

## Discerning the Signs of the Time

“God speaks to us all the time and in many ways, but it requires spiritual discernment to hear God’s voice, see what God sees, and read the signs in daily life.” (Henri Nouwen)

From a very early age an insatiable love of reading has dominated my life. My mother delighted in telling everyone that I was born, not with a silver spoon in my mouth, but with a book in my hand! As a young child, fighting sleep, it was the gentle voice of my mother reading to me, or the sound of my father’s Irish brogue making up wonderful stories that lulled me to sleep.

As an adult, my love for books has not diminished. My tastes, however, have changed considerably over the years. These days, my bookshelves are filled with books from which I can learn and draw on other peoples’ experiences and wisdom. I happily echo the sentiments of French writer, Colette: ‘Books, books, books! It was not that I read so much. I read and re-read the same ones. But all of them were necessary to me...’

Books are my friends. A really ‘good’ book becomes my best friend. It has the knack of speaking to me when I need to hear it speak. It comforts me when I need to be comforted, uplifted or inspired. One such book is ‘Abide’ – a beautiful book on meditation written by Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr in which she describes the beauty of words: “I was discovering that words bless. They move and dance and sing. They abide.... Words invite us to feel included, loved, honoured....”

The books we read, the nature we enjoy, the people we meet, our everyday experiences, contain within themselves signs of God’s presence and guidance in our lives. They also open the way to discover, if this is what we want, how our lives are far from being ordinary. To realise there is nothing in our daily reality that is not meaningful; nothing that cannot offer us something that is beneficial for our spiritual growth, learning, expression of gratitude, and awe.

In olden times, Monks described it as ‘reading the book of the world’ whilst Quakers referred to it as ‘praying the Ordinary.’ The root meaning of these words maintains that spiritual literacy is ‘a life rightly lived.’ As ancient as this sounds, spiritual literacy is a skill, I believe, in which the modern world is sorrowfully lacking.

Possibly, for most of us, the journey of discernment begins when we find ourselves seeking a deeper relationship with God in the very mystery of the ordinariness of our lives. How often does it happen when we are alone and still, especially through this current time of ‘lockdown’, we experience a yearning so deep within, it aches?

We may well ask ourselves, what does it mean to become spiritually literate and how important is it to us? Generally speaking, becoming spiritual literate enables us to examine not only our own lives but also to understand, at a different level, what’s happening in the world. A level that is much more acute and sensitive to the myriad layers of our mere existence.

We will find ourselves paying more attention to those aspects of reality that perhaps we had failed to notice before, such as our fears, wounds, hopes and dreams. We will begin to listen with not only our ears but also the ears of our hearts. We will be able to listen with a resonance we didn't realize existed. And then, finally, we will discover that the whole world is permeated with sacred meaning.

Unfortunately, though, at first, we may experience difficulty as we begin this inward journey without help. And that is why we turn to spiritual books and other sources as we seek to discover what God's way forward is for us.

However, studying spiritual discernment is quite different, say, to studying philosophy, etc. It is not an intellectual or technical skill to be mastered, 'somewhat like an integral calculus.' It is not just about reading spiritual things but also understanding that we need to read about them in a spiritual way. As Henri Nouwen observed: 'That requires a willingness not to just read but to also be read, not just to master but to be mastered by words.'

Discerning the sacred in everyday life necessitates our developing new qualities of the mind and heart. Qualities that will enable us to become more aware of the spiritual within all aspects of our existence.

Discernment is a gift. And like any gift, it must be received with openness, at the time of the giver's choosing. Pope Francis has repeatedly reflected on the need for patience in discernment, a patience that is not passive resignation, but active reliance on God's good time. Discernment, for Pope Francis, means not rushing ahead of graces given, but patiently following God's lead.

This waiting on God also requires from us an act of radical trust in those periods of uncertainty and confusion. Poet John Keats called this period of waiting 'negative capability', that is, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.' A space which is a 'mysteriously fertile' one, in which the seed of discernment may grow and bear fruit.

We need to become spiritually discerning because life is constantly speaking to us, giving us insights, help and wisdom. It also helps us to find our true place in the scheme of things. When we can discern the 'signs of the time', we will be better able to maintain a balanced sense of who we are and what our responsibilities in life are to our God, society and neighbour.

Peggy Spencer