

A 24-Hour Life and Death Discernment

By

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“We have two options. We can do our best to keep the disease at bay and just treat side effects, leaving you days or weeks to live, or we have a sliver of time now to start a very challenging regimen of chemo and radiation with a small chance a bone marrow transplant will buy you more time, maybe less. We need to know by tomorrow. There will be no option to turn back either way.”

This was the prognosis from my doctor after eight months of trying to treat my cancer to no avail. My husband and I sat, hand in hand, trying to process the reality of the month that lay before us. It seemed an impossible discernment. We had 24 hours to choose a path of peaceful, certain death or painful extended life, for how long no one knew.

Only with the tools of Ignatian discernment that we had practiced for years could we begin to process that moment.

Call my spiritual director.

For the last seven years my spiritual director, a Sister of Mercy with wisdom untold, has helped unknot my temptations and ego-fallacies from my deepest yearnings and callings. Even via phone she could read me without judgement and gently guide me to a healthy place of connection with God. I broke into tears at the sound of her voice, knowing I was finally in a safe space to let it all out. In response, she offered true compassion but remained firm in her role as my guide. She asked me my gut reaction. There was no clarity there. I want to live; I want to die with dignity. We walked through the pros and cons of each path forward. She reassured me there was no right or wrong choice here. I was completely free to follow my heart. Different people in different circumstances would make a different choice. This was my discernment to make. She affirmed how hard this was. She heard my concerns for my family and reminded me to trust that God will be with them too, so I need not try to control what is best for everyone else. She didn't give even a hint of what she thought I should do. She affirmed that God and I together will walk either path. I will never be alone. That gave me the peace of heart to think and feel more clearly.

Embrace “Thy will be done.”

In my prayer, I searched desperately for the will of God in that moment. I have come to know the will of God not as some expectation of a Being out there in the heavens orchestrating a particular future that I am supposed to figure out, but as the constant calling from the Power of Infinite Love that resides deep within me, to know what will fulfil my soul and give me peace. This was my Suscipe prayer for only love and grace. It might not come in the moment of prayer itself, but I trust it will come, somehow, in the remaining time I have.

Be aware of internal movements.

Even in an immediate discernment, daily living had to go on: dinner had to be made, messes had to be cleaned up,

medications had to be ordered. In some ways those distractions helped me to just be aware of what was going on inside while my hands busied with other tasks. Was it fear of pain or death? Was it anger or desperation? Was it relief or agitation? What was certain and strong in this shaken-up existence? As I sorted the silverware, I observed the tumult inside.

Get information, not opinions.

My doctor had given me as much info as he could about what to expect, the odds, and other similar cases. He too was clear that no one would fault me for choosing either path. We only shared the news with our grown children. Perhaps it was having grown up in an Ignatian household, hearing the language of discernment offered to them as parental guidance for so many years, but each of our children was clear this was my decision and, rather than try to sway me to the path they wanted for me or themselves, they just offered their unconditional love and promised they would be OK either way.

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Walk down each path a little way.

Throughout the evening we leaned hard in one direction. It seemed to fit, though not completely. During the night I had trouble sleeping and continually felt the desire to choose the other path. When I told my husband in the morning, we each went into our day as if the choice were made. By lunch, I admitted it left with me with emptiness and angst when I visualized what that coming month would look like if we chose that path. Yes, it felt like whiplash going from one path to the other, but we had given each true consideration. We were both emotionally exhausted, still not knowing how to proceed. But we knew enough not to make a decision in desolation.

Look for peace in safe spaces of relationship.

My husband ensured we didn't retreat into our individual angst. Together we rooted ourselves on what we knew was true and

foundational to our lives together. Somehow, a glimmer of light came for how to proceed. It started very softly from my gut but seemed to blossom with his reassurance that I would not be alone. I made the phone call to the doctor with an hour to spare.

Observe the aftermath.

In the days following, the affirmation of the discernment continues and allows me to live peacefully and in consolation in this moment. The train has left the station, and I am on board for the ride.

I write this reflection not for sympathy or even prayers of support, but as testament to the tools of this practice of discernment. The path I ultimately chose isn't the point. Rather, I want to help others recognize the daily living of Ignatian spirituality brings us to a place of trust in God that enables us to hear the deepest callings of our lives, especially to hear the call to come home.