

ON OUR WAY

Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life

edited by Dorothy C. Bass & Susan R. Briehl

ON OUR WAY: CHRISTIAN PRACTICES FOR LIVING A WHOLE LIFE
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ON OUR WAY

3* Discerning God's Call

Jennifer Grant Haworth

Few things cause more anxiety, incite more fear, or generate as much daydreaming as the question *What do I want to do with my life?* This is especially true when major life decisions demand attention, as they often do during our twenties. From picking a major to selecting a career, staying single or getting married, following our dreams or playing it safe, decisions are the stuff of early adulthood.

Just ask Kate, who came face-to-face with these questions soon after graduating from college. Although Kate believed she had already thought things through, she was thrown into an existential tailspin when she found herself working long hours at a job she thought she'd love but, instead, hated. "I've been told I have a future here," Kate, a former student of mine, told me. "But I don't even care. My work doesn't make a difference beyond pleasing my boss. And I'm always working, so I never see my fiancé or my family. I'm so frustrated I limp home every night and cry."

"Why not quit?" I asked, rather matter-of-factly.

"I can't!" she lamented. "I have bills to pay and a wedding to help finance. I feel trapped. I can't tell you how many times I've wondered, *Is there more to life than this?*"

Fortunately, for Kate and for all of us, the answer is yes! As people of faith, we believe that when God knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps. 139:13), God had more than work in mind for us. Calling us each by name (Isa. 43:1), God longs for us to live fully into our vocations.

What is vocation? At its core, vocation is a call from God to love and to grow in love—with self, others, and God. We respond to this invitation by listening carefully to our own experience in the light of God's loving presence. In doing so, we discern what the writer and theologian Frederick Buechner says is "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Each person's unique calling gathers together those talents and passions that bring joy; and it discloses where, how, and with whom sharing those talents and passions will bring more love and life into the world. Father Michael Himes has described our calling as our "particular way of self-gift" that, once discovered, leads us to make loving decisions to "give oneself away."

We begin to learn about our vocation through a centuries-old Christian practice known as *discernment*. Through individual reflection and conversation with others, the practice of discernment challenges us to pay attention to and understand our experience, encouraging us to become more familiar with and sensitive to God's action in our lives. When discernment becomes a habit of our heart, mind, and soul, it leads us more honestly into our deepest self and also prepares us to go out to live God's love in our world.

While discerning our vocations, or callings, is a lifelong practice, in this chapter I am exploring vocational discernment in early adulthood.

“Practicing discernment means attending to what is truly important—and really real—in ourselves and in our world.”

Grounded in both individual attentiveness and communal reflection, vocational discernment as a Christian practice invites us to notice where and how we are experiencing God in our daily lives. Practicing discernment means attending to what is truly important—and really real—in ourselves and in our world. As Ray's story illustrates, this is often easier said than done.

*Whose Life Am I Living?

Tall and tan, Ray is a surfer who grew up on the beaches of suburban Los Angeles. Not an "academic type," Ray excelled as an athlete and played water polo during college. "I loved the competition, and I loved being part of a team. All I wanted to do was hang out at the pool with guys who weren't thinking past winning our next game." Reflecting on that time, Ray, now thirty-one, said, "I had no idea what I wanted to do. I had no clue who I was. I avoided dealing with those questions by living in a bubble for five years."

Ray admitted that as graduation neared, he was scared, because he knew what was around the corner. Ray's dad owned a business. When Ray was growing up, his dad dreamed about his son someday working with him, learning the ropes, and then taking over the company. Ray majored in management—not because he wanted to but because it would prepare him for this future. "I was okay with it during college," Ray said. "The script was set; I'd get my degree and, voilà, I'd have a good job. Meanwhile, my friends were worried about finding employment and paying off their school loans. Given what they faced, it seemed selfish to want more for myself."

Ray did go to work for his dad. Five mornings a week he got up at 5:00 AM, put on a shirt and tie, and commuted two hours in heavy LA traffic. Five evenings a week he drove back. On weekends Ray and his girlfriend spent time alternately looking at condos and escaping to the mountains, where he "found his breath again" while cycling on physically demanding trails.

