

Seton Hall University

From the Selected Works of Richard M Liddy

2005

Hints and Guesses: Discerning Value

Richard M Liddy, *Seton Hall University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/richard_liddy/9/

Hints and Guesses:

Discerning Values

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

A version of this appeared as “Hints and Guesses: Discerning Values,” *Called and Chosen: Toward a Spirituality for Lay Leaders*, edited by Zeni Fox and Regina Bechtel, S.C., Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2005; 31-42.

“HINTS AND GUESSES”: DISCERNING VALUE

Msgr. Richard M. Liddy

According to Michael Downey, Christian lay leaders need a vision, for “without a vision the people perish” (Proverbs 16, 9). That vision, of course, is Trinitarian for we are brought within the Father’s tender embrace of his Son in the Holy Spirit. That vision is also of the kingdom coming among us as in each historical situation the Christian leader discerns through the *bricolage* of fragmentary insights and hunches the next step in the coming of the kingdom. T. S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* wrote of this as the “hints and guesses” by which we discern the Incarnation.

In this article I would like to specify these insights by reflecting on our growth in virtue as we choose values; and I would like to do so by pointing to a vocabulary that can help us link our faith statements with our own human experience. The creation and adoption of such a vocabulary is an instance of *fides quaerens intellectum*, the ancient goal of Christian theology, “faith seeking understanding.” For as Christian leaders - administrators, principals, teachers, chaplains – we are called upon not only to repeat faith statements, but also “to give a reason for the faith that is in us” (I Peter 3, 15); that is, to explain how the realities of faith fit in to the rest of our human living. Our leadership and the mission of our Catholic institutions depend on it.

In other words, our topic is “discerning value,” that is, the Spirit-laden values that build up our selves and our communities. In order to talk about the habits of the heart needed to for this discernment - openness of heart, prayer, attentiveness to the Spirit and the Word, asceticism, etc. – it is important to call attention to the human dynamics by which we “search” at all – that is, the “heuristic” character of the human spirit as it searches for being and for value. In other words, before talking about the concrete human habits we need to develop in order to help us discern Spirit-filled values, it is important to point to a language about our human searching as such. Since, to my mind, no one has made these connections so clearly the focal point of his own thought as the Canadian philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), I will be drawing on his writings in this essay.¹ Our topics then are: our infinite human quest; the fulfillment of our quest; discernment; community; conversion and habits of the heart.

1. Our Infinite Human Quest

In an essay entitled “Mission and Spirit” Bernard Lonergan refers to “the passionateness of being.” What possibly could he have meant by such a phrase? After all, for the most part one thinks of “being” as a cold and lifeless philosophical concept. What possible meaning could being have for a Catholic hospital administrator? a teacher? a principal? And what could “being” have to do with passion? - with desire? - with a desire so intense one would suffer for it?

Unless, of course, “being” is the totality, all there is, the totally true, the good, the beautiful: the universe in all its concreteness: everything about everything. Being is what the teacher in the classroom is introducing her students into: the world with all its contours and challenges and vastness. It is against the background of being that administrators and principals make their

decisions and lead their institutions. It is the “call of being” that keeps us searching, seeking, questioning, wondering. And it is the notion of being in our very spirits that enables us to say occasionally, “Yes, that’s what I have been looking for!” or “No, that’s not it,” or “That’s partially correct – a hint, perhaps, but there is more to it.”

To use a big word, the notion of being is the “heuristic” character of our human spirit, that is, the shadowy anticipation of what answers will have to live up to if we are to recognize them as answers and say “Eureka! I’ve found it.” As Plato in his dialogues makes clear, our human spirits have this character of openness to being – otherwise we would not recognize an answer when we found one. It is this that the teacher can count on in the classroom: that, besides her own efforts, there is in the child the notion of being inviting him to discover the universe.

We begin to get a handle on being, therefore, by asking and answering questions. By the child’s incessant “What is this?” and “What is that?” And by the insights and correct judgments the child makes as he or she grows up. And by the scientist’s careful and methodical questioning as he penetrates into the secrets of the universe. And by the historian’s searching out our human roots. And by the administrator’s questions about how to motivate diverse human beings.

But the notion of being also prompts the question of God: the searcher’s question, “Is there a Person behind all this? A Mind here? A heart?” “Is being ultimately on my side?” “Is being personal?” For the notion of being that is our spirit is ultimately open-ended. There is no limit to our questioning and so there is nothing to prevent us from asking the question of God.

