

Finding Order:

*A Process of Intentional
Life-Transition Discernment
for Committed Christians*

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Finding order in our lives is difficult at times. Indeed, some of us find our lives so “out of order” that we make BIG changes in our lives as a means of finding godly order. In an effort to help others in such times to find and follow God’s will, I have designed a structured progression of activities--a process of “intentional life-transition”--that helps us 1) prepare for life-transition discernment, 2) undertake the discernment process itself, and 3) to follow through with the results of well-discerned decisions.

This process develops through five steps moving from life assessment, through making life choices, to living those choices out. It requires four things: seekers, a team, time, and commitment. A seeker is a person or group of people (a married couple or corporate entity of some type - I will speak of the seeker, whether individual or a group as “you”) who are interested in life transition. A team is one or more people who are willing to invest in you and to help “sponsor” you through this process. These people may not need to be familiar with all the areas of life you speak about (for example - they do not need to be professional psychologists or Ignatian retreat directors), but they need to be able to communicate with those to whom you relate for the various components of the process as a whole. You need to be very comfortable being honest with your team, as you will have to reveal a great deal about yourself to them. As for time, just face it. Quality life-changes may take some time. Indeed, it may take years. You simply must clear the schedule for this kind of work. And finally there is commitment. I call this a process for “committed” Christians. This is not for the faint at heart. Be honest, this will hurt at times. Are you ready for this? Do you want it? How bad?

1. Assessment

We cannot know where to go in life (or how to get there) if we do not know where we are. So, the first step of life transition is life assessment. While I grant that God, at times, may call us, for example, into what may appear to be outside our gifts or experience, or into what may be the center of our spiritual strongholds, or into what may appear to be financial irresponsibility, we are all the wiser when we face such unique callings with open eyes. Discernment is clearer when we have taken an honest look at the order (and disorder) that we find in our lives. All of our lives are a mixture of order and disorder. There is a positive dimension to this, as God himself is both Spirit/wind/spontaneity and Son/logos/order. At times, however, our orders are lived out as a way of avoiding the confrontation with the Spirit of God, and our disorders are lived out as a way of avoiding the Kingdom of God. All in all I think it is best when we can see our own patterns of life, right up front. All of the areas listed below do not necessarily need to be assessed in depth for each individual going through intentional life transition. The areas to be assessed and appropriate means for assessment and review should be decided by the person(s) in transition and the team together.

A. Record

You will need to record some things down. Different stuff for different people.

- Time - Some of us need to track our use of time:
how much time for work, family,
entertainment, devotions, home care, and
so on. Usually we do this for a three month
segment

- Space - We are shaped by our “spaces” of life more than we think. Sometimes it is helpful just to take account of our spaces of life. Where do you spend your time each day? How much time in what spaces? What are your favorite spaces? Why?
- Money - Some need to track their use of money: how much comes in from various sources, how much goes out for food, insurance, gasoline and so on. Again, usually a few months of careful observation gives a sense of the pattern of our financial life.
- Diet - Our health affects our life, so diet and exercise are areas that need tracking as well. What kinds of foods do you eat? How much? How much exercise do you get each day? What kind of exercise? How much sleep do you get? Tracking this for a few weeks gives a sense of the patterns of physical life.
- Energy - It is also helpful to record the dynamics of our own energy levels throughout a day/week/month/year. When are you generally “on top” of things? When are you at your worst? You can assess physical energy, psychological energy, social energy, or spiritual energy in this way. What kinds of rhythms do you generally have? What kinds of rhythms would facilitate a life that would give the greatest possible glory in the long haul?

B. History

You will probably also need to reflect on your own history.

- Personal Story - The first step is simply to tell the story of your life(lives). I recommend giving yourself a chance to tell your “long story” to someone. Often this pulls pieces together that may have not have been able to be pulled together.
- Health - Go to your physician and get an examination. Review your own medical history with your physician or someone else competent. What do notice when you look at your life over the years? What patterns have been established? What might you have to face in the near future?

