

INTRODUCTORY READING

The modern problem of choice

Excerpt from *Committed: A love story*, Elizabeth Gilbert

I'm not willing - or probably even able - to relinquish my life of individualistic yearnings, all of which are the birthright of my modernity. Like most human beings, once I've been shown the options, I will always opt for more choices for my life: expressive choices, individualistic choices, inscrutable and indefensible and sometimes risky choices, perhaps...but they will all be mine. As a result of such personal freedoms, my life belongs to me and resembles me to an extent that would be unfathomable for many non-Westerners. It's almost as if I'm from an entirely new strain of woman (Homo limitlessness, you might call us). And while we of this brave new species do have possibilities that are vast and magnificent and almost infinite in scope, it's important to realise that our choice-rich lives have the potential to breed their own brand of trouble.

The problem, simply put, is that we cannot choose everything simultaneously. So we live in danger of becoming paralysed by indecision, terrified that every choice might be the wrong choice. (I have a friend who second-guesses herself so compulsively that her husband jokes her autobiography will someday be titled *I Should've Had the Scampi*.) Equally disquieting are the times when we do make a choice, only to later feel as though we have murdered some other aspect of our being by settling on one single concrete decision. By choosing Door Number Three, we fear we have killed off a different - but equally critical - piece of our soul that could only have been made manifest by walking through Door Number One or Door Number Two.

The philosopher Odo Marguard has noted a correlation in the German language between the word *zwei*, which means "two," and the word *zweifel*, which means "doubt" - suggesting that two of anything brings the automatic possibility of uncertainty to our lives. Now imagine a life in which every day a person is presented with not two or even three but dozens of choices, and you can begin to grasp why the modern world has become, even with all its advantages, a neurosis-generating machine of the highest order. In a world of abundant possibility, many of us go limp from indecision. Or we derail our life's journey again and again, backing up to try the doors we neglected on the first round, desperate to get it right this time. Or we become compulsive comparers - always measuring our life against some other person's life, secretly wondering if we should have taken her path instead.

Compulsive comparing, of course, only leads to debilitating cases of what Nietzsche called *Lebensneid*, or "life envy": the certainty that somebody else is much luckier than you, and that if you only had her body, her husband, her job, everything would be easy and wonderful and happy. (A therapist friend of mine defines this problem simply as "the condition by which all of my single patients secretly long to be married, and all of my married patients secretly long to be single.") With certainty so difficult to achieve, everyone's decisions become an indictment of everyone else's decisions, and because there is no universal model anymore for what makes "a good man" or "a good woman," one must almost earn a personal merit badge in emotional orientation and navigation in order to find one's way through life anymore.

Vocation

The Gift of Being Yourself, 2004 – David G Benner pp.95-97

Identity is not static. It always gives direction to how we live our life. The discovery of our true self does not simply produce freedom. It also generates vocation.

Vocation is the older, more theologically rooted word for what we sometimes today refer to as "calling". Both point us in the same direction – toward a purpose of being that is grounded in God rather than in our self. Our vocation, like our self, can be understood only in relation to the One Who Calls.

We can understand God's call to us at a number of levels. First, we are called to be human beings. In *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier reminds us of the fundamental importance of this call to discover and live out our shared humanity. He describes it as "a longing," a love that "liberates us from self-centred compulsions and inner hurts...that finds its fulfillment in forgiveness and in loving those who are our enemies." This, and nothing less, is what is involved in the call to become fully human.

A second level of calling is to be Christians. This builds on the first by showing us the route to the fulfillment of our humanity. Genuine Christ-following will always make us more, not less, human. We know something is seriously wrong if it does not. Jesus Christ, the perfect God-Man, bridges the chasm between God and humanity. By becoming fully human, Jesus leads us to the fulfillment of our humanity. By being fully God, he leads us to God.

But we can also think of our calling in terms of our mission in the world, the way of living out our uniqueness within the more general call to become fully human as we follow Jesus toward union with God. Gordon Smith notes that – much bigger than a career, job or occupation – our unique calling will be based on our gifts and abilities, will grow out of our deepest desires, and will always involve some response to the needs of the world.

