

# Moving into a Deeper Communion: Communal Discernment through Contemplative Dialogue

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*We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity for a further union,  
A deeper communion.*  
-- TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*

In this article I hope to explore both how contemplative dialogue creates a liminal space for the deep listening from which communal discernment emerges and how communal discernment offers us a governance process that is a way to engage conscious evolution.

We live in a time of profound change and upheaval, a time when social systems, culture, and human consciousness must transform if we are to meet the critical challenges we are facing. The evening news tells the story: the destruction of the earth, war, violence and hatred, materialism that ignores the needs of the poorest among us, hunger, joblessness—miseries that come at us from every direction. Today's problems, as Einstein reminds us, "cannot be solved with the same level of consciousness that created them." (1) I believe this means we need to evolve communally at the level of consciousness. It's an invitation to learn to transform the way we are together, to evolve the way we think, feel, and love when we are in relationship communally.

## Contemplative Dialogue

Because I've used the dialogue process (2) extensively with groups who are exploring themes of conscious evolution and, at times, with religious congregations seeking to engage challenging and sometimes emotionally laden questions together, I trust its potential as a carrier of transformation.

The word dialogue comes from two Greek words—*dia* which means "through" and *logos* which refers to "meaning"—that invite us into a way of thinking, speaking, and listening with others so that we participate in a flow of shared meaning. Contemplative dialogue, deeply grounded in silence, allows us to experience a profound state of shared consciousness as we listen from the fullness of who we are, speak to one another with humility, candor, trust, and vulnerability, and open ourselves to being transformed by what we hear.

With practice, we learn to encounter one another's thinking from the interior level of contemplative listening where

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we have the capacity to hold multiple perspectives and welcome differences without reactive judgments. This kind of listening creates a liminal space, a sacred

threshold, for attending to the movements of our deep communal consciousness as we think together *as one organic body*. When we approach communal discernment through this medium of contemplative dialogue, our way of being together becomes a religious experience enacted in community, a communal experience of God "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) that draws forth from within us creative intelligence and wisdom.

Contemplative dialogue's attention to the way we think together reminds me of Teilhard de Chardin's ideas about the unfolding evolution of the noosphere, the evolution of the "planet-encompassing phenomena of thought" (3) which is where evolution is emerging today through human consciousness. Each community that meets in this discerning way has its own creative impulse, its own evolutionary sense of direction, rooted in its charism and history. This direction is reawakened or revitalized through the contemplative practice of thinking together. We are engaging in a dynamic process of communal conversion and transformation that can lead us to a prophetic stance in the world.

## The Context for Communal Discernment

All discernment is rooted in the foundational stories that ground our lives. For us as women reli-

gious, these include our cosmic story, the suffering of the earth and people who are poor and marginalized, the Gospel, our congregational story, and all the personal experiences of each of us that have shaped us individually and as communities. Discernment, then, confronts us with these signs of our times, these realities that break open our hearts and demand our response. Our attention is on the Spirit within and among us, on the urgent needs of our world and on the choices we are facing. We make these choices not in isolation from the suffering of the world around us but as people intimately interconnected with, responsible for, and at times complicit in the pain or wrongs we witness.

### Communal Discernment

Ladislav Orsy, SJ defines communal discernment as a creative process, a “search for the revelation of God’s will which is to be recognized or discovered through the movements of grace in

