

## Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault

### Lesson #1: Introduction

Have you ever hit that decision-making brick wall where you just don't know what to do? Your first reaction to a challenging decision may be to run for the hills. But then you gather your wits and tell yourself the "right" thing to do. But then you crumple into a heap and say "I don't *want* to do that!" But then you wait and pray for the answer to your dilemma to appear in the sky, paralyzed by the cacophony of voices coming from within—not to mention all of the external voices shouting in your ears.

Thankfully, we're about to embark on a course that will help us identify and incorporate the many parts of our being that tend to pull us apart when decision-making gets tough.

Cynthia Bourgeault has identified the following four voices within us all:

**Nafs**- the Sufi term for lower, passionate soul (often called the false self in Christian circles)

**Soul**- the deeper voice of our deeper self

**Spirit**- the highest, most true and clear voice of our loftiest aspirations

**Heart**- the still, small voice within that straddles the higher and lower voices

Cynthia doesn't present these four voices in any form of hierarchy, but rather shows us how to honor and value the distinct message each voice brings to the table. The key is learning how to recognize each voice and skillfully bring them into consensus. At first this might seem like a tall order, but stay with us. This method works if you work it!

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 1, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Which of the four voices most often "writes the blank check" in your decision making?
2. Can you recall a time when you made a heart decision that was so clear it didn't feel like a decision at all?
3. Look back over major decisions and analyze them according to this model. Make notes in your journal.
4. Bring your own current work in progress as you experiment with the Four Voices. Jot down a few decisions you're currently grappling with. There's nothing theoretical about this brilliantly practical application of spiritual insight.

Remember to make time for spiritual practice this week! An additional half hour each day of the practice of your choosing will help you learn to listen and wait. And, finally, please introduce yourself on the Student Community Forum. We're all in this together! If you'd like to share an intention for the next four weeks, please do so in a sentence or two. We have a huge turnout for this course, so please keep your entries brief so we can keep up with them all.

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #2: Nafs**

This lesson is devoted to the voice known as Nafs. Cynthia embraces this rather reactive, often knee-jerk, even neurotic voice of our lower passional soul as a beautiful reflection of the tenacity of the human spirit. This part of our being is linked to our survival, and can be credited with protecting our very essence or God in us. Thomas Keating calls it the “false self,” others call it the “homemade self”, but as far as we can see, it’s not going anywhere so we had better learn to incorporate it. Or we end up giving it the power to make our lives miserable.

While all of our voices are doing their best to take care of us, the Nafs tends to dwell on the ill-fated emotional programs for happiness that Thomas Keating associates with the human need for security/survival, affection/esteem, and power/control. This may indeed be the case, but it doesn’t mean that we should demonize or attempt to annihilate the Nafs. Cynthia suggests we befriend it instead. If we listen carefully to our Nafs and incorporate it into the equation of our decision making, we’ll have a much higher chance of making a decision we can actually live with.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 2, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Are you willing to welcome the Nafs as an equal player in this “gang of thieves” or do you still hope to dismantle the most egoic of the four voices?
2. Recall a time that Nafs was right and what seemed like a knee-jerk reaction was actually in your best interest and, ultimately, best for the greater good.
3. Recall a time when Nafs was not even remotely reasonable, but still needed to be heard.

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #3: Soul**

This lesson is devoted to the voice known as Soul, which Cynthia associates with the “true self” or “eternal self”, where inner guidance is developed through conscious reflection. She helps us to recognize it by its narrative tone. Soul is concerned with authenticity and sustainability. It asks deep questions like “What is real?” and “Who am I?” And Cynthia says Soul is “always playing ‘Twenty Questions’ with God.”

The Soul is best used as a compass. Cynthia warns that too much interiority can lead to a dead end. But Soul can be a bit passive. It waits to be uncovered. When it does speak, it tends to be very clear, not wishy-washy at all. Many of us tend to suppress Soul, but long-term violation of Soul will drain the life out of you.

