

How Can You Tell If You're Being Spiritually Guided? 15 Discernment Tools

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We'll be talking about many tools for discernment in today's Sounds True program, as well as in the 10 month Mystery School immersion Trevor and I will be teaching this year.

In short, there's no simple answer to the question, "How can you tell if you're being spiritually guided?" In fact, the very question calls to mind a story Rabbi Reb Zalman told about an enlightened master whose disciples were concerned about choosing another spiritual teacher after he died. The master told them to ask any prospective teachers a question. "Ask him what we should do with our thoughts that interrupt us in meditation, that drag us away. If he answers you, don't take him as a teacher. It's too facile to give such an answer." In some ways, discerning whether you're receiving accurate spiritual guidance is similar. If anyone tries to tell you they know for sure when they're receiving clear guidance, be skeptical.

With that disclaimer, here are some key questions you can use to double-check yourself when you think you might be receiving spiritual guidance. Keep in mind that no single one of these questions is adequate for discernment. Don't interpret your answers to all these questions literally. Use these questions as a prompt for your own intuition and discernment.

15 Discernment Questions

-Does it feel like "shackles on" or "shackles off"?

Does this make you feel like you're in prison, or unfettered? Is the cage door open or closed? Do you feel the heaviness of the shackles or the lightness of being that comes with freedom. Martha Beck writes, "The Buddha often said that wherever you find water, you can tell if it's the ocean because the ocean always tastes of salt." By the same token, anywhere you find enlightenment—whatever improbable or unfamiliar shape it may have assumed—you can tell it's enlightenment because enlightenment always tastes of freedom. Not comfort. Not ease. Freedom." If you feel like you're being guided, does it feel like freedom?

-Is it kind?

If you think you're being guided to do something overtly cruel, insensitive or unkind, think again. Don't mistake kindness for people-pleasing though. Trustworthy spiritual guidance is kind at heart, but it can also be tough love — complete with strict boundary setting and ferocious love. You may be guided to break a people-pleasing co-dependence pattern that may feel to someone else like your new boundary setting isn't as kind as usual. Check the kindness meter in your own heart. Your heart will know.

-Is there Aliveness here?

This is a vitality check. True spiritual guidance rarely tells you to do something that makes you feel dead inside. The rational mind, the fear-based inner critic or the task-master superego may order you to do something that feels deadening, but spiritual guidance will not.

-Does it exhaust me or fill me with dread?

Your true nature may ask you to complete tasks that require you to hunker down and focus. You may even feel a certain weariness after saying yes to a calling that puts you on the front line of something big and scary. But even if your body is tired, you will also feel a certain excitement, a rightness and lightness of being, and positive flow of energy through your body. You may feel scared. You may have butterflies in your solar plexus. But if you feel dread, you can be pretty certain the guidance isn't pure.

-Does it nourish or deplete me?

Even when spiritual guidance asks you to do something that requires a lot of energy, true guidance will only ask you to do things that fill you with spiritual energy and do not require you to give away all of your own personal energy.

-Does it feel natural, efficient, easeful, peaceful and graceful?

This question, from Joan Borysenko and Gordon Dveirin's wonderful book *Your Soul's Compass*, always help me breathe more easily when I'm discerning whether guidance is real. As they discovered by interviewing priests, rabbis, Sufi masters, Christian mystics, sages, intuitives, and gurus, spiritual guidance usually feels natural, efficient, easeful, peaceful and graceful.

-Does it make sense?

While spiritual guidance may often ask you to do things that feel crazy, common sense is still a useful discernment tool. It certainly didn't make sense when my

spiritual guidance told me to leave my job as a doctor ten years ago. So as with all the questions, this question doesn't work on its own. But if spiritual guidance is asking you to do something that violates your common sense, slow down. Ask for clarification and confirmation. If you're not sure, it's OK to ask for more guidance.

-Will it hurt anyone?

As with the "Is it kind?" question, this doesn't mean your irresponsible 30-year-old son won't get his feelings hurt when you set a boundary and tell him he has to move out of the house if he can't contribute to the household as a mature adult. It also doesn't mean you may not be guided to hurt someone who breaks into your house and is threatening your kids. It's simply a prompt to remind you that if your guidance is potentially dangerous or hurtful to someone else, double check yourself.

-Would Love do this?

This is one of my favorite questions because it's so expansive. What would love do? Sometimes love forgives unforgivable acts. Sometimes love leaves. But there's nothing more powerful in the universe.

-How does this feel in my body?

Does your body feel contracted or expansive? Is it saying "Hell yeah" or "Hell no?" When you consider what you feel you are guided to do, do you get a headache or feel nauseous? Do you feel exhausted or enlivened? Does your heart light up? Check in. Let your body be your compass .

-Am I rushing?

In my experience, trustworthy spiritual guidance doesn't rush you unless someone's life is at risk. If you're not clear, you can always ask the invisible forces of love for confirmation. Pray for another sign, a dream, a clear knowing or seeing or gut instinct. Slow down and get quiet. Listen deeply. Pay attention. You will get your answer. You just may not get your answer on someone else's deadline. If you feel pressured to rush, the answer is probably "Not yet." Urgency usually stems from fear and scarcity. But true guidance isn't afraid and it's ever-plentiful. There's always enough.

-Is it coercive or controlling?

If what you feel guided to do is coercive or controlling of someone else, pause. Love doesn't coerce or control.

-Is it ethical and aligned with my core values?

This one is so important that I could write a whole blog post just about this. I met a shaman who defended his sexual molestation of a client because he said, "I was being spiritually guided to give her a sexual healing." Bullshit. I'm not saying that ethics are black and white or that you might be led into grey territory from time to time, but if you think you're being guided to do something that might be a blatant ethics violation, think again.

-Will this cultivate the stillness in me?

This one is HUGE and it's not often emphasized in our busy, rushed culture. So many things you might enjoy leave you feeling hyped up, manic, and on edge. As one guy who lived on a wild game reserve in Africa told me when he was breaking up with his girlfriend, "I used to think that the excited feeling I got when I was with her was love. But then I realized it was actually the feeling I get when I'm with an unpredictable wild animal." Sometimes what we interpret as excitement is actually a physiological stress response. Choose the people, work, and experiences that cultivate relaxation responses in your nervous system.

-What's true and not true about this situation?

Sometimes we get confused because we think it's a black or white answer we're seeking. But maybe it's both/and. Sometimes the solution that resonates in your heart is a paradox.

Are you being guided? Do you have what the Quakers would call a "leading?" Run through these questions and see if they help. Also, don't be afraid to seek out trustworthy guidance from therapists, spiritual counselors, and reputable intuitives, energy healers and shamans. Often, they can help confirm what you already know in your heart of hearts.