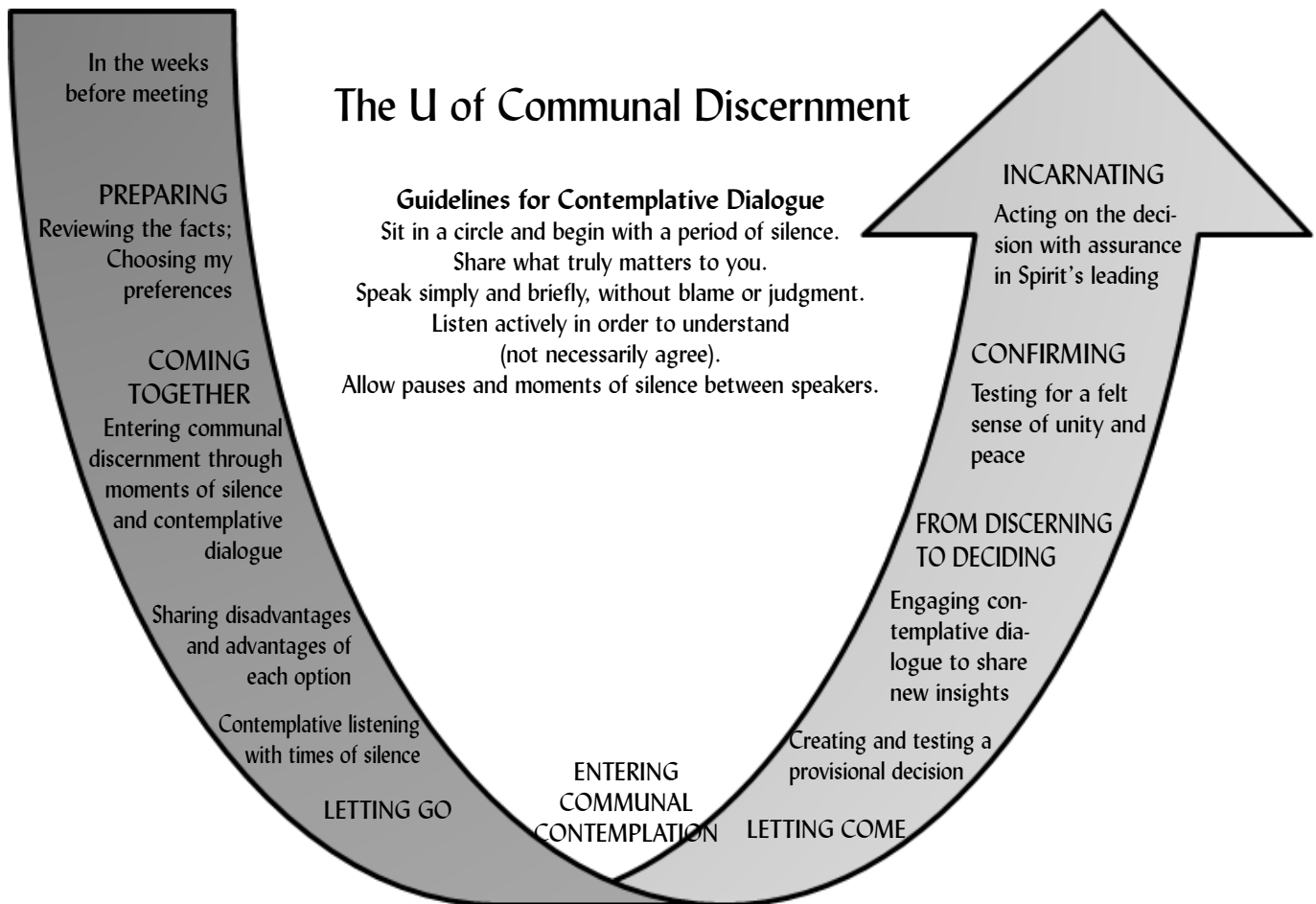
the inner being of the participants.” (4) As the emerging scientific story of the universe reveals, God acts from within us, through us, and through the ongoing evolutionary process. Our image of God has shifted from a Divine Being who intervenes from above and outside us to Spirit’s Presence empowering and guiding us and all creation from within.

As Sandra Schneiders, IHM suggests, “The challenge of discernment is not to figure out what God wills ... but to work out in our concrete situation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how best to participate in and promote the flourishing of all creation and ourselves because this is what God wills.” (5) As followers of Christ, the intention of Jesus’ life and mission to foster God’s reign through acts of healing, compassion, forgiveness, and inclusive love becomes our touchstone for communal discernment. These are the values we hope to internalize and live prophetically as our response to our contemporary situations.

Communal discernment invites us to ongoing conversion to the clearest vision and the most generous response possible for us as communities called to act creatively at this moment of history. For this reason, discernment is a contemporary governance process, an expression of our vow of obedience, whose Latin root, *ob audire*, means to listen attentively. We listen to the Spirit, to our own depths, and to one another so that we can take participative roles in our world in response to grace.

### The Process for Discernment: Theory U as a Template

Several years ago, as a member of a congregational task force commissioned to develop a process for communal discernment, I/we reread the classics written in the early 1970s by Jesuits Jules Toner, Ladislav Orsy, and John Futrell. (6)



At the time, I was also reading C. Otto Scharmer's book, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* which suggests "that the key to addressing the multiple unfolding crises of our time—and the future course of human development—lies in learning how to access the source (the invisible, subtle, underlying dimension) of mastery (creativity) collectively." (7) I realized that this subtle invisible source is what we experience as the presence of Spirit revealed in the interior movements we listen for in order to guide our choices in the course of communal discernment. This led me to plot out the process of communal discernment on the graph of the U.