Ray made his father proud. "Apparently, I was a natural," he told me. "Dad promoted me, gave me an impressive title, and raised my salary. I looked like a success, but I felt like a total failure. I didn't like the work. I hated the commute. Every time I put on that tie, I felt like I was choking

off my voice. I lived for the weekends. Biking brought me home to my soul and gave me the space to quiet the noise and hear God's voice."

Although it took him another few years of long commutes (which he learned to value as quiet time for reflection), Ray eventually found the courage to tell his dad that running the family business was his dad's dream but not his. "It was one of the most difficult moments of my life," Ray confessed. "I didn't want to disappoint him. Here I was, the family business talent, making a lot of money and on the verge of buying a great condo, and I was choosing to leave all of it without any clear idea of what I would do next. I had discovered that none of that was as real to me as the voices I heard biking on the backwoods trails of the Santa Monica Mountains. It sounds crazy, but I heard God telling me, *Ray, there's more to life than this. It's time to leap and trust that the net will appear.*"

Ray took the leap and spent a year talking with people he admired about how they learned to live their dreams. He racked up a load of debt, but he felt it was what he had to do to discover where he was being called. Today Ray helps to run a production company that tells the stories of people who have overcome fears, doubts, and the expectations of others by listening to and acting on the voice of the genuine in themselves. By listening to his experience and longings, Ray discerned a way of making a good living by using his gifts as an entrepreneur to inspire the thousands of viewers who see the company's films each year.

*Are You Stuck in the Crosscurrents?

You've heard it. Your sister says, "I know you want to move, but I hope you'll stay close to home." A friend remarks, "You love to argue. You'd be an awesome lawyer." A professor scribbles on one of your papers, "You write well. The academic life may be calling you." A tiny voice inside you whispers, *I'd love to write and work from home*, but a loud voice then booms, *It took you how long to earn your degree? How much do you owe in student loans? I don't care if you're not thrilled with your life. Get used to it.*

None of us is immune. Voices from within and without compete for our attention, often pushing and pulling us in every direction so noisily that we can't hear the one that asks, *Is this the real me? Is this who God is calling me to be?* As Ray experienced, certain voices can choke the life out of us. My friend Bill Creed, SJ, offers a helpful image for such voices: they are like

the surface crosscurrents on a river—easily visible and pulling in various directions. But beneath the river's surface, Bill says, a far mightier current flows, moving the river gently but steadily toward its mouth, its true end.

In my work with twenty-somethings, I've heard about the many voices that act like crosscurrents, overwhelming the deeper current of vocation and calling. Ray's crosscurrent was listening too closely to his father's hopes for his life rather than his own. Efforts to please our parents, distinguish ourselves from siblings, and compete with peers often generate powerful surface-level tensions. Ray also struggled with the voice of professional success, which too often translates in our culture as good pay and lots of possessions. The voice of doubt can also be loud, especially for the many who are still trying to identify their talents, strengths, and limits. *Am I good (or courageous or committed or even crazy) enough to do this?* the voice of doubt asks. *If I choose this, will I have to say no to that? What if this doesn't work out the way I planned?*

Closely linked to the voice of doubt is that of fear. This voice causes some to retreat into compulsive busyness at work, at home, in relationships, in social life, even in free time, as a way to avoid listening to the deeper voice within. Fear can also lead to stalling and lethargy; people move numbly through daily life, frightened even to ask, *Is there more to life than this?*

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen, recognized the seductive power of these voices. In his bestselling book *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen wrote that all of us live in a "world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable; you are nobody—unless you can demonstrate the opposite.'" Trying to respond to these voices by proving our worth can lead to endless efforts to please others—parents, mentors, bosses, peers—and to unsatisfying careers and lifestyles that fit the culture's definition of success, not our own. When this happens, Nouwen saw, we often stop listening to the deep river of our lives, letting the surface currents determine our direction. We begin to avoid risk. We grow anxious or restless, depressed or angry, because we just can't seem to wrap our hands around anything that brings forth the response, "Ah, yes, that's it! That's the truth I've been seeking, the bedrock that makes me know that I matter, that helps me to see that there is a meaningful way to live."