Those times in our life when we can step outside of ourselves and see ourselves as the hero in our own drama we’re most likely tapping into Soul. We need it to read the emotional print out of our lives. It cares about value and feeling and vigilantly watches for compromises in integrity.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 3, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. What first comes to mind when you hear the word “soul”?
2. Can you see how Soul differs from Nafs?
3. Recall a story from your faith tradition, literature, or film that exemplifies Soul in action.
4. How did Soul “save the day” in Cynthia’s example of “The Retreat Center in British Columbia”?

Remember to visit the Student Community if you have any questions or insights to share!

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #4: Spirit**

This lesson is devoted to the voice known as Spirit. Cynthia describes it as “the internalized voice of our highest spiritual striving.” It is strengthened by spiritual practice and is characterized by complete spaciousness and non-reactivity. Some people might equate it with our conscience, but it’s really a higher level of consciousness at work in us.

Sometimes Spirit can be a bit impersonal because it’s really transpersonal. Cynthia says human beings “live on the cusp between the finite and infinite.” Spirit meets us at that cusp and offers us “sweeping panoramic views” of our life from a “high Himalayan perspective.” Spirit is less about morality than it is about universal truth.

Does this voice seem too lofty to engage in the clamorous competition of our “inner board room”? Perhaps, but it offers deep guidance that the other voices lack. We need to pay close attention to Spirit, with awareness that Spirit tends to set the benchmark too high. Cynthia says Spirit is never wrong, but unless we balance it with the lower voices, we can end up making decisions that we can’t sustain. Then we beat ourselves up for failing to live up to the unattainable standards Spirit often demands.

Cynthia’s description of “The Anthony Principle” is a useful image for us to consider as we learn to navigate the voice of Spirit. Saint Anthony was one of the early Desert Fathers who took the middle ground in terms of asceticism. When criticized for being too soft on the monks, he told his critic to pick up a bow and draw it back. Then he told him to draw it back further. And then yet further. When his critic gasped “It’s about to snap!” Anthony replied, “So it is with the human soul.”

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 4, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Why is Spirit an important voice?
2. How do you cultivate Spirit in your life?
3. Recall a time when Spirit spoke clearly to you.
4. Recall a time when obeying Spirit almost caused you to snap.

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #5: Heart**

This lesson is devoted to the voice known as Heart. Although Heart can take a while to emerge and speak its piece, it is crucial to the process of calling all four voices into harmony. While it resembles Soul in some ways, it's not self-reflective; it springs whole out of a unitive understanding. Cynthia uses the image of the crescent moon where the full moon is also faintly visible to describe the contrast between Soul and Heart; Soul is the crescent as it appears in time, while Heart is the fullness of the moon as it appears in the fullness of time.

The key to listening to Heart is patience. We must wait as Heart straddles the higher and lower voices and eventually releases a decision that is often so strong it doesn't feel like a decision anymore. It's just the answer. But we must learn to sit in the tension of opposites to access Heart. This voice is very integrated, inclusive, and decisive. Sometimes it seems to come out of left field!

It's really not just another voice. Heart is the voice of consensus.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 5, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Cynthia quotes Helen Luke's book *Old Age*: "Wholeness is born of acceptance of the conflict between human and divine in the individual psyche." How does this passage speak to you?
2. Cynthia shares the Sufi teaching that we're really living in two dimensions. How does heart help us live into that reality?
3. Differentiate between your understanding of Heart and Soul. Give examples of how each speak in your life.
4. "To the deepening celebration! The experiment continues" is the toast Cynthia and Rafe often shared as they raised a glass to life. Invent a toast for yourself that reflects your Heart voice.

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #6: The Law of Three**

This lesson is devoted to the underlying principle of the Four Voices method: The Law of Three. This concept comes from the Gurdjieff Work, but can be seen at work in many philosophies. You may recognize similarities with Hegel's "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" model, but the Law of Three has an added twist. It states that "any new arising is the result of interweaving three independent forces." It incorporates tension between the three as a key ingredient, like a braid twisting three forces against one another.

