I go from your spirit?
From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.
If I take the wings of dawn
and dwell beyond the sea,
Even there your hand guides me,
your right hand holds me fast.

✧ PSALM 139:1–10

Whatever path we take, wherever we may find ourselves, God is present. God is with us to guide, to relate to us with understanding, to hold us close as intimate friends and companions on the journey. We can also trust that God is present and active in the sit-

uations we face and in the lives of the people we meet, even when that is hard to imagine.

God Encounters Us in the People We Meet

It is especially in those *people*, I believe, that God makes himself known to us. In sometimes surprising ways God speaks to us through the folks we encounter in our lives. Many spiritual writers that I consider to be masters in the art of spiritual discernment—such as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen—have reminded us that we need to pay attention to the people God puts in our path if we want to discern the presence and activity of God in the world.

I remember, for instance, visiting a man who had been a police officer and then an investigator for a major corporation. Sometimes he was asked by the company's HR department to take on the difficult job of dealing with employees who were being dismissed. He would go to that person's desk or office, watch as they cleaned it out, and then accompany them out of the building to make sure no equipment or proprietary information was stolen and to provide security in case there was an incident. These were situations ripe for conflict and ill will, even violence. His wife told me that HR liked to have him do this because he was so good at it. In fact, she said that one time, after having escorted a fired employee out, that employee actually sent him a "thank you" note for his kindness and consideration while doing a difficult job. Even though he was not a typically religious, churchgoing person, God reminded me through him: "What is desirable in a man is his kindness..." (Proverbs 19:22, NASB).

I had the chance to visit another man who also had been non-religious most of his life. He was likewise one of the gentlest and

kindest people you could meet. A musician, he had played saxophone for years in various clubs around the region. For some reason, we hit it off on our first visit, and you might have thought we were lifelong friends, the way we enjoyed being together and swapping stories. He eventually went into the hospital, and on my last visit I found him lying there unresponsive. So I took out my phone and played an old Billie Holiday tune for him as I sat by his bed.

At the funeral I was surprised to hear his daughter express thanks that he told her in his final weeks he had come to believe in God. Later, his wife said that meeting someone like me, who didn't fit his image of a "religious person" was a key factor in helping him come to faith. I had no idea. At the cemetery the family scattered his ashes in a wooded garden while a sax player from a well-known local jazz club played "When the Saints Go Marching In" as we committed him into God's care. In all of our "nonreligious" interactions, God had been present and active, and faith, hope, and love sprouted to life.

I feel I have learned so much from people like these. God teaches me through them. Somehow, God touches them through me. It confirms to me that my dealings with people are part of a much larger picture in which the Spirit of God is personally interested and involved.

Let me tell you about a family I've known for several years now. Several years ago, I met one of my favorite patients and his spouse, Leigh. They were not devout people, unless you count their devotion to playing golf. But Dick's terminal illness curbed his activities, humbled him, and gave him a lot to think about. Unable to do much more than sit in his chair, he looked forward to my visits, and as we talked, he often expressed a deep spiritual

hunger. We finished our times together with prayers, something he was always eager to participate in.

At one point, Dick decided he wanted to be baptized as a response of faith to God's love for him. As a hospice chaplain I sometimes do religious rituals on a nondenominational basis to meet my patients' spiritual needs, and so we arranged to have a baptism in their living room to mark Dick's faith. His son and family came to witness the event, and right then and there, in the moment, they were moved to ask to be baptized themselves. As did Leigh. It was a "household salvation" moment. We sang and rejoiced and embraced, celebrating the renewed faith of this entire family. I was convinced that God had orchestrated the whole event.

Jack died, and I did his funeral, and a couple of years later Leigh succumbed to dementia and died as well. I did her service also. However, that did not end my relationship with this family. A few years later, I found out that their daughter's husband, Ted, had cancer. I called him immediately. "Mike," he said, "I'm gonna beat this." I told him I knew he would give it his best shot. So much sadness for this family, and yet so much grace and love. It made my heart fairly break.

We didn't see each other again until Ted became a hospice patient and I visited him and his family in the hospital. Even as he lay dying, he was full of gratitude and joy, expressing love for his wife and appreciation for everyone who came to see him. He was eager to pray with me and talked of his love for God to the end. I officiated the funeral, and I continue to meet with members of his family to help them on their journey of grief, a decade after we first met.

That family has had a rough road. Their path has taken them

in directions no one would choose. And yet it has been clear, at least to me, that God has been with them. God has helped them. God has comforted and embraced them and granted them his gifts of faith, hope, and love, even on the hardest days and in the saddest situations. And in them and through them, God has met me and reminded me that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). God’s love and *shalom* have been evident through it all.

God Is Alive and at Work!