The Christian concept of vocation derives its meaning from the belief in "a creator God who molds humanity and all nature with loving intent, seeking the flourishing and fulfillment of all created things." Our calling is therefore the way of being that is both best for us and best for the world. This is what Frederick Buechner means when he states that "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Our vocation is always a response to a Divine call to take our place in the kingdom of God. Our vocation is a call to serve God and our fellow humans in the distinctive way that fits the shape of our being. In one way or another, Christian calling will always involve the care of God's creation and people. This realigns us to the created world and to our neighbor, moving us from self-centred exploitation to self-sacrificing service and stewardship.

The communal nature of the kingdom of God also draws our attention to the fact that we discover our calling – and, as previously noted, our true self – in community. Here, through

the help of others who know us well, we learn to discern our gifts and find our authentic voice and vocation. We are all called to Christ-following and loving service of God and neighbor. But the specific call that is rooted in your unique identity, gifts and personality will be found as you come to know both God and self in Christian community.

To live apart from a sense of calling by God is to live a life oriented simply to our own choices about who we want to be and what we want to do. Calling brings freedom and fulfillment because it orients us toward something bigger than self.

SELF AWARENESS SURVEY

This exercise will help you to assemble an inventory of your life. You will see qualities that you have lived, possibilities that may have been cast off or closed to you, and potentials that you still would like to fulfill. Look for unrealised and underachieved potentials. While doing this exercise, direct your attention to the past in a reflective, honest manner, not idealising it or judging it. It is what it is. Just state what has been true for you and what is true now. Read each statement carefully and take a few moments to decide on a true response for yourself. Then mark the box that most nearly reflects that response.

DD - Definitely Disagree
 SD - Somewhat Disagree
 SA - Somewhat Agree
 DA - Definitely agree

Outer Life

DD SD SA DA Score

I get satisfaction from what I do with my life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel at ease relating to people.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
New situations are difficult for me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
My work life is not a good use of my talents and abilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I have a positive attitude toward money.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do not use my time effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
My physical energy is good.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel overburdened with responsibility.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I do not have enough free time for recreation & relaxation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I usually accomplish what I set out to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Total —

Inner Life

DD SD SA DA Score

I like myself as a person.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have (had) a loving relationship with my family of origin.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I often experience difficult emotional states.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I feel uncomfortable when I am on my own.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I keep a balance between looking after myself and others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I find it difficult to concentrate and think clearly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I show my love and affection to others easily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel dissatisfied with my personal relationship(s).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I seldom know exactly what I am feeling.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	* <input type="checkbox"/>
I have a positive relationship with my body.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Total —

Deeper Life

DD SD SA DA Score

- I trust that I know what is best for me.
- I am able to express my creativity in a number of different ways.
- I am not interested in what goes on in my unconscious. *
- I do not usually listen to my intuition and inner guidance. *
- I cultivate a positive vision of my future.
- I seldom pay attention to my dreams. *
- I know I am growing and developing.
- I am not sure that I have the ability to heal myself. *
- I find it hard to imagine things I have never experienced. *
- I often feel connected to nature.

Total _____

Greater Life

DD SD SA DA Score

- I am aware of the presence of a Higher Power.
- I try to practice love and compassion toward others.
- I am not sure that spirituality is important to me. *
- I do not believe that being alive has a greater purpose. *
- I want my life to have a positive impact on the world.
- I do not have a regular spiritual practice
(meditation/contemplation/prayer). *
- I spend time in activities that quiet my thoughts and feelings.
- I easily get caught up in superficial activities and concerns. *
- I seldom reflect on the meaning of my life experiences. *
- I follow what is spiritually "right" when making a major decision.

Total _____

Scoring

Questions 1, 2, 5, 7, and 10 in each section (without an *), are scored: 0, 1, 2, 3, from disagree to agree. Questions 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9, in each section, marked with an *, are scored: 3, 2, 1, 0, from disagree to agree. Sum the secrets for each section and put the totals below.