People of faith need not despair, Nouwen insisted in his writings. If we will just stop, interrupt the surface noise, and listen, we will hear a voice speaking life to us. "I have called you by name, from the very beginning," this voice will say, according to Nouwen. "You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch."

The voice that calls us Beloved is the voice of God. Once we claim the truth that we are God's beloved, we recognize surface crosscurrents for what they are: forces that have no real hold on who we most deeply are.

*What Life Wants to Live in Me?

Through individual reflection and conversation with others, the Christian practice of discernment invites us (1) to pay attention to our daily experience and what it stirs in us; (2) to reflect on what we notice there, sorting and sifting in order to understand what is leading to greater life and love and what is not; and (3) to take loving action on what we have learned. When done faithfully, discernment draws us closer to God, opening our heart in ways that lead us to make more loving choices for ourselves and our world.

Before exploring this three-part process, I need to say a word about the role of desires in Christian discernment. As Jesuit priest James Martin reminds us, human desire (the word comes from the Latin *desiderare*, "to long for") plays an important but often overlooked role in the spiritual life because it inclines or motivates us to act in certain ways. Our desires can be shallow or deep, fleeting or enduring, from God or from something other than God. One task of discernment is to grow in awareness of which desires lead us closer to life, love, and God, and which ones lead us away.

Spiritual writers from a variety of Christian traditions agree that our most authentic desires are God-given. The Protestant theologian and psychologist James W. Fowler makes this point simply: "What God wants for us and from us has something central to do with what we most deeply and truly want for

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ourselves.” Similarly, the contemporary spiritual writer Margaret Silf, who was trained in Ignatian discernment, observes that “for those whose hearts are, deep down, directed towards God . . . the deepest desire will be in tune with God’s dream for them, and for all of creation.” Bringing God’s dream for us to birth, writes Silf, is “the amazing vocation of every believer.”

But how can we discern what our deepest, God-given desires are? The insights of a sixteenth-century soldier-turned-priest have been helpful to me and to millions of others. For Ignatius of Loyola, the first step was to slow down, open his eyes a little, and pay attention to the love and life that had a hold on his heart. Ignatius was born into a wealthy Spanish family in 1491. His parents hoped he would make them proud by serving as a courtier and knight who would marry a wealthy royal. His friends urged him to go out drinking, gambling, and fighting. And all around him, Ignatius felt the pressures of a society that rewarded ambition, valued the acquisition of wealth, and required conformity to social expectations.

Ignatius did not buck these pressures. He served ably as a courtier and soldier in the service of King Ferdinand of Spain. He was admired by friends as a fun-loving sport who didn’t hesitate to engage in swordplay to win the attention of a beautiful woman. His emerging success as an aristocrat, however, came to an abrupt halt at age thirty, when a cannonball shattered his leg while he was defending a royal fortress in Pamplona. Ignatius went home to his parents’ castle to recuperate and to figure out what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

For the next eight months, Ignatius lay in bed as his leg healed, though it would never be the same again. He passed the time by reading. Although he had requested stories of knightly valor, the castle had only two books: one on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the saints. For months, Ignatius alternated between these two, reading, reflecting, and paying attention to the daydreams they generated in his imagination.

Ignatius slowly noticed that two daydreams vied for his attention. One was the heroic dream of knightly ambition and military glory; the other was a newly emerging dream of serving a different King. While his heroic dreams brought fleeting delight, over time they left him “dry and discontented.” In contrast, his dreams of serving God and imitating the saints left him feeling full of life. He later wrote, “I paid no attention” to these feelings at first, but “one day my eyes were opened a little and I began to wonder at the difference and to reflect on it. I learned from experience that one kind of thought left me sad and the other cheerful. Thus, step-by-step I came to recognize the difference between these two . . . the one being from my own sinfulness and vanity and the other from God.”

Ignatius’s daydreams provided a window into what gave him life. His deep desire, he came to understand, was not to win the admiration of his friends or to meet the expectations of his parents; rather, as Nouwen might have put it, it was to “become the Beloved.” Motivated by the love he experienced in his daydreams, Ignatius discerned that what *really, truly, authentically* had a hold on his heart was God. Despite many setbacks, Ignatius would spend the next several years walking the path to “I know not where” in search of an elusive “I know not what.” Eventually, while studying at the University of Paris, he met others with whom he could explore his deep desire to serve God. In 1534, Ignatius and a small group of his friends formed a community known as the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, which would later grow into one of the largest religious orders in the history of the Catholic Church.

