

The humble act of noticing

by Mary Sharon Moore

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I recall the story of a wise monk who was approached by some city folk who were in search of “truth,” eager to find the next new thing. So they asked Wise Monk for a word, and he gave them one: Awareness.

“Well, what does ‘awareness’ mean?”

“Awareness,” Wise Monk said, “means, well, *awareness*.”

“Yes, but what does it *mean*?” asked the impatient city folk.

“Awareness,” Wise Monk responded, a tad impatient at their obtuse minds, “*means awareness awareness awareness!*”

I like this story because I like the word: Awareness. In my work of charism and vocation discernment, I find I more often use the word *notice*. Both words require you to be here now. To notice means to observe, or literally, to hold near. It means to give attention to something, to stretch toward it. To notice means to regard something, as though fixing your gaze intently upon it. To notice means to heed, to extend care, to keep or protect. And most important, to notice means to be cognizant of something, to have a contextualized knowledge of the thing which is before you.

In my charism and vocation work, I pay attention to things, particularly patterns of recurring circumstances or recurring opportunities in people’s lives, their patterns of response, and patterns of

results. Why? Because secretly I believe the Holy Spirit *likes* patterns?

You laugh. And the answer is—Yes! Let’s take a look at the importance of noticing patterns in three key dimensions of your life: in the circumstances of daily life, in charism discernment, and in vocation discernment.

Noticing patterns in life circumstances

How often have people told me (OK, I’ll be honest: How often have I told myself): “*God doesn’t seem to answer my prayer.*” It’s easy to pray while standing right where you think God will make something appear, just the way you pictured it, when God has already answered your prayer over there. Like praying that a loved one will “return to the Church,” only to discover that their conversion was happening in a different way.

I remember searching and praying for two and a half years for a job. After filling out countless applications, and going through a handful of promising interviews, I still was unemployed. In the meantime I did what I could, drawing on past experience and talent, applying myself to things I enjoy, to support myself. One day the light bulb fired up: God *did* answer my prayer. God spared me jobs that would have vacuumed the soul right out of my body, and sustains me just fine while I do work that I genuinely enjoy. How good is that!

Noticing patterns in your life circumstances may not give you what *you’re* looking for, but it will lead you to

discover God's perfect plan in these particular circumstances in your life.

Noticing patterns in charism discernment

I guide people in charism discernment based on their scores on the Called & Gifted workshop's Spiritual Gifts Inventory. And I constantly scan for patterns of gifting and evidence of charisms at work in my spiritual direction practice, in conversation with strangers, even in reading the newspaper or listening to people interviewed on the radio.

Sometimes in a Spiritual Gifts interview people will say, "Well, once in my early twenties I had this or that experience. Does that qualify as a charism? (Short answer: Probably not.) Conversely, people who have no knowledge of charisms might say, "For as long as I can remember, I've felt drawn to do this or to create that. People seem to respond, and it makes me feel fulfilled." Evidence of a charism? Possibly—in part because these individuals notice a pattern; they notice consistent response; and they notice their effectiveness and the positive way the activity always makes them feel. The Holy Spirit respects our humanity by working in noticeable patterns over time.

Noticing patterns in vocation discernment

If ever there was a place for noticing God's movement, it's in discerning God's willing in your life. This is not rocket science. Yet choosing a way of life or work of love that fits your image or a family member's image of God's willing for your life is *not* the same as discerning God's willing. Again, notice patterns of circumstances, opportunities, response,

and results. If in your forties you notice that there was always some reason why you never got married, then look back and see how your availability to God for unexpected opportunities or unusual service shaped your experience throughout those years.

Sometimes you discern God's willing by noticing what's *not* happening in your life, or by noticing patterns of unexpected opportunity. The simple act of noticing helps you to move from a stuck place to a life of spiritual fruitfulness.

The humble act of noticing

Unlike the experience of those hip city folk looking for the next new thing, truly noticing things in your life—patterns of circumstance, opportunity, response, and results—is pretty humble work. Why? Because to notice God's movement in your life requires you to actually "walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Discerning God's presence, God's movement, and God's willing in your life does not require an advanced degree in lofty things. It requires the unsophisticated work of being here now, being authentically present—with mind, body, and soul—to the activity of the moment. If you're driving, hang up the phone. If you're walking, pull out the ear buds. If you're eating, mindfully chew, savor, and swallow your food. Let go the myth of multitasking. Put on your pants one leg at a time. Slow down and cultivate the habit of noticing the Holy Spirit's movement in your day-to-day life, and noticing patterns of grace in your life, so that God's purposes can be fulfilled in you and God's glorious reign revealed through you.