Outer life score _____
 Inner life score _____
 Deeper life score _____
 Greater life score _____

INTERPRETATION OF SURVEY

Outer life is a dimension of external experiences and outer activity - how effectively and comfortably you approach the *doing* aspects of your life.

Inner life is a dimension of subjective experiences of your personal self - how you feel about yourself, your self-confidence, and your personal relationships with others.

Deeper life is the dimension of intuitive and creative experiences - how you relate to those aspects of your experience that seem outside conscious control.

Greater life is a dimension of the higher Self, transpersonal connection to the divine - how you relate to spirituality, core values, and aspirations.

Your score in each section is one measure of your realisation and actualisation of potential in that dimension.

Your total Whole Life Inventory score (out of a possible 120) gives a measure of the development and satisfaction you are experiencing in your life at present.

Scores of 15 or less in any section suggest that you have significant unlived and underdeveloped potentials in that area of your life. A measure of psychic health is your ability to experience different types of awareness and shift states (dimensions) with facility.

Your scores can help you to see where you may be over- or under-identified with certain aspects of your being. For example, you may be very comfortable with the outer surface of the self, yet experience anxiety when you are required to move into inner experience (a realm that is key for feeling and relationships). Or you may score high in the greater dimension, but have difficulty paying the bills and keeping your outer life afloat. Highly spiritual people sometimes get lost in the transpersonal realm of experience.

The deeper dimension of life is the arena of symbolic impersonal knowing. Underlying consciousness, this is the foundation for your physical and psychological integration; if you scored low in the deeper dimension, review the questions again and consider how core beliefs developed from past experience may now be holding you back. Just for variety, listen to your intuition for your next decision or write down a dream to gain a different perspective.

You can use this framework—outer, inner, deeper, greater—to check in periodically with different aspects of yourself. What do you need right now to feel better?

The goal is to keep a dynamic balance, accessing all the different possibilities of your self as you go through life. The path to wholeness is not about becoming cured or enlightened so much as managing different experiences and responding with resilience and creativity to life's ongoing changes. As you tune in to its different aspects, life becomes more interesting.

Comparing the scores for different dimensions gives a picture of the areas of your life that are more lived in contrast to areas that are relatively unlived. Reflect on which dimensions of your life would benefit from more attention, and notice areas in each dimension that seem to be least developed.

From *Living your Unlived Life*
Robert Johnson and Jerry Ruhl pp 244-251

WEEK 1: Listening to God

The discernment process explicitly includes and involves mindful meditation and attentive awareness of one's own relationship to God. This week we will take a look at different theories of how God speaks, and also on the work of Ignatius, who believed that accurate discernment could be based on our own enormous ability to see and actively seek the good.

Finding God's Will

Denis Edwards in *Human Experience of God*

The Church has a great tradition of moral teaching and moral theology which can act as a major signpost for Christian decision-making. However there are many decisions which a Christian may be called upon to make which neither the Gospels nor the moral tradition of the Church illuminates in any direct way: a young couple setting up their own home may have to decide to what extent, and in what ways, their lifestyle will reflect alternative values to their culture's materialism; a mother may need to decide whether to take on a job or whether to put all her creative energy into her home and her involvement in community activities; a man may have to wrestle with a decision whether or not he will accept more responsibility at work when this option will mean that there is less time and energy to give to family life; a man or woman, whose life already seems full, may need to decide whether to take on one more activity, be it involvement in a social issue or work on a committee of the parish. Many decisions, whether they be as big as the choice of vocation in life, or as small as a choice about the time a person rises in the morning, are well beyond the scope of Christian moral teaching.

Yet a Christian who seeks to follow Jesus will place great priority on doing the will of God in all things. Is there any way, beyond the ethical teaching of the Scriptures and of the Church, that God's will can be found in the ordinary areas of life? In this chapter I will be suggesting that there is such a way of seeking to find God's will, and that it is directly related to our experience of God. To this end it will be helpful to consider four original thinkers in this area: Paul, Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius Loyola and Karl Rahner.