When we open our eyes a little, we will, as Jesus says to Nathanael, “see greater things” for ourselves and our world (John 1:50). Practicing this kind of seeing will require us, as it did Ignatius, to become aware of God’s action in our lives; to reflect on our experiences in order to understand which lead us to greater life and love and which do not; and to act lovingly on what we’ve learned, even if it means that we must walk a path to “I know not where.”

*Becoming Aware

Three large lithographs by the American painter Georgia O'Keeffe hang in my office. O'Keeffe, who like many artists managed to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, created paintings in which ordinary things—flowers, buildings, desert landscapes—are transformed into powerful abstract images. Once, when asked why she painted so many flowers, O'Keeffe responded, "Nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time."

Yes, to see or to have a friend does take time. Discerning God's call takes time too.

Discernment begins with choosing to slow down and open our eyes a little. The first step in developing a discerning heart is to pay attention to where God is active in our lives, and to do this alone and with others. There, in the stuff of our everyday experience—our hopes, our fears, our dreams, our routines—God is at work, inviting us to notice what brings us joy, what we're good at, and what others need us to do. We can foster

“... to act lovingly on what we've learned,
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'I know not where.'”

such noticing through prayer and meditation, service to others, and active listening to the stories of others.

Prayer and meditation allow us to press the pause button and be still, opening a space where we can to listen to God, talk to God, and listen some more. When we read and pray over the daily scriptures chosen for a church lectionary or devotional source, for instance, we connect with God's wisdom and are invited to notice how it connects to our day-to-day lives. Other forms of prayer—such as centering prayer or meditative yoga—can quiet and open us, allowing us to hear more clearly God's voice of love and where, to what, and to whom it is calling us.

The examen, a particular form of prayer used by Christians across the centuries, invites us to stop each day to notice what is leading us toward greater life and love and what is blocking our way. This simple, three-part prayer, often done near the end of the day (examen is short for “examination of conscience”) may last only a few minutes. After asking the Spirit for illumination, you ask, *For what moment today am I most grateful?* and *When did I feel most alive today?* You then offer a prayer of gratitude for these blessings, noting that God is always present in any encounter that deepens love and enriches life. After this, you review the day again, asking, *For what moment today am I least grateful?* and *When did I most feel life draining out of me?* You pay attention to these experiences, take note of how you reacted in these moments, and pray for forgiveness in those situations where your response was less than loving or life giving. Finally, you reflect on what you noticed while praying. What feelings arose? How are these connected to specific experiences of the day? What patterns are emerging over time in your reflections? Which experiences make you feel more alive, and which exhaust and deaden your spirit?

While prayer quiets us in order to hear God's voice, serving others often carries us to places where we encounter God in the gritty realities of the world. Here we are invited to become aware of our “deep gladness”—for example, when we experience joy or energy in using a particular talent for the benefit of others—and of the “deep hungers” of the human community for care, for food and shelter, for peace, for companionship, and for so much more.

Recently I met with a twenty-six-year-old graduate student, Shalene, for a spiritual companioning session. After graduation, Shalene had spent two life-changing years in Africa, and now she was excitedly preparing for an upcoming service trip to Kenya.

“What happened while you were in Africa the first time that produced such a change in you?” I asked. “What did it help you become more aware of?”

“In the journal I kept during that time,” she answered, “I wrote a lot about how my eyes were being opened in ways I never could have imagined while living in the States. I saw how the everyday decisions I make at home adversely affect the poor in Africa. Everything here is about finding

the cheapest price, but in Africa I saw firsthand how the best deal for me is not always good for others.

"I lived with a family that came from a long line of tea farmers. Unfortunately, the Kenyan government had recently moved to a farming policy that placed a priority on cash-crop farming. In this family, the husband was forced to leave their small tea farm—tea was not considered a cash crop—to plant and harvest roses in a government-sponsored operation. He barely made any money. Eventually they lost their farm, which is now producing cash crops for the government. Centuries of love went into that farm, but greed eventually overtook it. Because of this family's heartache, I'll never look at a rose in the same way again."

"That experience helped you to see injustice as more than a concept," I offered.

"Oh yes. And it showed me what I wanted my life to be about. I went to Africa as a social worker who wanted to help people. I came back from Kenya as a more compassionate, humble person who realized that the best help I could offer was to stand beside others working for justice. I know that if I listen enough to my experience, I will hear where God is inviting me to go next."

Shalene's service experience made her more aware of the world's deep hunger, and it also led her to notice the deep currents of justice, kindness, and humility that moved within her. Serving others—especially those who live on the margins—can shed light both on our unique talents and abilities and on the gifts all Christians are called to share: friendship, compassion, hope, love.

Listening to others' stories offers a third way to become aware of God's call. Whether we hear these stories firsthand, read them in a book, or experience them through film, it's important to pay attention when certain stories speak to us. That may happen even as you read the stories in this chapter and throughout this book. As you ponder these stories, perhaps one or more of these practices will call out to you as a vocation, a way of participating in God's life and love in this world.

*Developing Understanding

Through prayer, service, and story, God invites us to wake up and become aware of the many ways in which we can share our talents and gifts with

others. That said, awareness without understanding goes nowhere. Understanding develops through reflection, taking the time to see the patterns in our experience and grasp their significance. While we can begin to notice and interpret God's action in our lives individually, if we want to hear deeply, see clearly, and choose wisely, we need trusted companions on the journey.

"The path [to our callings] is too deeply hidden to be traveled without company," writes the Quaker educator Parker Palmer. "Finding our way involves clues that are subtle and sometimes misleading, requiring the kind of discernment that can happen only in dialogue." We need other people to help us discern our callings, Palmer continues, because "the destination is too daunting to be achieved alone: we need community to find the courage to venture into the alien lands to which the inner teacher [God] may call us."

For at least three centuries, spiritual directors and Quaker clearness committees have accompanied seekers on the journey of discernment. Both can provide the companionship we need to sort and sift through our experiences, clarifying which are leading to greater life and love and which are not.

Spiritual direction usually occurs within the context of a one-on-one relationship. Its focus is on encouraging people to become more aware of God's movement in their lives, inviting them to grow in intimacy with God and to respond lovingly to God. Directors prompt directees to reflect on their experiences and to pay attention to the feelings they evoke. They help directees to notice patterns in their lives, including those that consistently deepen their relationship with God, give them energy and life, grow their hearts in love and joy, and inspire them to share their talents and gifts with others. And because all this is done in a context of trust and support, directors also encourage directees to identify tendencies that might be deceptive or destructive to their discernment. When done faithfully, spiritual direction often guides people to live more fully into their Belovedness, their authentic callings.

Quaker clearness committees, in contrast, offer a group approach to discernment. Since the seventeenth century, members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) have gathered in face-to-face groups to help one another better hear and understand God's voice in their lives. These committees

assemble most frequently when a member (or a couple, family, or other group of members) is standing at the crossroads of an important decision. A Quaker approach to discernment is grounded in the assumption that every person has an "inner teacher" who longs to guide us more deeply into our deepest truth. Quaker clearness committees focus on listening attentively and walking compassionately with a member as he or she explores varying choices. Rather than offering opinions or advice, committee members ask questions that emerge from deep listening to the member and to the promptings of the Spirit in the accompanying silence—questions meant to assist the member in sorting through thoughts, feelings, choices. As the member reflects and responds, Quakers trust that the inner teacher will be heard more clearly, leading the member to choose the more loving and life-giving choice.

Whether we walk with one companion or several, we need the guidance, support, and insights of others as we travel the pathways of discernment. Each individual, shaped by a particular history and point of view, can see only partially. Reflecting on our experiences with trusted others can prevent us from being blinded by our own arrogance or deceived by our own insecurities. Discerning in community can encourage us to continue our search. And sharing our thoughts with others who listen in love can enrich our understanding of the God-given desires that lead us to live more fully into our callings.

