

Teaching Discernment: A Case Study

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Abstract: In response to increased anxiety and fear about the future, two chaplains created a discernment workshop for students on their campus. This case study explores how the need for the workshop arose, the content of the workshop, and key takeaways and participant anecdotes.

Keywords: retreat, discernment, anxiety, values

Context:

Our students are facing a series of uphill battles: political and ecological crises, ongoing and exacerbated inequality, and an ever-increasing sense of isolation and loneliness. As chaplains, their sense of fear and anxiety is not lost on us. These are unstable times for everyone.

In our commitment to walking alongside students at Yale University, we have noticed an ongoing and emerging trend: college-aged students are channeling their overwhelming anxiety into finding perfect, lucrative, and stable careers. Their desire to shape a life full of meaning and purpose has been narrowed by the notion that only well-worn career pathways will offer stability and protection from vulnerability and turmoil. This last sentiment is especially felt at Yale.

In conversation with students, we have heard an oft repeated sentiment that people attend Yale to secure jobs at a handful of prominent companies in finance and tech. The company names matter less than what these institutions have come to represent for our students: a seemingly surefooted step towards professional and financial stability, and therefore, a successful and fulfilling life. This is something that we have noticed across socioeconomic status, cultural identity, class year, and area of academic study/major. While the pressures that might lead them towards the desire for these careers are diverse, the choices students are making about their futures remain similar.

With that said, as students are choosing these career paths, we hear that some of them feel constrained and dissatisfied. They are longing for livelihoods that speak to their commitments and values, and they recognize that the paths they are choosing are not always in alignment with their passions and interests. The roadmap to creating lives rooted in meaning, purpose, and stability is becoming increasingly opaque and difficult to discern for our students.

In 2024, we decided to intervene. We designed a workshop offering tools for discernment and the opportunity for students to reflect on what had inspired them in the past and how that

inspiration might guide their future steps. Students left the workshop with their own personal compass which allowed them to stay oriented inside their values and passions. Here, we offer our workshop design in the hope that it might be useful for chaplains across higher education as they walk alongside students who are striving to build meaningful and flourishing futures.

Finding Our Way: Discernment and Decision-Making Workshop Design

Time: 90 minutes

Location: A cozy space is ideal. The space should accommodate a group of up to 15 students sitting in a circle with space to draw and spread out for private reflection time. It is best to not use tables. The aim is to avoid the feel of a classroom experience.

Audience: Workshops usually are offered to specific populations throughout the year, including for: Seniors, any Undergraduate students, Graduate and Professional Students, and Postdoctoral Fellows

Supplies: Handouts, clipboards (so that students do not need a table to draw), pencils and colored pencils, white board/easel with large post-its, compasses

Agenda:

Opening Introductions

Discernment: What is it?

Introduce students to the concept of discernment, including brief introductions to how discernment is understood within Abrahamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. We emphasize that discernment is not limited to vocational discernment. Discernment can be utilized whenever making decisions about our day-to-day lives and relationships.

After introducing students to the concept of discernment, we encourage them to consider what strategies and tools they already use when making important decisions in their lives. Students often name talking to friends, seeking advice from family or mentors, taking alone time on a walk, prayer, etc.

Considering Howard Thurman & Coming Alive

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive” - Howard Thurman

Invite students to reflect together on Thurman’s words. Share within the large group some examples of when they feel they have “come alive.” Examples often include: hiking, walking along the ocean, spending time with close friends, getting lost in a book, etc. This opening reflection helps students see that there are many ways to activate presence, joy, and curiosity.

Value Mapping and Building their Compass

Using the materials and instructions below, introduce and explain the Value Mapping activity. Allot 20 minutes to complete. Materials include:

- A simple, printed outline of a compass
- A list of over 100 different values drawn from Brené Brown’s *Dare to Lead* work
- A handout explaining the activity
- A physical compass and small piece of paper that can be taped to the compass
- Colored pencils

Invite students to look at the list of values and initially choose 10 that resonate with them. Encourage students to narrow that list of 10 values down to just four guiding values. Ask them to write each value on the compass, over the major cardinal directions (North, East, South, West.)

Using the intermediate directions (NE, SE, SW, NW) and the space between the cardinal directions, students are then invited to write the previously generated examples of what makes them come alive.

After everyone has had time to fill their page with their values and examples of what makes them come alive, give them time to consider how all of these elements interact.

After twenty minutes, invite students to share in small groups how they felt doing the exercise. Then invite sharing with the large group. Students might share what they discovered about themselves, what became clear, what was difficult, etc. Note that we do not encourage students to share what four values they chose—we let this remain private so that they are not apt to compare themselves to others.