Discernment of Spirits in Paul

It is not unusual for us to find ourselves drawn in different directions by a variety of influences. These influences include the expressed wishes of people we love, the advice of those we trust, the need to provide responsibly for family life, the demands made upon us in our workplace, the effect of advertising and the pressure to conform to the expectations of our society and our peer groups. This list could be extended almost endlessly. Sometimes competing external pressures pull us in directions that are quite contradictory, and, for example, a man or woman may be lugged in one direction by the expectations of work life and in the opposite direction by the needs of home life.

God that we cannot doubt the call and, like Paul on the road to Damascus, we are moved to follow an unmistakable invitation. The second time is through the movements of spirits and the discernment of these spirits. In this second time light and knowledge of God's will can be attained through the experience of what Ignatius calls consolations and desolations. The third time is through a rational choice, a clearheaded intellectual assessment of the values involved. Ignatius presents two exercises for such a rational evaluation.

What is really interesting is that St. Ignatius presents this rational approach last and says that it is to be used when there is no movement of spirits and when election has not been made in the first or second way. It seems as though the rational approach is a kind of last resort. Even when we make a decision in this way Ignatius insists that we must take it to prayer and ask the Lord to confirm it." This confirmation can occur only through a movement of spirits similar to the first or second time. All of this is saying that Ignatius believed that the movement of spirits (the "second time") and the clear call of God (the "first time") are the privileged ways of coming to know God's will.

Of course it may well happen that all three ways, or "times," are part of one single process of discernment of God's will. They cannot be completely separated from one another. However if the first "time" is the time of exceptional clarity about God's call and the third "time" is the last resort, then this suggests that the normal pattern of finding God's will is the way of the second "time," the movements of consolation and desolation and the discernment of spirits.

What are these "consolations" and "desolations"? According to Ignatius consolations are interior movements of the soul such as these: "when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is enflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and, as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all"; "when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God"; "every increase of faith, hope and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord."

Desolation, Ignatius tells us, involves the opposite kinds of movements: "darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from any disturbances and temptations, which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. In desolation the soul is "wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. "

Desolation may occur for different reasons. It may be the result of our own infidelity, or it may be a time of trial, or it may be a time when the Lord leaves us to ourselves in order that we may more truly know ourselves and that consolation is God's gift. Consolation, too, can have several causes. It may come, Ignatius tells us, from the good angel or from the evil spirit. The experience of consolations and desolations cannot be used simplistically to determine what is of the good or bad spirit. Ignatius gives many wise and finely tuned directions for the discernment of such spirits.

For example he shows that when a soul is progressing toward perfection, the promptings of the good spirit will be gentle and delightful, while the evil spirit acts upon the soul in ways that are "violent, noisy and disturbing." However, when the soul is going from bad to worse, then the good spirit will appear as disruptive and desolating, while the evil spirit's promptings will appear as agreeable and consoling.

The directions that Ignatius gives are too subtle to summarize here. They depend upon their whole context in the *Spiritual Exercises*. What is important for our purposes is that Ignatius asserts that we can reflect upon our own experience of the movement of spirits, and from that reflection we can come to know what leads to good and what leads to evil.

It is important to emphasise that for Ignatius a retreatant learns discernment within a process which involves growing freedom from disordered attachments and a progressive identification with the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. Important decisions should be made only when a person has found a certain

amount of freedom. This freedom (or "indifference") is attained only when a person recognizes and accepts that, in a decision involving a choice between two directions, God might be leading in either direction. What seems least attractive might well be of God. This kind of freedom comes from prayerful confrontation with Jesus in the Gospels: with his constant surrender to the Father's will, his acceptance of the collapse of his own project and of the way of the cross. A real identification with Jesus creates the possibility of going beyond attachment to one direction, to a real openness and freedom to accept that God's will might lead in either direction. The way of the Lord may well include a call to the cross.

Ignatius offers us further help in finding God's will. He believes that there are certain psychological impulses that can be recognised as coming from God. These are what he calls "consolations without previous cause." When we experience this kind of consolation it is not caused by good or bad spirits but only by God. Such an experience can provide a solid basis for knowing what is "of God," for finding God's will.