*Acting Lovingly

Discernment does not end with becoming aware of how our experiences are drawing us closer to or further away from God. As Timothy Gallagher, a Roman Catholic priest, has pointed out, "the life of discernment calls for a person willing to act." When God has shown us greater things for our lives and our world, we eventually must decide what we want to do with this knowledge. How will we act on what we've learned, if we act at all?

Christian wisdom teaches that a sound decision is one that will grow our heart in love, bring us and others life, and reflect the "fruit of the Spirit." Looking back on his own long process of discernment, Father Pedro Arrupe, a twentieth-century leader in the Society of Jesus, wrote that "finding God, that is, falling in love in a quite absolute, final way" is what leads a person to a vocation. "What you are in love with, what seizes your

imagination, will affect everything," he continued. "It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

If growing in love is an important guideline to follow in making a decision, then growing in life is not far behind it. Any choice that leads to greater energy, creativity, or healing is a life-giving option, since it is always the "Spirit [that] gives life" (John 6:63, NIV). "Jesus, 'God-with-us,' poured his life energy into touching all creation with compassion and healing love," writes Margaret Silf. "He lived out the bias of God towards all that is life-giving, and he teaches and commissions us to do the same. . . . It is in the nature of God always to be weaving the most life-giving outcome from whatever we present." A wise choice fills us with the energy of life and inspires us to share our life with others. To use Michael Himes's terms, a good decision—a real calling—will energize us to give ourselves away.

"Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.—Father Pedro Arrupe"

Last, we'll know we're choosing wisely if, as we live with our decision and act out of it over time, we (and those we touch) experience the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). A wise decision fosters these dispositions, suggesting that the Spirit is at work in us. As Jesus told his disciples, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. . . . Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:18, 20).

Eventually, all of our individual and communal efforts to become aware and develop understanding lead to a place of decision. Ray had to decide whether he was going to live his father's life or his own. Ignatius had to choose between serving God or a Spanish king. And Kate had to determine whether to stay in a job she hated or discern a more life-giving

course (which she did, eventually gathering the courage to leave her job, enroll full-time in a graduate program, and follow a calling to give herself away as an educator).

We cannot grow into our deepest desires or distinctive callings if we are not willing to become aware of God's movement in our lives, to reflect on this movement prayerfully alone and with others, and to take loving action on what we have learned. This is, in a nutshell, the work of discernment. Practicing it faithfully will help us to discover, over time, the unique gifts God has given to each of us—gifts we are called to share lovingly in healing the world. It will help us to notice the deep hungers of the world. And time and again it will reveal how much God loves each of us individually, and how much God loves this suffering world, inspiring us to make decisions that, in gratitude, "pay forward" more love and life to ourselves, our neighbors, and our God.

*How, Then, Shall We Live?

In these pages I have shared words of wisdom concerning discernment and what this practice promises to reveal about the ways God calls us to live—together, as members of the body of Christ, and uniquely, as individuals called by name to share our unique gifts with others. Now there is one more word I want to share, one that is as important as any of the others: *patience*.

Although we live in a culture that believes our questions will be answered if we just work hard enough, study long enough, or throw enough money at them, the Christian practice of vocational discernment reminds us that quick answers and fixes are illusions. Life is a mystery: not a single one of us knows for certain when a new life will begin or a current life end. A life well-lived keeps us focused on God, continually moving us into the depths of the mysterious river that sustains us. Trusting that we are held by God in the midst of these waters, we are set free to love the questions, not be terrified by them. And we come to love the mouth from which all questions are ultimately answered. We are set free to live in patience and hope, even while our discernment continues. "Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and . . . try to love *the questions themselves*," the writer Rainer Maria Rilke once advised a young poet. "Do not now seek the answers, that cannot be given you because you would

not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

It is the vocation of all Christians to keep living life's questions throughout our lives, turning our ears daily toward God as we seek to respond to God's call to us and to our world. If we do this, we will no doubt be invited to travel the path of "I know not what." When I respond to that invitation in my own life, I still often wonder where I am being led. But I am sustained by a felt knowledge that I am lovingly led by God.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you,
says the LORD, plans for your welfare and
not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
Then when you call upon me and come
and pray to me, I will hear you.
When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart,
I will let you find me.—Jeremiah 29:11-14a"