Hand out the compasses and give students time to write their four values on a small piece of paper they can tape to the compass and keep.

Stargazing and Thinking about the Future

Now that the students have articulated what they value and when they feel more alive, we share one final metaphor with them. This metaphor is meant to offer a new framework for thinking about how they can use their compasses when making decisions about their futures.

We often comment that this metaphor has been helpful to each of us when making decisions about our lives over the years. The metaphor is below:

Oftentimes, when thinking about the future, we have been taught to see ourselves climbing an imaginary ladder. With the ladder as our model, it is easy to assume that the only options in life are to be moving forward, moving backward, or being stuck and stagnant. This linear model creates false pressure and assumes that there are decidedly “right” and “wrong” choices for one’s future and that one is constantly at risk of regressing. The ladder can also encourage us to feel trapped within a path that we have chosen – assuming that the sunk cost of the time or effort we have extended in a relationship or career means that we should stay the course even when the course is not satisfying.

Instead, what might decision making about our future feel like if we used stargazing as our guiding metaphor? Life is a lot like a starry night. You look up at the stars and they are beautiful and vast. Over time, humans have drawn constellations, connecting the dots between various stars, creating an image. What if we looked at our lives as if they are ever evolving constellations? In looking back, trust that you’ll see how the stars connect. When looking forward, go to the stars that nourish you, that create a sense of curiosity or “aliveness” within you, and that connect you to others. Trust that if you go where you feel alive, even if some stars prove to be fleeting or false, you’ll grow and learn. These stars become a part of your constellation in ways yet unforeseen.

Give students time to write out a few of their personal reactions to this metaphor and then reflect as a group on how this way of considering the future does and does not map onto their own ways of thinking about decision making and the future. Students often reflect that they like the idea of stargazing, but they find letting go of the perceived controllability and certainty of the ladder daunting.

Closing Reflection

Offer students one final handout that includes the following questions:

- What may you need to navigate what’s ahead? What do you need to support living into your values?

- What tools do you already have available to you? (i.e. talking to a mentor, taking a walk, talking to a friend or family member, spiritual or religious resources) How can you create space in your life here at [our institution] to access these tools and resources?

Depending on how much time is left, give students time to reflect personally and share out as a group, or just reflect personally for five minutes.

End the time together by inviting each participant to share one thought or “nugget” from our time together that they want to take with them.

Workshop Takeaways:

We have received very positive feedback from students who have participated in the workshop. Since its launch we have also adapted it for retreats within religious communities and with postdoctoral fellows. We plan to continue to adapt it to support our staff and faculty who are more settled in their vocations but are feeling limited in their ability to live the lives they want within their careers.

Across populations, the metaphors of the compass and stargazing have been quite impactful. We are hopeful that this workshop will be an inspiration for participants’ life journeys, inviting them to name and consider their values and what makes them feel most alive in the world.

Participant Anecdotes:

- An undergrad whose parents have been encouraging her to pursue medical school for most of her life has since decided to take time away from school after graduating to explore if she would like to be a teacher or professor. While the journey to this decision was complex and layered, she recalled the metaphor of stargazing and Howard Thurman’s words as being key to helping her feel more courageous when informing her parents of her decision.
- An undergrad who expressed interest in being a teacher has decided to commit herself to working for a large financial firm. She has mixed feelings about this decision but shared that the questions she is asking about what she needs in her future have shifted in tenor. Since attending the workshop, in one-on-one pastoral care meetings, she has been naming her desire to explore how she can sustain, protect, and reinforce her values and sense of self when in a work environment that has different bottom lines than what is more important to her sense of purpose.
- A postdoc who has been having a difficult time deciding if she would like to stay in academia or not has decided to leave academia. She realized that while she is good at her work, it does not make her “feel alive.” She has since discovered a love of writing fiction in her native language and is pursuing careers that lend themselves to more work/life balance so she has time to write. She credits the exercise of making her compass and

discerning her values as being helpful tools for choosing a path that her academic mentors don't understand but her friends celebrate.

As chaplains, we have been moved by the lasting impact a metaphor or two can have to nurture courage, trust, and agency in the individuals we are supporting. While we consider our own future adaptations, we sincerely hope that this offering might be useful and impactful for other chaplains in higher education. In the ongoing uncertainty of these times, we sense that the need for discernment tools and reflection will only increase. By equipping our community with new insights and tools, we hope to expand their imaginations and nurture a sense of possibility in their lives.

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