- Psychological History - For some it is important to do a psychological history. Professional help may be necessary for this step.
- Social life - Do a history of key relationships. Where did they come from? Why were they important to you? What kinds of patterns do you notice looking back at your history of relationships?
- Spirituality - Do a history of your relationship with God. Create a graph of the high points and low points and share these with your team. What does the story of your relationship with God say about the direction you have been heading?
- Strongholds - Flowing from the physical, the social, the psychological and the spiritual, you might be able to identify a history of “strongholds” in your life. What patterns of life (usually complexes which involve a mix of the above) have developed over the years which have tended to defeat you? What patterns have the potential of defeating you in the future?
- Experience and Education - Here you might want to think of developing a “resumé of life.” On the one hand I want you to think like you are looking for a job. Record training, experience, classes and so on. But think much, much broader. Think not of job, but of *life, of calling*.
- Creativity - Another exercise that can be fun and revealing is to do a history of your creativity. Where and how have you expressed yourself through life?

C. Evaluation

You will also need to make a general evaluation about certain things in life:

- Gifts and Skills - Take one of those spiritual gifts tests or take a battery of professional skills evaluation tests and see what they say about you.
- Key relationships - Who are your key relationships now? What kind of relationships are these? What kinds of obligations do you have to these relationships? What must be considered in these relationships with regard to life-

- transition?
- Temperament - Take one of those temperament analysis tests. Ask, are you more extroverted or introverted? More feeling oriented or thinking oriented? The aim here is not to pigeon-hole you, but rather to discover tendencies in life that may affect life transition or provide wisdom for life-transition choices.
 - Church “home” - Where is your local spiritual home? How does this home feel? What obligations do you have with this community or with other relationships that form your church” home”? What role does this home have to play in your life-transition?
 - Spiritual Formation Stage/Skills - Different kinds of spiritual disciplines, relationships, experiences and ministries are usually appropriate for different stages of spiritual maturity. Examine your level of maturity honestly. What are your strengths and weaknesses in terms of the virtues of the Christian faith, the skills of ministry, your ability to perceive the presence and work of the Spirit, and so on [I have material related to this]? What might this mean for the possibilities for your future?
 - Likes and Dislikes - Believe it or not, we don’t often honestly and openly assess our likes and dislikes. Consequently, they affect us subconsciously. So let’s be open. What is really the pits to you? What do you love about life? Why?
 - Vision - Finally, what is your vision? Who are your heroes? What do you dream about in your wildest dreams? If you could be or do anything in the world, what would you be/do?

Another exercise that can be helpful in a general assessment is what is called a “360 evaluation.” This is where you get mentors (over you), those you mentor (under you) and peers (at your sides) to write up evaluations of your life. What do these people see your strengths and weakness to be? Where do they see you going? And so on. These evaluations are turned into your team which meets with you and reviews them as a whole.

As you and your team reflect on your assessment: the fruits of your recordings, your histories, and your evaluations, you should have a better sense of who you are. From this you will be better able to move into the next stages of life-transition.

2. Supplement

After the assessment stage you and your team may discover that there are “gaps” in your development. I am not speaking about career development or training. Rather I am speaking about certain elements missing in your life-experience that might hinder you from making a quality life-transition. For example, you may have become a Christian, but have no sense of what God’s purpose for humankind is all about. You have no sense of the basic story of Christian theology. How can we align our lives with the purposes of God if we have no knowledge of these purposes? In this case, it might help foster a quality *Christian* life-transition if, at this stage of the process, you were to read or discuss some of the basic principles of Christian theology. I am not talking about getting a Ph.D. What I am talking about is getting to the point where a quality life-choice can be made. Other examples of supplements might include:

- Ministry skills - Are you thinking of a particular ministry in this life-transition? Have you ever tried out the skills of this ministry? It might be helpful to explore the skills of a particular calling--to get your feet wet--prior to a choice of life.
- Devotional skills - The process of discernment itself can require a fair amount of spiritual practice. Perhaps some experience in biblical meditation, self-examination or other disciplines might be valuable to gain before moving to the next stage of life-transition.
- “Psychological” care - Perhaps there are areas of personal life that might get in the way of the discernment process. Areas of hurt in the past that might make it too hard to face certain options in the future: certain ways of hiding oneself from others that might prevent a fair co-discerning process with a team, and so on. In a case like this, it might be best to delay the next step of intentional life-transition until such areas are addressed. Again, I am not talking about “complete healing” here. The question for the team to ask is simply, “Is there reason to believe that this person (or group) can profitably proceed with the rest of the intentional life-transition process at this point in time?” If so, it is perfectly OK to go ahead even if you and the team are all aware that you have some serious problem.
- Health, Diet, Exercise - It may be that you discover, in the assessment process, a health issue that simply needs to be addressed. You know if you go overseas in the near future, that this health issue will bring you right back real soon. So, once again, you deal with it insofar as necessary to continue the process of life-transition.
- Spiritual - Likewise, it may not be good to make major life-transitions if the foundations of one’s faith are up for grabs. It may not be fair to a Christian organization or congregation to have you working for them if your beliefs are not in sufficient harmony with theirs, or your lived-relationship with God would hinder the work of that group. You must face these situations honestly. You may need to give yourself time to invest in the settling of some spiritual issues first. This is not a failure of the process. Rather it is the wise fruit of the process pointing to directions in life that might be best taken--each in their own time--to the glory of God.

Having completed personal assessment and having filled in any “gaps” relevant to the life-transition process, you and your team are ready to proceed to the discernment of life itself.

3. Discernment

We must recognize that the process of Christian discernment of a way of life is different than “career planning.” True, we may equip ourselves with much of the trappings of career planning, but first of all, a life is not a career. A *life* includes networks of relationships, habits of pursuing intimacy with God, the maintenance of a world view that may be contrary to your surrounding culture, and your sense of identity. Furthermore, discernment is a matter of listening to the Spirit of God. We are not merely paying attention to what is profitable, or what may be the most rational decision (though, at times, profitability or reason can be the voice of the Spirit). Rather we are looking for signs of the decisions that best reflect the work of God in our life: past, present, and future. It involves attention to mind, emotions, and will. Ultimately you may find that your life-decisions have nothing directly connected, for example, to a career choice or a move to a different location. What you may find is that “no matter what I do in life I always need to be involved in X” And this decision, well-discerned gives you a sense of God’s will in an number of equally valid options. I recommend a three-component discernment process in which each of the three components are going on simultaneously.

- Spiritual Exercises - The most important component of this process is the intentional seeking of God’s will. For this purpose I recommend the person(s) participation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. This is a four “week” process of discernment and life-choice oriented around finding and following God’s will. Opportunities for “going through” the exercises is offered many places around the country. Look for an offering that is compatible with your way of approaching relationship with God. The *Spiritual Exercises* offer a way of systematic meditation on our sin and forgiveness, the life and call of Christ and the Kingdom of God, the costs of discipleship, and the joys of resurrected living in Christ that point us to our specific, personal place in the Mystery of God’s will on earth. If you have no opportunity for a formal participation of the exercises, perhaps you may want to buy the book and read it or just try to explore with heart, mind, and will--long and deep--each of the themes I mentioned.
- Exploring Options - Frankly it is hard to make choices without exploring the options in a practical way. How much would it most likely cost if you lived here as opposed to there? What would be the foreseeable impact upon the children if you worked at home rather than at another job over there? This is the time to compare projection with assessment, as you see what might be the case squares with what you recorded in the first stage of life-transition. Such comparisons do not necessarily determine one’s choices (our sense of God’s will does). But they do inform our insight into God’s will. The team will need to be aware not only of the results of such explorations, but, perhaps even more important, your reactions to the results of the explorations and why you reacted as you did.
- Community Participation - This leads us to the role of community in

discernment. Our friends know our blind spots. They know where we tend to lie to ourselves. They have heard repeat over time things that we say are “God’s will.” Community: especially our team, but also our wider range of relationships, can serve both to check our direction for problems and to provide insight and direction we may not have noticed. Perhaps one or another has a “word” for us. We welcome the voice of God through others.

