

Significant Consequences
A message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation
By The Rev. CJ McGregor
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As a parent I let my children fail. It is difficult because I want them to be successful. I don't always step in and make decisions for them. I certainly guide them but feel that the natural consequences to their decisions is the best teacher. These consequences teach them discernment and cause and effect. Certainly, I step in when there would be great harm. Richard and I often discuss decisions made by our two sons and we usually throw our hands in the air and say "oh well, he'll soon see." And we are there when things hit the fan. Not an "I told you so" but processing with them why something happened. This also works when they make good decisions.

One of the things we can do with the time we have before making a decision is to practice discernment. Discernment is a habit of reflection on the ups and downs in going deeper in the spiritual life. You know that the theme of our messages this month is consolation and desolation. I've said that we as Unitarian Universalists look to that which holds us, spiritually, for comfort, joy, satisfaction, hope, and peace. This is consolation. We are challenged and moved away from our pursuit of truth and meaning by the wicked, the immoral, and the malicious. This is desolation. Discernment involves *consolation* and *desolation*. In her book, *The Inner Compass*, Margaret Silf provides an excellent description of the role these two words play in our process of discernment. Consolation and desolation only inform our discernment. As the Jesuit, Fr. Ian Van Hausen tells us, "we are also asked to discern between consolation and desolation." That is, which will we choose as we reflect or discern, and which will we choose as a consequence.

We are presently flooded with reports of significant consequences. Our former President, members of Congress, and the Senate are experiencing accountability as consequences to their actions of hate and division are deliberated and potentially imposed. Too many Americans live in fear and disgust as they remain unvaccinated with the spread of COVID as a consequence. These examples allow us to witness desolation. Then, there are examples of consolation. Many see our new administration as a relief and as hope. Both consequences of this new administration.

A lot of people don't want to be responsible for the choices they make, and they often don't want to admit that their decisions have real life consequences. Try as you might, you can't escape the consequences of your decisions, whether good or bad. Gary Ryan Blair tells us, "Every choice carries a consequence. For better or worse, each choice is the unavoidable consequence of its predecessor. There are not exceptions. If you can accept that a bad choice carries the seed of its own punishment, why not accept the fact that a good choice yields desirable fruit?"

The consequences of our choices are directly related to the decisions that we've made – and often times people think they can make bad decisions and escape the consequences of those decisions. They want someone to rescue them from their bad choices. This sounds very

familiar in the times we are living in. But often there's no one there to help. With each choice comes a consequence. No amount of rationalizing or complaining will alter the consequence. If you pick up one end of a stick (choice), you also pick up the other end of the stick (consequence of that choice).

There is a human desire to be miraculously delivered from the consequences of an action. We tend to seek a rescue from consequences with little or no effort on our part. It's like seeking deliverance from a disease of choice by taking a pill to treat the symptoms instead of changing the behavior that causes the symptoms. We should seek to change our actions because we cannot choose the consequences. We must accept responsibility. Through a responsible use of our freedom to choose our path in life and by making the right choices (instead of sometimes the easy or convenient choice), we will help ourselves to succeed. Make a bad choice, you'll get a negative consequence.

I've been hip deep in the writings of Ignatius and Jesuit priests this month. You may be interested in learning that a key moment leading up to the conversion of Ignatius occurred when he was defending a castle against a French invasion and was hit by a cannonball. While convalescing from the resetting of his shattered leg – which he had re-broken and reset so he'd look better in his tights! – he asked for some romance novels to read. However, the only two books available for him to read were a Life of the Saints and a Life of Christ.