The notion of being is also the notion of value, for we are not only knowers but also “do-ers.” To the extent that we are not only knowers, but also deciders and do-ers, the notion of being is transformed into the notion of value: that is, all that is truly worthwhile – that is, worth our while, our time, our effort, our striving. Value is the “passionate” dimension of being as it draws us more and more to choose the truly good and not just what satisfies – the maximum of pleasure and the minimum of pain. For the truly valuable we will sacrifice ourselves.

Such is “the passionateness of being,” the value of the truly real as it attracts us. Such attraction can penetrate even into our sensuous, experiential being - our dreams.

2. The Fulfillment of Our Quest

Saint Thomas Aquinas once described the human person as “capax Dei,” that is, capable of God. Because our spirits are basically open to being, to all that is, even the infinite, we are capable of receiving God: we are capable of receiving “grace,” that is, the created participation in divine Trinitarian life itself. Because we are capable of being, because there is no limit to our spirits – though our achievement is always finite – we are capable of receiving the Spirit within us.

For where is our desire for being and value ultimately headed? For our desire can be to learn more and more about this world and to seek more and more the values of this world – but ultimately our desire is for what transcends this world: the “Beauty ever ancient, ever new,”

worth seeking with all that is in us. As Christians we believe that the universe itself participates in “such striving and groaning.”

Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies...Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8, 19; 22-23; 26)

The Christian message responds to such desire for knowledge and love: the desire written into our human hearts. Such a message proclaims the Trinitarian love-life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the sharing of that life with humanity. We believe that even now the depths of our being are inserted into the life of God and we are being invited to live accordingly. We are *capax Dei*, that is, capable of God, and that capacity finds fulfillment through the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

That love life would have a communal expression. Beyond all the horizontal aims of human life – prosperity, progress, etc. - there is also Jesus’ call to form the new community that in spite of all detours and dead-ends would bring together scattered humanity. This level is totally beyond what humanity could ever bring about by its own resources; nevertheless, it is in continuity with the infinite desire of our human minds for “being” and with the infinite desire of our human hearts for the truly valuable. It is beyond the human, but the human can be and has been raised to participate in this higher level through which we enter into the Trinitarian life itself.

3. *Discernment*

Certainly, as with all things that are “in process,” when the process has not been completed, its final end is obscure. Saint John’s Gospel speaks of the work of the Spirit as like the wind: you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is coming from or where it is going. Nevertheless, by the gift of the Spirit cooperating with our spirit, we can discern an outline of the kingdom that is coming into our midst.

For the Spirit-filled infinite longing plays itself out in the day to day, moment to moment “calls” of everyday life. It is what the upward thrust of our questioning seeks and what in us prompts us to say, “Yes, that’s it! That’s the answer! That’s what I must do!” or conversely, to say, “No, that’s not it – I must continue to seek.” Or, “That’s partially the answer – that’s a hint which I must follow out further - Let me take a further guess...” And, as we noted, such shadowy anticipations can invade our sensuous and experiential being; and they can even invade the fabric of our dreams.

The criterion of our discernment is the coherence of our spirit with the Holy Spirit moving within us. Ignatius of Loyola spoke of “consolation without an external cause” as the criterion of our

decision making – that is, “the peace that the world cannot give. Reason and “figuring” is not enough. Our spirits need the Lord’s Spirit.

4. Community

Thus, the passionateness of being works “from below” in “the springs of thought” in which images emerge that can provide “hints” as to what we are looking for, what we are afraid of and what we truly want. The work of the Spirit works in and through our own spirits as we seek out the “hints and guesses” by which we find our way in the world.

At the same time the passionateness of being works “from above” through the loves we experience in community. This is the dynamism that “by intersubjectivity prepares, by solidarity entices, by falling in love establishes us as members of community.”² Within each individual person consciousness heads for self-transcendence, and in a community of self-transcending persons there can emerge “the new creation,” God’s design for the human family.

As Christians, we believe that the visibly sent Son of God bequeathed to us through his Body a vision that is beyond us, that is, God’s vision for our lives and our world. At the same time that vision is in continuity with our native desire for being and for value, the truly good. Because he was not only God, but also one of us, Jesus was able to communicate to us the way to the Father. In the images, symbols, meanings and truths mediated to us through the Body of Christ we encounter Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the sacrament of our encounter with God.