The fact that we live in a God-soaked world is fundamental to the Christian faith we profess. In our creeds we confess our faith in the living God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who made us, knows everything about us, loves us and redeems us, and is at work setting our lives and this broken world right. From the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, to the end, when we will participate in the life everlasting, God is here and actively fulfilling his loving purposes for all creation.

First, we believe that God is the Creator of all. Not only did he make the universe in the beginning, but he remains continually active in it, intimately engaged with his creation and creatures. Some writers speak of the doctrine of “continuous creation” (*creatio continua*):

Creatio continua suggests that [God’s] creative work is constantly ongoing in order to reveal the world’s full potential, which is perpetually novel and fresh.

* MARK HARRIS, *THE NATURE OF CREATION*, P. 116

God is busy leading this world toward a *new* creation, and he calls us to participate with him in that work. I like to think that when we cooperate with God in the course of our daily lives, we are “planting seeds” for that new creation, and that one day there will be a great harvest of *shalom* (wholeness and peace) that will fill the world.

Another way to look at this is through the Jewish teaching of *tikkun olam*, which suggests that working with God in this way helps to “repair the world”—mending the small tattered holes humans have made in the fabric of life through our sin and indifference over the course of time.

Or, we might remember that Jesus taught us to pray, “*May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as in heaven.*” God’s just and loving rule is made evident here and now when we participate with him in advancing his will here on earth.

God the Creator is everywhere present, ever making things new.

Second, we are taught to believe that Jesus is the firstfruits of that new creation. Living, dying, rising, and ascending into heaven, Jesus now rules at God’s right hand to bring sin, evil, and injustice under his feet. The newness that God longs for has already begun in Jesus.

Jesus came to open the door to God’s new creation. When Jesus announced, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he was proclaiming that in him, God had come to take up his rule and begin to transform the world. Now God calls each of us to take our place as engaged members of the new creation that has already begun. Through Jesus, God entered the world in a new way and showed us how to live in this world with God. Under his rule, we

lay down our lives for others as Jesus did. We die to ourselves and live to serve as his ambassadors for the life of the world.

I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. * GALATIANS 2:20

Third, we have received the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's presence in us and among us as God's people. Jesus told his disciples that it would actually be advantageous for us that he go away. That would allow him to send the Spirit, who would indwell us, guide us, teach us, comfort and encourage us, and empower us to show God's love to others each day. The Spirit pours out God's *shalom* in our hearts so that, through us, *shalom* might be restored to the world.

Through the Spirit, we have enhanced access to God through prayer, worship, the Scriptures, and spiritual practices that form us in faith, hope, and love. When we are walking our daily path, trying to discover God at work and figuring out how to respond, it is the Holy Spirit who is there to enlighten and help us.

God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is with us on our daily path. And we live in a God-soaked world! God, in fact, has already gone ahead of us on that path and is constantly working to bring newness of life in places where death and despair have held sway. As we walk the path, face various situations, and encounter people along the way, we ask:

- Creator God, what are you doing to bring about new creation here?

- Lord Jesus, how can I lay down my life, as you did, that you may renew life here?
- Holy Spirit, how are you guiding here? Give me inner strength and wisdom to respond with love here!

We discover. We respond. But it's all within a God-soaked environment. We labor in God's field and work toward the day when he will bring the harvest. And God is with us, in us, and all around us. We walk with God on the path where the Spirit leads, and God enables us to walk in wisdom and discernment.

SUMMARY

A life of discernment relies on the truth that God is with us, in us, and all around us, at work bringing newness to the world. As I walk the path of my everyday life, God has already gone before me and has been working toward this purpose. It is my privilege to discover what God is doing and cooperate with him in that work.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND DISCUSS

1. Can you recall a time when you suspected that you may have been involved in a “divine encounter” where God was at work, not just a “random incident”?
.....
2. What kinds of things might clue us in to the fact that God is present and active in a given situation, and that we are not just walking the path of everyday life by ourselves?
.....
3. Who are some of the people you’ve encountered in your life through whom God has revealed himself to you?
.....
4. At the end of the chapter, I suggest a few questions to ask God to help you discern God’s activity in your daily life. What other questions might you ask and what practices might you take up that could help you be more aware of God’s presence and work?

A Path toward *Shalom*

The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, *PEACE* (P. 13)

Life Is Relational

Since the 1930s, a group of scientists at Harvard has been working on something called the Harvard Study of Adult Development. It is the longest study of adult life ever done, a detailed, systematic analysis of seven hundred men who are now over seventy-five years old. Robert Waldinger, who heads up the study now, says it tracks “physical health, mental health, work life, relationship functioning—and then as people have gotten older—aging, retirement.”

Waldinger describes the way the study has worked: