

LISTENING WITH THE HEART

What are you doing after you graduate?

I disliked that question when I was in college. I didn't know for certain what I was going to do after graduation. There were so many choices and so many things I was good at and wanted to do. It was hard to settle on something. I wasn't sure how to decide or who could help me sort out what to do. Two things I did know. I wanted my life to make a difference in the world, and I wanted to please God.

Through the years, I have learned that this kind of decision making or discernment, as it is called, has to do with listening with one's heart. When I was discerning my call to the community to which I belong, Benedictine Women of Madison, Wisconsin, my journal was full of questions I thought needed to be answered before I could make the decision whether or not to come to the community. In the process of discernment, I discovered that figuring everything out with my mind was not as important as was listening with my heart.

Someone has written that the way to discover your call in life is to consider where your deepest desire meets the world's needs. The key question to ask yourself in discernment is what is your heart's desire? What gives you deep joy?

The call to community or to a vocation of any kind comes through the heart more than through the head. Listening with the heart means attending to your feelings. How do you feel when you visit the community or the work place you are considering? Does it feel life-giving or does it feel oppressive. Our heads can easily be swayed by thoughts of money, prestige or someone else's opinion. Our hearts are a truer guide to our deepest desires. How do you feel when you tutor a child or design a webpage or work in the garden? Does it give you deep sense of joy or is it just something to do?

It can be helpful to look back over your life to notice the kind of activities you have been drawn to or to find a common thread that runs through the various things you have chosen to do. One woman, after attending a *Spiritual Spring Break* retreat at our monastery, realized that her passion was for bridge-building. That is, she liked building relationships among people. As she reflected on her life, she discovered that she had often been a mediator between family members and friends. That could have its downside. She sometimes got caught in the middle of relationships. But the positive side was that she loved bringing diverse people together.

Some of my passions are worship, teaching, music and being outdoors. These passions come together in my life as a Benedictine sister in an inclusive Christian community. The first time I visited Benedictine Women of Madison, I fell in love with the liturgy. We pray the *Liturgy of the Hours* three times a day and sing the Psalms together. The liturgy speaks to my heart, and music sings in me throughout the day.

My life here also includes teaching women who come to join the community and working in our gardens and restored prairie. I love being outdoors and working on the land.

In discernment, it is also helpful to have a trusted advisor, a friend or spiritual guide who knows you well and will give you honest feedback and ask difficult questions. One of our sisters thought she wanted to be a missionary after college. Her parish priest who knew her well told her he couldn't see her doing that because family was so important to her. He asked her if she had thought about what it would be like to be thousands of miles away from her family. To be a missionary is a wonderful calling. But when being close to family holds a special place in your heart, living overseas may not be for you.

On my first retreat with the community I joined, when I experienced the common prayers and the daily rhythm of the community's life, my heart said to me, "This feels like home." I spent many months in the discernment process praying and talking with the sisters and people who knew me well. I journaled about my experience. I looked back at how the Spirit had brought me to this point. I asked many questions. But the most important question was, "What does my heart say?"

Every time I visited Benedictine Women of Madison, it was my heart that kept drawing me back. I have found my home with a community that is life-giving and where I can make a difference.

At Holy Wisdom Monastery, we offer retreats that help people listen to their heart's desire and find God in their lives. We welcome women and men on the spiritual journey who bring questions and are discerning God's guidance. Visit our website (www.benedictinewomen.org) to learn more about us and the discernment retreats we offer.

God wants us to use the gifts God has given us in service to others. God also wants us to find deep joy in using those gifts. If you follow your heart's desire, you won't be far from God's will for you.

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