To realize, appreciate and respond to this visible mission of the Son, there is within our hearts the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit who teaches us the meaning of Jesus’ life and words. Besides the faith infused into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, there is also the faith that comes from hearing the Word of God in the community of the church. Without the visible mission of the Word, the gift of the Spirit is a being-in-love that is “anonymous,” that remains simply an orientation to mystery that awaits its interpretation. But without the invisible mission of the Spirit working within our hearts, “the Word enters into his own, but his own receive him not.”

Consequently, just as the Father sent the Son, so the Son also sends us on a mission to our particular parishes, schools, hospitals, communities. As the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to the disciples, so they continue to bestow the Spirit on the ever new members of the Body of Christ.

But all of this can be obscure – for being and the direction of the universe is obscure. Because we are talking about the ways of God, we have at best analogical knowledge – hints and guesses - of what we are talking about. We do not know unequivocally all that we mean. And so besides doctrines, that defines the limits of our belief, we also use poetry and music, song and ritual, to express our longings and to translate Jesus’ own words and symbols into our own minds and hearts. Furthermore, the decisions of our hearts and lives can open us to ever new depths of meaning: for as Pascal put it, “the heart has reasons that reason knows not of.”

5. *Conversion*

One day, as I hurried from meeting to meeting at Seton Hall University, where I teach, I realized that not only was I rushing around - sometimes frantically! - but I was also “being drawn” by the meanings and values discussed in those meetings and penetrating the life of the university. For such meanings and values emerge in the midst of community and in the midst of conflicts in community, conflicts that can make both us and our communities better.

The school of virtue is the community in which one finds oneself. We are life or death for each other. From others we learn honesty. Their presence invites us to live for something greater than ourselves. They are, in fact, the abiding sacrament of Christ. So I must listen humbly to what they say, to what God tells me through them, and then put their message into practice.³

Through the presence of others who challenge and refine our own thinking we grasp more fully the hints and guesses of the Spirit working in our time. The Spirit works within us to give us the desire for the hints and guesses that presage the emerging vision of “what needs to be done” to build up the Body of Christ. At the same time the Word works through our human words and our human communities as we try to build communities that are truly healing of the wounds of the human family.

Of course, things do not work out in a smooth line. When we sit down and think about it, the motive of fundamental love can take over our lives and help us make concrete decisions in line with that motive. But in practice things can turn out quite differently. We can be surprised by situations and re-act according to our spontaneities: our need to protect ourselves, our desire for pleasure or for power. We can think we are doing good, and at the same time what the Scriptures call “our hidden faults” can smudge our undertakings. We can talk a good game, but our hearts can be far from the Lord. This is “original sin” – our personal and social inability for sustained development: our inability to keep responding according to our better nature.⁴

And so we are involved in a war: and the stakes are big. On the one hand there are all the forces, both around us and within us, that would lead us to throw in the towel and take the easy way out so that our human situation spirals more and more into incoherence. On the other hand, there is within us the passionateness of being: our innate desire for all that is meaningful, loving and beautiful. It is that innate desire that is stoked by the gift of the Spirit and that by the gift of the Spirit is not only brought within the embrace of the divine Trinity, but is also healed of its listlessness and its impotence. A life of seeking a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain is transformed into a life focused on value- whatever the cost.

But it is one thing to move beyond ourselves in fits and starts. It is another thing to do this regularly, easily, spontaneously. It is only by reaching the sustained self-transcendence of the virtuous person that one becomes a good judge, not only of this or that human act, but of the whole range of human goodness. And throughout this development we are continually stopped with the disenchantment that asks whether what we are doing is truly worthwhile.

And so in the light of the Spirit influencing our quest for being and value, we make decisions that not only affect the world around us, but also affect ourselves. Every intentional act makes it

easier to perform that act in the future – and less necessary to persuade ourselves to do it the next time. It becomes habitual, a “second nature.” And such habits constitute our character. If we have not developed good habits, if we have not become accustomed to doing good, all our good intentions will tend to go out the window when we are caught by surprise.

On the other hand, every good action makes it easier for us to repeat that action in the future. What in the beginning was a definite “*agere contra*,” an acting-against, a difficult resistance to a bad habit, becomes eventually easier and even more filled with peace. Our ultimate aim is a total openness to being: to all that is beautiful and good and true. Our aim is to respond immediately to the Spirit-given hints and guesses by which we can be led to love and transform our world.

The philosopher Alford North Whitehead once remarked that moral education is impossible without the constant vision of greatness – stories of those who have lived well before us. Moral education communicates that vision in many unnoticed ways. The vision gathers the way dust gathers, not through any massive action but through the continuous addition of particles that remain.⁵

Such is the process of moral conversion and it eventually leads to choosing the highest value, that is, the value of falling in love with and being in love with God.

...at the summit of the ascent from the initial infantile bundle of needs and clamors and gratifications, there are to be found the deep-set joy and solid peace, the power and the vigor, of being in love with God. In the measure that that summit is reached, then the supreme value is God, and other values are God's expression of his love in this world, in its aspirations, and in its goal. In the measure that one's love of God is complete, then values are whatever one loves, and evils are whatever one hates so that, in Augustine's phrase, if one loves God, one may do as one pleases, *Ama Deum et fac quod vis*. [Love God and do what you will]. Then affectivity is of a single piece. Further developments only fill out previous achievement. Lapses from grace are rarer and more quickly amended.⁶

Our development, human and religious, then, is of a piece. For the experience of “grace” is as large as the Christian experience of life. It is experience of our capacity to go beyond ourselves, of our unrestricted openness to being. It is experience of a twofold frustration of that capacity in the objective frustration of life in a world distorted by sin and in the subjective frustration of our own incapacity to break with our evil ways. It is the experience of a transformation, a conversion, that we did not bring about ourselves but rather underwent.⁷ It involves many elements, including “letting evil take its course,” so that the tension of life is heightened, our circumstances shift, our dispositions change, new encounters occur and our hearts are touched.

6. Habits of the Heart

Some years ago I made a weekend Cursillo, literally “a short course” in Christianity - part of an influential movement of that name that came to the United States from Spain in the 1960s. Although priests were spiritual directors on Cursillo weekends, the real power of the movement

came from lay persons talking to one another about their spiritual lives. One of the first talks on the Cursillo weekend was called “Ideals” and it basically asked the question, “What is your ideal in life?” In other words, “What turns you on?” And, the talk suggested, one of the ways we might figure out our ideal is to ask ourselves a few questions: “Where do our free thoughts go?” “Where do we spend our free time?” “Where do we spend our extra money?”

In other words, what we think about and what we do with our time and money can give us a clue, a hint, as to our “ideal,” that is, our values and our priorities. As we can trace the movement of the wind by seeing where it takes a kite in the sky, so we can trace our own values by answering questions about how we use our freedom. The Cursillo talk goes on to suggest that “grace,” or God’s gift of love, can indeed be our ideal. As a prayer by Pedro Arrupe, former superior of the Jesuits, suggests, “falling in love with God” can be an ideal for human life.

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide

- what will get you out of bed in the morning,
- what you will do with your evenings,
- how you 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.

And that is why we pray – to get in touch with that basic fire within us, our basic capacity for love and the gift that fulfills that capacity, the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is why we take time out to think, to meditate, to read, to converse with wise people: so that we can get in touch with our basic desire for being and value and the basic fulfillment of that desire, the experience of “being in love with God.” We pray and we seek the good, we develop a life style focused on goodness, so that we can allow the Spirit to help us make concrete decisions that will incarnate the Spirit’s promptings in our world today.

The genius of Saint Benedict and his monastic rule is that it ordered time and space so that this Spirit-stoked desire could find an orderly expression in human life. Besides the orderly celebration of the times of the day and of the year, the monastic rule also ordered the spaces in which one lived.⁸ A regular ordering of space and time is a “habit of the heart” that follows from our being material beings – rooted in the space and time of the universe, but stretching beyond. Following Benedict’s direction, we need to order our lives so that our praying and working, our eating and sleeping, can all be for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor. Just finding regular times and places for prayer – and keeping to it – can make a great difference in our lives – in what we value, in how we treat people, etc. If we do this, our very dreams can cooperate – as they did in the Scriptures - with the passionateness of being so that the lower levels of our being can cooperate in the wise decisions we need to make.

Joseph Pieper once wrote a book called, *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*. The idea of the book is that unless we take time out to learn, unless we take time out to allow the Spirit's promptings to take shape in our lives, we will not experience the freedom and creativity to initiate the projects that our world needs so much. These are the projects that need to be initiated and completed in our parishes, our schools, our universities, our health-care facilities, or wherever we may be. Every human situation needs to be redeemed from the surd of meaninglessness and the lack of love. Every human situation needs the light of the Holy Spirit to be shed upon it – and that light shines through our own human eyes. We need to take time to smell the flowers and to allow the dream to be born in us of the world God wants to create.