Ignatius speaks of this kind of consolation in two of the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (the second and eighth rules):

God alone can give consolation to the soul without any previous cause. It belongs solely to the Creator to come into the soul, to leave it, to act upon it, to draw it wholly to the love of His Divine Majesty. I said without previous cause, that is, without any preceding perception or knowledge of any subject by which a soul might be led to such a consolation through its own acts of intellect and will.

When consolation is without previous cause, as was said, there can be no deception in it, since it can proceed from God our Lord alone. But a spiritual person who has received such a consolation must consider it very attentively, and must cautiously distinguish the actual time of the consolation from the period which follows it. At such a time the soul is still fervent and favored with the grace and the aftereffects of the consolation which has passed. In the second period the soul frequently forms various resolutions and plans which are not granted directly by God our Lord. They may come from our own reasoning on the relations of our concepts and the consequences of our judgments, they may come from the good or evil spirit. Hence, they must be carefully examined before they are given full approval and put into execution.

This kind of experience occurs when the Creator draws the person wholly into love of the Divine. Here we find a consolation which can be the criterion for the movements of our hearts. When something is clearly of God, then everything else in life can be tested against it.

This suggests that an appropriate way of discovering God's will is by way of testing a decision against this experience which is so uniquely of God, the consolation without cause. If there is this kind of consolation in our lives, and it is unambiguously of God, then we have a basis for knowing God's will.

Two questions immediately present themselves. What exactly is this consolation without cause? How can we apply it to our own search for God's will in our lives? These questions have been addressed by Karl Rahner.

Finding God's Will—Karl Rahner

Rahner asks himself the question: What is the consolation without cause of which Ignatius speaks? He answers that it is precisely a pre-conceptual experience of God, the kind of experience that

has been discussed in earlier chapters of this book. There is no created cause for our consolation. There is no intellectual, imaginative or external cause for what we experience. Rather we simply find ourselves open to the mystery of God, drawn into his love. It is a moment when our beings are open and receptive to God and there is no intermediary, no concept or image, between ourselves and God.

At its highest, then, it is a moment of contemplation. When we find ourselves called to a moment of union with God in love without the mediations of images, concepts and words, then we have a consolation without cause. This interpretation of Rahner's is confirmed by looking at Ignatius' eighth rule of discernment (quoted above). Once we have passed from the first state of consolation without previous cause (from the pre-conceptual experience of God) in which there is no deceit, to a second stage of reflection which involves "resolutions," "plans," "reasonings," "concepts" and "judgments," then again we may be deceived. Clearly Ignatius is distinguishing between an original pre-conceptual encounter and our interpretation of this encounter in our own consciousness.

Rahner suggests that our experience of grace in life can become just such an encounter. As has been seen already, a person who encounters God as the mystery of grace in the day to day events of life can begin to attend fully to this God present by grace. This day to day experience can become transparent so that we are focally (but pre-conceptually) aware of the mystery of God, and our hearts are taken in love of this mystery. Such a moment would be an instance of the pure consolation of which St. Ignatius speaks. Moments of contemplation in prayer would also be instances of this kind of consolation.

The touchstone for discovering the will of God is precisely the experience of God as we have been discussing it: a pre-conceptual loving union with God, in which he is the center of our attention and love. The consolation is not something added on to this experience; rather it is simply the effect in us of the experience of grace. When our whole beings are open to this experience, the effect in us is that we actually experience the fruits of the spirit - peace, joy and tranquillity.

If the pre-conceptual, loving encounter with God is the criterion for finding God's will, the next question is a practical one: How can we make decisions in the light of this experience? Rahner's answer is simple: God's will is discovered through an experimental test. A particular matter to be discerned is placed against a person's experience of God and kept there. Holding what one is about to decide against the experience of openness to God should reveal whether the particular matter in question is in harmony with what one experiences of God. The synthesis of the proposed decision and our experience of God may produce peace and tranquillity or it may produce unease and lack of peace.

It is really a matter of testing whether what we might do is congruent or incongruent with our deepest sense of God. Avery Dulles has described the process quite simply: "Through a process of 'play acting' we imaginatively place ourselves in the situation we are on the point of choosing, attempting to measure whether it is translucent to pure consolation."

Such an experimental test may need to take place over a long time. The choice that is made is not directly revealed by God. God reveals himself to us (obscurely) in the mystery of his grace. We make a decision in the light of our perception of congruence or incongruence between the matter being discerned and our experience of grace. Such congruence or lack of it may not be immediately evident.

This means, of course, that people who have never made the *Spiritual Exercises* can also make decisions in the light of their experience of grace in the way that St. Ignatius proposed. Rahner goes further than this and suggests that ordinary people who have never heard of Ignatius and his directions

actually do make decisions in much the way that Ignatius was suggesting. Sometimes a person who has to make a decision will take a long time to "think the matter over." However it seems that this is not purely a rational matter; the decision is often made on the grounds of what seems to "suit" the individual, or what he or she is "at home with." The same process is revealed when a person expresses the need to "sleep on" a decision. Such a person, Rahner suggests, "will probably make his decision through a fundamental global awareness of himself actually present and making itself felt in him during this space and time, and through a feeling of harmony or disharmony of the object of choice with this fundamental feeling he has about himself." Now part of this global sense of self is the whole dimension of mystery, or of God's presence in life. What is most truly and deeply in tune with self is in tune with grace. But, of course, grace may not be consciously noticed.

Ordinary people, then, instinctively make important decisions in what is essentially the same way that Ignatius outlines. As Aristotle discovered the rules of logic and made explicit what was already practiced by ordinary people, so Ignatius discovered the rules for making a decision (finding God's will) and made explicit what ordinary people often practice. With Ignatius the process becomes refined and therefore more helpful for difficult vocational decisions.

This argument of Rahner's seems to me to be quite convincing. There is a real link between everyday decisions which are made in tune with the deepest sense of self and the process of finding God's will that is suggested by Ignatius. However, it is important to sound a note of warning here. There is much more room for self-delusion in everyday decisions (as when a person makes a decision on the basis of what he or she feels "at home with") since there is always the possibility that we are opting for something that is self-centered. The more refined process of Ignatius creates the possibility of real freedom to make the hard choice, and also seeks to ensure that we are testing a decision not against a superficial level of self, but against a real openness to the mystery of God.

A Process for Christian Decision-Making

It might be helpful, at this stage, to summarise what has been said about finding God's will by outlining a process for Christian decision-making.

1. Preparation

Pray for light and freedom to follow God's will.

Clarify the options for discernment. It might be helpful to list the "pros" and "cons" for both directions in which God might be leading. This intellectual assessment should then be left behind as a person moves more deeply into the process.

2. Finding Freedom

Recognise that God might be leading in either direction. Our own emotional attachment to one direction might come from an attachment to our *own way*, or to a refusal to face the cross in our lives.

Confront the Gospel of Jesus in prayer. Reflective prayer over a Gospel text puts us in touch with the way of Jesus, his surrender to the Father, his acceptance of the collapse of his own project and his way of the cross. The Gospels call us to an active choice to follow Jesus and to the desire to share his stance before the Father. Taking on the mind of Christ in this way can free us to go beyond our conscious or unconscious attachments.

3. Making the Decision

Invoke and remember in prayer the most central and abiding experience of God in life, a time of openness to God in love, a time when God is experienced as calling into a complete "yes." Hold in prayer this

experience of union with God.

Call to mind one of the directions in which God may be calling and place this alongside the central experience of God. Notice whether the union of the two produces a sense of congruence and deep peace, or incongruence and disharmony. Repeat with the other direction.

The direction of God's call will be indicated by the level of congruence that is experienced between the choice to be made and the experience of God. Notice that there is no special revelation or magic at work here, but rather our own assessment of congruence, which may take a long time.

4. Confirmation

A decision that is made needs to be confirmed after prayer time in the hours, days and weeks that follow. As we go about our daily duties and face difficulties in life, what is truly of God will find confirmation in a sense of deep peace in God, in spite of external complexities. The decision we have made will need to find confirmation in its actual effects. This means that the way it affects others, and what it opens up in us, will be experienced as of God.

In prayer we can place the matter again before our God and test it to ensure that it leads to peace and sits well with that part of our being where we are open to the Spirit.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In which way would you most like God to communicate with you? How have you experienced God's call in the past?

Describe a time when you felt the promptings of God? Describe a time when you felt promptings but you knew (then or later) that they weren't of God?

What kinds of decisions should be made in a purely rational form?

Have you personally experienced a lightning bolt? When has that happened in scripture?

Write about a time that you made a decision in a time of desolation. Where did it lead you?

What would it mean if you responded to what you thought was a call from God, but whatever it was didn't work out, fell flat, went wrong or just plain failed?

HOMWORK: LECTIO DIVINA

After you come to the first session of Upper Room "Listening to God" go home and during the week practice the ancient method of reading the bible called *lectio divina* - way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. Choose your own scripture passages (or try any of these: Acts 17: 16-3, Matt 28: 16-20, Luke 9: 1-6, Psalm 6, Jonah 1-2, Genesis 12: 1-9)

We understand what wind is by feeling it blow in our face. We know what snow is like when we make a snowball or watch snowflakes collect on our mittens. This sort of knowing transcends the intellect; it is direct, sensate and experiential. Devotional reading, or "lectio divina", invites us into this kind of knowing. It is the kind of knowing for which Paul prayed when he said, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to *know this; love that surpasses knowledge*—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19)

The first 1,500 years of church history were characterized by the practice of *lectio divina*. Since many people were illiterate and many that could read didn't have Bibles, *lectio divina* offered a way of attending to Scripture as it was read in church, with an ear to hearing a word from God. Some brief and memorable word or phrase became bread for the soul throughout the week. Devotional reacting is not an exercise in mentally critiquing or exegeting the text. It exists to further divine companionship. *Lectio divina* invites us into God's presence to listen for his particular, loving word to me at this particular moment in time. In *lectio* one listens to the word as it is read aloud, or you read the text aloud for yourself.

Devotional reacting is made up of five movements:

1. *Silencio*—quiet preparation of the heart. Come into God's presence, slow down, relax, and intentionally release the chaos and noise in your mind to him.
2. *Lectio*—read the word. React a Scripture passage slowly and out loud, lingering over the words so that they resonate in your heart. When a word or phrase catches your attention, don't keep reading. Stop and attend to what God is saying to you. Be open to the word. Don't analyze it or judge it. Listen and wait.
3. *Meditatio*—meditate. Read the Scripture a second time out loud. Savor the words. Listen for any invitation that God is extending to you in his word. Reflect on the importance of the words that light up to you. Like Mary, who pondered the word in her heart, gently explore the ramifications of God's invitation.

4. *Oratio*—respond, pray. Read the Scripture a third time. Now is the moment to enter into a personal dialogue with God. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important thing is to respond truthfully and authentically. What feelings has the text aroused in you? Name where you are resistant or want to push back. Become aware of where you feel invited into a deeper way of being with God. Talk to God about these feelings.

5. *Contemplatio*—contemplate, rest and wait in the presence of God. Allow some time for the word to sink deeply into your soul. Yield and surrender yourself to God. Before you leave, you might consider a reminder that can help you dwell on or incarnate this word throughout the day.

FOR REFLECTION THIS WEEK

We Hear and Speak

(On reading Jeremiah - Walter Bruggeman)

We are a people with many words and muck talk:
creeds and
ads and
propaganda and
slogans and
sound bytes.

We keep listening among these words for comfort,
and we find ourselves made anxious by the cacophony.

And then - the din is broken;
You speak and we enter the zone of the address.
You speak and we are called by name.
You name and we are summoned
summoned, commanded, sent.

We hear and cringe and pause . . .
overwhelmed by mandate.

We listen and you speak again;
you utter words of presence,
promises of protection,
assurances of solidarity.

We breathe easier, still afraid, but on our way, at risk, not alone.

Give us good ears in these days,
That we may hear the mandate and listen for assurance.
That even such as us may speak you well,
you in your sovereignty,
you in your fidelity
you in your sadness
and in your newness.

Let your word be fleshed through our tongues and on our lips,
that our fleshed verbiage may truly echo
your word made flesh via Nazareth.

NOTES