He spent part of his time lying in bed daydreaming about future adventures and serving some unidentified lady of his dreams. When he daydreamed about these adventures, he felt excited but afterwards felt flat, empty, and mildly depressed. However, when he dreamt about serving God as St. Francis, St. Dominic, and the other saints he was reading about did, he also felt excited. But, afterwards, he felt consoled – happy and joyful rather than depressed as he did after his daydreams. He noticed this difference and concluded overtime that God was calling him not to continue as a courtier but to do great things in the service of God as the saints he read about did. Ignatius continued to reflect on the different “spirits” or interior movements he experienced and eventually included them in his retreat manual called *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Those facts which enlivened his heart and gave energy toward a certain path, he called consolation. Those interior facts which left one restless, hollow or with distaste, he called desolation. And he came to understand that consolation usually came from the Spirit of God touching into one's heart and thoughts. And he came to learn that the spirit of dis-ease, hollowness and restlessness came from the enemy of human nature that he saw as the evil spirit or desolation.

Use of these guidelines were for serious decisions an individual needs to make—what path of life to take, what occupation best suits one's gifts and talents, changing jobs, determining the number of children a couple chooses to bring into life, buying a house, choice of college for a son or daughter or determining the best living environment for an aging parent. These are decisions in which there are competing goods and not a choice between good and bad.

As one faces important choices, St. Ignatius says there usually are three times when one can make a choice. His times are not linear but refer to one's awareness level as he or she goes about choosing. Sometimes as one ponders a choice, there is great clarity about which way one should go. There is a sense of, "That's it." Another time is described as having alternating certainties and doubts, of consolation and desolation, of strength and weakness. The third time is when one feels nothing. There is no leaning one way or another but a calmness and feeling one is stuck in one's head.

Discernment of spirits always involves choosing between "goods" (such as between religious life and marriage) and not between good and evil. If our decision is between something good and something evil, that's not a matter for discernment. We just need to do what we know is right. It's like what the Father of Universalism, Hosea Ballou once said. He was challenged by a man who said if you believe I am already saved, I could slap you in the face with no fear. Ballou said, if you were a Universalist, you would have never had that thought.

Discernment of spirits only makes sense in the context of a personal love. Ignatius says that love expresses itself more in deeds than in words. If we love someone, we want to please them. If we love God and want to have a good relationship with God and grow closer to God, we will want to please God, serve God, and do God's will. It's only in this context of a love relationship with God that the question of how we know God's will is meaningful.

Discernment of spirits comes out of the spiritual warfare and struggle described by the desert fathers and mothers and in the Bible itself. If there were no inner struggle, if God's will for them was perfectly clear, there would be no need for the discernment of spirits. However, we all have to struggle with our false self, inner compulsions, selfishness, egotistical side, pride, anger, greed, fears, self-doubt, lack of trust, and being co-opted by the un-Unitarian values of our surrounding culture.

Discernment of spirits takes us on an exciting adventure. When we give up control and take risks to follow our Unitarian Universalist values and live or seven principles not knowing where we will end up, with the attitudes of openness, generosity, and inner freedom recommended by Ignatius, life is a lot more meaningful than when we try to control everything ourselves. That doesn't mean that where our UU values lead us will be easy or won't involve sacrifice and even some suffering. But it will lead to a life that matters, makes a difference, has great meaning, and involves more joy. Any life worth living involves sacrifice and suffering. But if we are following the call of our hearts and our spirits it will also bring great satisfactions and joy.

We are free to make choices, but we are not free from consequences of our choices. Choices have consequences. Choices have unintended consequences. Others are impacted by your choices. Life is full of consequences from our own action. Life is full of consequences from other people actions. We are free to make choices, but the consequences make us. Consequences are inevitable. We may not experience consequences immediately but they will surely come.

My colleague, The rev. Lyn Cox, writes, "Let us seek out new perspectives by paying attention to the whole range of direct experience, our own and those of our neighbors. Let us appreciate

one another, and let us appreciate all of the challenges and gifts that come to us through the legacy of Unitarian Universalism. Let us engage with each other authentically, honestly, and kindly, so that we can offer each other a larger outlook. Let us form noble purposes in making repairs and responding with compassion. There is meaning to be found in the whole world, the uplifting and the difficult, when we place ourselves in the legacy of caring.”

May it be so.