When we have sifted through spiritual exercises, explored options, and community participation, it is time to make an election, a choice of life. The end of the stage of discernment is when you feel confident saying, “Yes *this* is my life for the next period of time.” And you not only see it, but you willingly choose it.

4. Intent-ment

Now we are prepared to *express* this intent, to state a course of life and to bring it into focus for practical application. I see four stages involved in this stage of intentional life-transition:

- Dream - You have dreamed a bit during the previous stages, but now your dreams must take a particular direction. Imagine what life would be like in this new choice. Imagine it in every way. How would it affect your family? Where would you be living? How would you feel about this and that? What about time? Try to project the impact of your life transition into every key area of life, and “test it out.” You can do this dreaming simply in the mind. You can also begin to walk it out a bit at a time, noting the impact on different elements of your life. Some might want to call this kind of work personal “environmental impact” assessment of a projected life transition. Or you can just call it dreaming.
- Write - I recommend writing down the directions for life that you sense from God. Some might call this reflection of God’s will “resolutions,” or a “Rule of Life.” No matter the title. What is important is that you put down--for the sake of inspiration, accountability, and support--where you decide to go, given yours and the team’s sense of God’s will. You don’t need to make this a dissertation. But you don’t want to leave out those matters which are important, whether details of practicality or spiritual wisdom.
- Explore - Now it is time to act out the choice. *Do it*. You make steps that put into action your choices. But at the same time you are looking for feedback, from God, yourself, and your team. What does this look like? Some consequences of your decisions you will not be able to see for some time. Some you will be able to see right away. Are there any red flags that come up right away that are obvious to all? Are there matters that, while not requiring starting from scratch all over again, could use a little slight revision?
- Revise - If there is need of re-vision, you revise. Again, it is helpful to do this revision in writing and in communication with your team. No choice of life is perfect in every respect. Over time you learn when to hold strictly to the rule and when to bend the rules. Order and spontaneity. The right

blend for the right time for the right person. This is only learned if we give ourselves the freedom to explore, to experiment, and to revise.

5. Management

Once a form of life is chosen and intentional life transition is lived-out, we move from discernment and intent-ment to an ongoing management of the well-made decisions. Sometimes the art of *making* decisions is not so difficult as that of *keeping* decisions. The latter requires systems of support, of encouragement, of accountability, of variety, and of revision and re-habitation. Indeed, a life of managing the living out of well-discerned Christian life-transition is a life of ongoing formation in Christ, wherein:

- clear vision - keeps you in constant touch with the aims of Christ in general and for your own lives
- strong determination - expresses your love, your intent, your desire to serve God no matter what
- community support - provides you with support, encouragement, accountability, and a network of common life wherein obligation and grace are freely given and received
- attention - is given to the patterns of life and their changes: changes in body, in relationships, in mind, in rhythm and so on
- selection - is made of areas that need attention for further growth. You never stop growing and learning how to live out God's will
- implementation - is acted. Where you live according to the means of grace: those means chosen during life-transition, those revised in the intent-ment stage, and new means you might be exploring just now
- transmutation - is worked into your life as life choices influence life habits which influence life character
- experimentation - keeps you constantly free and constantly open to the Logos and the Wind of God's Spirit
- rehabilitation - works into your life. You are made new in ever increasing measure--in heart, mind, and life; in a way that is appropriate to *you--into the image of Christ.*