As we look at the graph of the "U of Discernment," the Ignatian pattern is familiar to many of us. We can think of the outline as a musical scale, the essential notes that can create infinite scores of music, a flexible framework that can adapt itself to a variety of content, processes, and timelines. Since communal discernment concerns decisions about matters of value and significance for our future, the movements of the U indicate a time of discerning that would span at least two days but could extend into weeks or months.

**Preparing:** In the weeks before meeting, a clear statement of the content for dis-

cernment and all the information needed to form an opinion is shared with the community. With prayerful reflection, we prepare our hearts and minds as we pray for personal interior freedom and form our own opinion on each option.

**Coming Together:** When we meet together, we build a container for dialogue and get a felt sense of the communal field of consolation for us as a community by remembering and connecting interiorly with recent communal touchstones of grace, experiences that stirred our hearts and deepened our sense of unity and belonging. At the end of the discernment process, we hope to confirm the rightness of our decision by how deeply our hearts resonate with these initial touchstones.

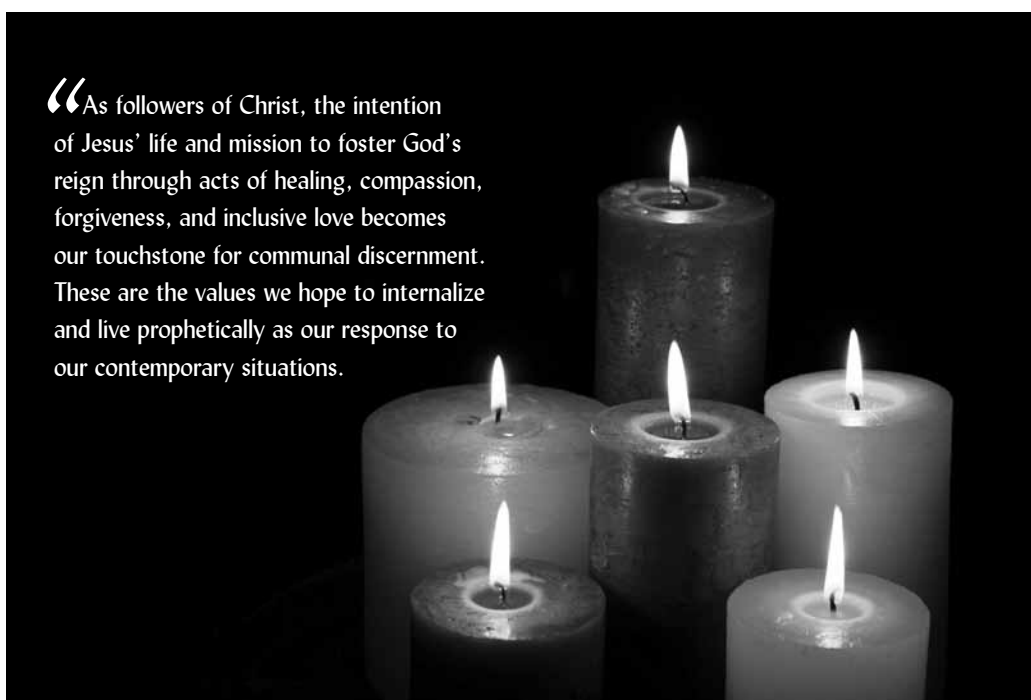
Then, in the most laborious part of our work, we strive to understand fully the content of our discernment. Using contemplative dialogue and taking all the time we need, we share our thinking, typically, beginning with the disadvantages of any option and then moving to the advantages. At each phase of discernment, we pay attention to both our personal and communal interior movements and feelings, and sense the direction to which they lead: to greater harmony, peace, and active love, or to fear, distrust, and self-centeredness. In a contemplative way, we listen to one

another with curiosity, an open mind and heart, a willingness to understand each point of view, open to building on one another's thinking.

In Theory U, Scharmer cautions us to beware of the interior voices of judgment, cynicism, and fear that prevent true discernment and creativity because they block our open mind, open heart, and open will. He encourages us to attend to the inner source from which we speak and listen. Our years of meetings have familiarized us with talk that comes from the habitual self's "same old, same old," and the rational self's debate and discussion. Instead, in dialogue, we are inviting the relational self's embodied knowing from within and the authentic self's ability to attune to and speak from the Source, from what is freshly emerging in the present moment. (8)

**Letting Go:** Having actively listened to one another, we intentionally make a conscious interior shift, a pivotal turn, toward surrendering what I want, letting go of my preferred outcome, and still refraining from jumping to decision-making too quickly.

Beginning with a time of reflective silence, each person prayerfully ponders her personal decision in light of all we've heard. After any clarifying questions are



asked and responded to, the assembly moves into silent contemplation.