Gurdjieff described it as "Higher blending with lower to create middle." Cynthia talks about how the defining force meets the denying force, and then the reconciling force brings about the new creation. In the Four Voices method, Heart brings the third force into play, and "click": we have a decision.

Cynthia reminds us that the denying force is more than just a trouble maker; it's crucial to the process. We must learn to sit in the tension of opposites without judgment. Spiritual practice trains us to sit with impartiality and give the Four Voices space to do their thing.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 6, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Which of Cynthia's examples resonates with you most deeply? Why?
2. Did any of Cynthia's examples not sit well with you? Why?
3. Can you see the third force at work in Cynthia's examples?
4. Share an example of the Four Voices method in action in your life.

## Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault

### Lesson #7: Practical Tips & Pointers

In this final week of the course, we will incorporate some practical tips that will make the Four Voices Method more accessible in your life.

Cynthia reminds us to first take care of practical, rational due diligence before applying the method. For example, before you begin to decide what house to buy you need to check your financial situation to be sure this is even feasible. The Four Voices Method doesn't replace logical decision-making. The voices must be responding to real information, not just fantasy.

It's important to take plenty of time to listen to the voices. Don't be in a hurry. Like an explorer, approach each phase of the process open to what might lie around the next bend. It takes a while to begin to recognize which voice is which. Practice with less intense decisions so you'll be ready when the big ones come. You may notice physical sensations that accompany each voice. For example, the rather defensive voice of Nafs may cause some inner constriction that manifests as tightness in the chest. Sometimes Nafs tries to clone Spirit by telling you what you *should* or *must* do. Don't be fooled! Spirit is never tight (and doesn't really give a damn what you do!) Heart and Soul sometimes look alike; the more established, familiar voice is more likely to be Soul, whereas Heart is often that unexpected "whoosh" like opening up a vacuum-packed can.

Finally, don't edit or censor your voices. Really *listen* to them. And remember, a decision is just another moment in time. A wrong choice isn't cause to be damned. In fact, truth often emerges out of our mistakes.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 7, consider the following questions and record your answers in your personal journal:**

1. Can you think of a time when your Nafs and your Spirit teamed up in opposition to Soul? Looking back, can you find any hidden agendas?
2. What keeps you from being honest with yourself when nobody is looking?
3. Have you ever "made a religion out of your better moments" as Jacob Needleman wrote?
4. Make room in your life for the unexpected by doing something outside your comfort zone. Write what you learned about yourself in your journal.

## **Four Voices of Contemplative Discernment with Cynthia Bourgeault**

### **Lesson #8: The Inner Bell Rack**

As we come to the final teaching session, Cynthia devotes this class to summarizing the entire method. She compares the Four Voices to an inner bell rack, where we are the musician who can make beautiful music only by learning to handle the various bells at our disposal. If we're willing to take the time to get to know these four voices (if not the 987 Gurdjieff recognized!) we will become much more skillful decision makers.

Cynthia's groundbreaking contributions in this method include a refreshing acceptance of the lower voices. It's great to know that they carry valuable information. While some would like to see them eradicated, Cynthia accepts that they are a part of us and thereby embraces them and welcomes them.

By teaching us to slow down and wait for the Heart to speak, the Four Voices method will surely help us avert decision-making disasters. Cynthia teaches us to seek this elusive fourth voice right where our physical heart resides—in the center of our chest. The heart truly is an organ of spiritual perception, by which we can “see” by feeling. The more you recognize the vibrations of Heart, the wider your field of perception will be.

**After you watch the video teaching and example for Part 8, here is your homework assignment:**

Write in your journal the narrative of three major decisions you have made. Walk through your memory with attention to the four voices and create a grid asking each voice the central question of your decision. Analyze the results of your previous decision-making methods. And now, for your final assignment, create a question and grid for a current important or challenging decision. Take your time and let the voices emerge as they will.