

– Our May 2020 theme –  
*Growing: the practice of discernment*

“Sound judgement, with discernment is the best of seers.” ~ Euripides

“Judgment is discernment on a bad hair day. ~ Mary Anne Radmacher

In the beginning baseball may seem boring.

Runs can be infrequent, there are lots of lulls between plays, and the end isn't bound by a clock. Yet those who learn how to watch the game often grow to love it. Knowing what to look for, when to look for it, where to look for it, and why it may materialize changes the entire experience. Enough duration and intensity of study reveals, for example, that each standoff between batter and pitcher has elements of a chess match, a realization paired with quite the cognitive kick—unless, of course, you find chess boring, too.

Jest aside, that's the essence of our theme this month, growing, the practice of discernment. Replace baseball with anything you don't know too much about—bridge, Civil War reenactment, the cinematography of Federico Fellini, infectious disease, Japanese haiku, Modern Monetary Theory, rose gardening, social justice, Sudoku, surfing, or yoga. Whatever it is, immersing yourself in it is bound to change the way you perceive it, as subtle nuances, inaccessible to the casual observer, begin to develop more clearly from your expanding point of view.

The term *discernment*, “keenness of intellectual perception, insight, and acuteness of judgment,” dates back to the sixteenth century. If “penetration goes to the heart of a subject” and “discrimination marks the differences in what it finds,” then discernment pairs both of these ideas together.<sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon defined it a bit differently: Not merely a matter of separating right and wrong, discernment instead distinguishes “the difference between right and almost right.” One of our own contemporaries, Scottish theologian Sinclair B. Ferguson, offers a more concrete and comprehensive take yet:

True discernment ... means distinguishing the primary from the secondary, the essential from the indifferent, and the permanent from the transient. And, yes, it means distinguishing between the good and the better, and even between the better and the best.

Discernment done right illuminates our ignorance and helps us grow to recognize when our words and deeds, including those paired with innocuous or even noble intentions, hurt others.

The practice of discernment, part of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, can mean confronting, accepting, and embracing the facts even when it's painful to do so; it can also mean letting go of what's false even when it'd be more convenient or comforting to hold on.

Growing, the practice of discernment, is learning to trust our own direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life. With or without baseball.

This month's theme was composed by Jeff Brown and the Worship Associates.

### Questions to contemplate:

1. How would you distinguish discernment from judgment?
2. Telling the difference between right and wrong sounds simple enough in theory, but our day-to-day reality often reflects the much harder task of telling the difference between right and almost right. True or false? How do you know?
3. Where do you excel in exercising discernment? In what areas of life could your ability to discern use some more sharpening or discipline?
4. When wrestling with difficult decisions, do you ever catch yourself conflating
  - a. The primary and the secondary?
  - b. The essential and the discretionary?
  - c. The enduring and the fleeting?
  - d. The good and the better, or even the better and the best?
5. When in your life do you feel like you've grown the most? The least?
6. How have you grown (or stalled or retreated) at different points in your life?
7. How have you intentionally or unintentionally helped others grow?
8. Have you ever hindered the growth of others? If so, how?
9. Grow for broke! How many clichés can you convert into fresh insight—or at least a cheap chuckle—by striking the word *go* and replacing it with *grow*?

### Quotations to consider:

“With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding.” ~ Job 12:12

“I can't predict what's waiting for us, lurking on the other side of our late middle age, but I know it can't be good.” ~ David Sedaris

“Good style is above all a matter of taste. Bad writers share the conviction that matters of taste are ‘mere matters of opinion,’ the notion being that ‘opinion’ is unarguable. A matter of taste, however, can be argued, often to a conclusion, about what the best rock music is, or the best movie, or the best ethics.” ~ Deirdre N. McCloskey

“Distrust your judgment the moment you can discern the shadow of a personal motive in it.” ~ Marie Ebner-Eschenbach

“The practice of discernment is part of higher consciousness. Discernment is not just a step up from judgment ... it is the opposite of judgment. Through judgment a man reveals what he needs to confront and learn. Through discernment, one reveals what he has mastered.” ~ Glenda Green

“Unless you try to do something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The minute you're satisfied with where you are, you aren't there anymore.” ~ Tony Gwynn

“He who moves not forward, goes backward.” ~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“When you're finished changing, you're finished.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

For more on this month's theme visit: [uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/](http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/)

“Growth is a spiral process, doubling back on itself, reassessing and regrouping.” ~ Julia Margaret Cameron

“Seeing reality for what it is is what we call discernment. The work of discernment is very hard.”  
~ Lewis B. Smedes

**Poem excerpt to ponder:**

Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who Present, Past, & Future, sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
That walk'd among the ancient trees

~ William Blake, from *Songs of Experience* (1794)

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<sup>i</sup> [etymonline.com/word/discernment#etymonline\\_v\\_29680](http://etymonline.com/word/discernment#etymonline_v_29680)

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