For this is how it works: the magnificent Trinitarian vision that Michael Downey spelled out in his article, “Without a Vision the People Perish,” takes place through our concrete universe. Our universe, our great world with its long billion-year history and teeming nebulae, is within the Trinitarian embrace. And that embrace touches us through our very bodies, our physical, chemical, biological and psychological being – just as we recapitulate in our own lives the whole history of the human family.

There is a sense in which we can be clear about the meaning of the Word of God; and that is what we mean by Christian doctrine. But there is also a sense in which that meaning is shrouded in darkness: so beyond us that, in Aristotle's phrase, our minds are “like owls' eyes in daylight” – unequal to the depths of the meaning of the Word of God. And so we squint and, with the eyes of our hearts we try to discern the meaning of the Word, and especially the Word as in the *Areopagus* of contemporary culture it sheds light on our contemporary situation

Michael Downey talks about it as the “*bricolage*” of insights and guesses by which we grasp the needed vision. “In this schema, vision, even if it is constructed from patches of insight and hunches of intuition, comes first.”⁹ And the vision has to do with such things as “building community” and “discerning the signs of the times” and discerning in the midst of the complexities of contemporary life where creative solutions to contemporary problems can be sought. The reason why the vision for approaching these problems only comes in “hints and guesses” is that the Lord is communicating to us a plan that is beyond us and beyond anything that we could figure out for ourselves; and yet, in some strange way, it is a plan that is in conformity with the deepest longings of our human hearts and minds.

And God's understanding of the universe does not interfere with his having a plan for my own particular life, as having endowed me personally - “from the gene pool” - with specific talents, abilities and charisms. As the great English 19th century figure, John Henry Newman, wrote:

God has created all things for good; all things for their greatest good; everything for its own good. What is the good of one is not the good of another; what makes one man happy would make another unhappy. God has determined, unless I interfere with his plan, that I should reach that which will be my greatest happiness. He looks to me individually, he calls me by my name, he knows what I can do, what I can best be, what is my greatest happiness, and means to give it to me. God knows what is my greatest happiness, but I do not. There is no rule about what is happy and good; what suits one would not suit another. And the

ways by which perfection is reached vary very much; the medicines necessary for our souls are very different from each other. Thus God leads us by strange ways; we know he wills our happiness, but we neither know what our happiness is, nor the way. We are blind; left to ourselves we should take the wrong way; we must leave it to him. Let us put ourselves into his hands, and not be startled though he leads us by a strange way, a *mirabilis via*, as the Church speaks. Let us be sure he will lead us right, that he will bring us to that which is, not indeed what we think best, nor what is best for another, but what is best for us.¹⁰

And so in this article I have linked the transforming life of the Trinity with our natural openness to all of being and our spirit's anticipation of what it seeks. The Spirit works within us in the hints and guesses given even in our dreams so we that we can discern the Word of God leading us to participate in building up the Body of Christ in history. This process is real. It is the process of being converted and of concretely forming the habits of the heart whereby we play our personal part in bringing about this grand vision.

And so, when we speak of the God's gift of himself in the Word made flesh, when we speak of the gift of the Spirit by which we become temples of the Holy Spirit and adopted children of the Father, when we speak of our destiny to know the Father even as we are known, we are speaking of a plan for which we were created, a plan that is absolutely beyond us, but which God in his goodness and mercy wants us to actively participate even now.

Notes

1. I am particularly indebted here to an article by Bernard Lonergan, "Mission and Spirit," which appears in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985) 23-34. In that article Lonergan is responding to an essay by Karl Rahner entitled "Christology Within an Evolutionary Framework." Lonergan's aim was to ask how we might conceive of the emergence of the supernatural, the emergence of "grace," within the context of the evolutionary emergence of higher levels of being.

2. *A Third Collection*, 30.

3. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B., *Essential Monastic Wisdom* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 66.

4. Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002).

5. Referred to in Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education: Collected Works of Bernard*

Lonergan Vol.10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) 102.

6. *Method in Theology*, 39.

7. *A Third Collection*, 32-33.

8. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 5-6.

9. Cf. Michael Downey, “‘Without a Vision the People Perish:’ Foundations for a Spirituality of Lay Leadership,” 3.

10. John, Henry Newman, “Putting Ourselves in Christ’s Hands,” From *Prayers, Verses and Devotions*, Ignatius Press, 1989. Copied from *Magnificat*, February, 2004 (Vol. 5, n. 13, 174-175).