**Contemplating:** In this movement, we desire to move intentionally into a space of shared identity, from I to WE, a movement that springs from the Spirit and leads to unifying love. When we sit in contemplation together, we can feel ourselves in a relational field of creative energy where the boundaries between us become more fluid—we are collectively connecting, profoundly interrelated.

**Letting Come:** Having actively listened to one another, we now enter a creative time of thinking together by engaging contemplative dialogue around questions like: As a living body with a mission and vision, what are we hearing about what we want, hope for, desire? Are there new insights? What future possibility may be emerging for us now? Asking for the grace of true interior freedom, we share what we are thinking and feeling with a willingness to shift our perspective as we sense what the communal leaning is for our decision.

**From Discerning to Deciding:** Only after all this attention to the way we are thinking and feeling together, do we move from the interior stance of discerning to that of creating a provisional decision, perhaps with a writing committee. At this time the original proposal

may be completely rethought or radically changed in light of the insight gained from our collective discernment.

**Confirming:** We test whether the felt sense of the communal touchstones of grace used at the beginning of the process confirm the decision. Is there a felt-sense of harmony, unanimity, one mind, one heart? Are the fruits of the Spirit present?

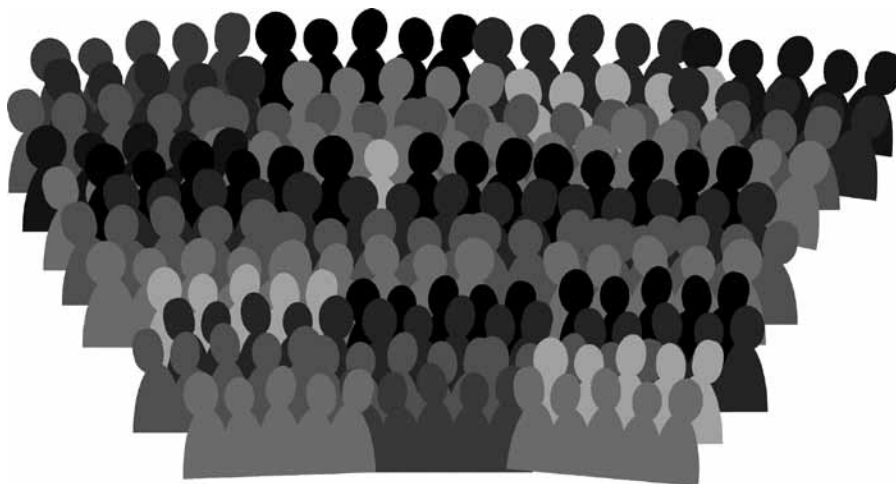
**Acting/Incarnating:** We assume responsibility to act on the decision to the best of our ability with assurance and trust in the Spirit's leading.

As TS Eliot's poem quoted earlier suggests, engaging this communal discernment process is, potentially, an experience of being "still and still moving/ Into another intensity for a further union/A deeper communion." Beatrice Bruteau claims that the next phase of evolution is participatory or communion consciousness, a consciousness that can give and receive agapic love, divine life, from the transcendent dimension of ourselves, a dimension beyond our ego-personality—and doing this *when we are in relationship with one another*. (9) As we face the challenges of the future, I believe making the effort to expand our communal contemplative practice beyond silence to include the way we think, feel, speak, and choose together, offers us a governance process

that is a catalyst for communal love and for an evolutionary shift in consciousness that will ripple out beyond ourselves—for the sake of the world.



Liz serves as a retreat leader, spiritual director and small group facilitator in Jesus House Retreat Center in Wilmington, Delaware.



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## Endnotes

1. [www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alberteins130982.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alberteins130982.html)
2. My attraction for the contemplative dialogue process began when I attended Nancy Sylvester, IHM's Engaging Impasse weekends. Helpful resources include William Isaac's *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, Doug Ross's *A Tao of Dialogue*, and Steve Wirth's work at [www.contemplativedialogue.org](http://www.contemplativedialogue.org)
3. John Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p. 144
4. Ladislav Orsy, SJ, "Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," *Studies in Spirituality of Jesuits*, Vol. V, No. 5, October, 1973, p. 139
5. Sandra Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, Paulist, New York, 2013, p. 523
6. John Carroll Futrell, SJ, *Studies in Spirituality of Jesuits*, Vol. IV, No. 5, 1972. Jules Toner, SJ, *Studies in Spirituality of Jesuits*, Vol. III, No. 4, 1971
7. C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2009, Peter Senge's forward, p. xi
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-299
9. Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2001, pp. 41-42 and 49-53. Italics mine