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Back-Handed Spirituality

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Back-Handed Spirituality

Back-handed serving in the game of tennis is acceptable, but back-handed dealing with other persons in business or social settings is not. A back-handed practice of discernment is an acceptable and healthy and sometimes even the best support for us when we are negotiating difficult decisions.

Most of us appreciate affirmation when we have made a decision in a difficult matter. We might accept compliments, unsolicited praise and other positive feedback to be the kind of confirmation that we would expect when we have chosen the better option that was available to us. And we might think of faint praise, criticism and negative feedback as indications that we have made a mistake.

But, just as a back-handed serve is in some situations the better or perhaps only way to return a tennis ball across the net, some of our decisions are definitely confirmed quite clearly by properly understanding and appropriately interpreting contrary comments and other expressions of displeasure that we receive from others. We cannot judge the value, truth or rightness of our significant decisions on the basis of their popularity.

Just as we are wholly responsible for the decisions we make, we are also accountable for interpreting the information we receive from others about the choices we have made. We do not treat as of equal value the feedback given to us by each and every person. When a trusted person either confirms or calls into question a major purchase we have made, we will listen. If someone who has previously demonstrated an almost exclusively self-centered attitude, their praise of our decision might well cause us to reconsider, and their criticism would probably count for us as back-handed affirmation.

We bear responsibility too, for attending to our own internal movements that occur before and after a decision of any significance. When we consider reasons for and against doing or saying something, we want to attend honestly and carefully to the indications in our hearts that supply confirmation or the opposite to the choices we make. Reflection, and also prayer, allow us to receive subtle and quiet, but clear and perceptible, "reasons of the heart" that affirm or do not affirm the direction we have in mind.

If the intent of a decision is to please others no matter what the cost to our personal integrity – what a loss! If we intend to make the best decision we can, believing that we have a serious responsibility to do so, affirmation can be found back-handed as well as fore-handed. When feedback from either

direction is brought consciously to the judgment of our hearts, we have real confirmation. For example, if we are thinking that it is right and good for us to visit someone in the hospital, we might also have unpleasant feelings at the prospect. Those feelings are not signs of a wrong decision, but rather, they clarify that for us, love sometimes "costs," and so our hearts remain firm in the value we place on making the visit. In a different example, we might intend to meet with someone to talk about a very sensitive topic, and have some fearful thoughts about possible consequences, but experience a surprising sense of peace - a movement in our heart which we would rightly consider as affirmation for our intended course of action.

Many of us have experiences of back-handed affirmation in the course of our day-to-day activities and decision-making. We usually look at both sides of an issue, and come to a reasonably clear sense of "the right thing to do," and make our decisions accordingly. But many times, an almost immediate subsequent and notably disturbing thought arises in our minds suggesting that we have made a mistake. The thought contains no new reason for our consideration, but only the negative suggestion of "being wrong," which we can properly understand as a back-handed confirmation of the choice we made.

Back-handed affirmations are a normal part of a healthy spirituality.