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By Nicholas Collura

One of the characters in Robert Cormier's novel The Chocolate War keeps a line from T.S. Eliot taped to the inside of his locker: "Do I dare disturb the universe?" Many of us have considered this question in some form or another. Even if we don't want to disturb the universe, we probably want to know what our place in it is. "Am I important?" we may ask ourselves. "What is my purpose in the world?"

Many people will try to assign us a place. Their opinions can be immensely helpful, as when a trusted mentor recognizes a gift in us that we'd never noticed before. They can also be distracting, as in that famous scene in the 1967 film The Graduate: poor Dustin Hoffman is done with college and unsure what's next when a friend of his parents corners him at a party and whispers, "I just want to say one word to you: plastics."

Somehow we need to sift through these external voices and ask ourselves: beneath everyone else's expectations for me, who am I, really? Our life decisions—from the greatest to the smallest—can only be authentic and fulfilling if they are rooted in genuine self-knowledge. We can never know what to do unless we know who we are. "For me to be a saint," Thomas Merton wrote, "means to be myself." Nothing more, nothing less. That is why our college president insists that preparation for a particular career is not the only purpose of college education. "As you begin your studies here at Assumption," Dr. Cesareo wrote in the freshman issue of Le

Provocateur, “you should seek to answer a fundamental question: What is my vocation in life?”

How do we discern our vocation? For one thing, prayer is a great help. St. Teresa of Avila wrote that there is a little room in the center of your soul where only you and God can enter. Within this little room it is possible to discover the greatest and most liberating truth of all: You are deeply loved, by an infinite love, and there is no need to be afraid.

Another huge help is the discovery of faith communities, whose goal is not to give advice or tell you what to do, but to provide a listening ear and companionship on the journey. Assumption College is a great place to find that support. Many of you already know of the retreat, service and prayer opportunities that are available through Campus Ministry; I’d like to tell you about two new discernment groups you might consider.

Last Tuesday, eight young men met in Emmanuel House for the first gathering of a reflection group dedicated to supporting one another in discernment. The evening began with prayer and dinner with the Assumptionists and continued into a discussion of God’s presence in our lives even in times of trial. Those who are interested in meeting regularly with such a group and delving deeply into the question of who God has created us to be may write to Brother Ron Sibugan (rsibugan@assumption.edu).

Likewise, the Religious Sisters of the Assumption have opened their home to local women interested in spiritual fellowship and faith sharing. They host a game night on Tuesdays and Scripture reflection on Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. During Advent and Lent, the Saturday program will start earlier and include dinner. For more information, you may write to Michelle Sherman (directorassumption@gmail.com).

St. Marie Eugenie, founder of the Religious of the Assumption, stressed, “Each of us has a mission on earth.” Therefore, these groups I’ve mentioned are for everyone who believes that life can be an adventure of radical love. There is no pressure to become a priest, brother, or sister...even though such groups are particularly helpful for those who have considered a vocation of service to the Church. These are vocations that can feel particularly strange and uncomfortable in this day and age, so it’s important for us to see that the world is still full of people who wish to give up money, power, and a family of their own to be freer to serve the Gospel. (In fact, two popular Assumption grads, Brian Verzella and Daniele Caglioni, began their formal discernment process with the Assumptionists just last month.)

You know, discernment can be paradoxical. On the one hand, it demands openness to the future. We cannot plan out what the next twenty or thirty or forty years of our lives will look like; life always interrupts our plans. (For that matter, those rare people whose plans are never challenged may be the saddest of all, because they are the ones who go through life without growing, changing, or being surprised.)

On the other hand, I wish someone had told me long ago that if we fritter away our time on a million different things, without committing our energy to our truest passions, then our lives could flash by without ever becoming what they are meant to become. That is why essayist Annie Dillard recommends that we live like weasels. Weasels never let go of their prey. Dillard tells of a weasel that sank its teeth into an eagle's neck once and hung on so tightly it was carried aloft into the sky. "The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way," Dillard writes; to "locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting...I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go."

My hope for every Assumption student is that you will take the time to seek out the resources you need in order to discern well during your college years—remaining open to the Spirit, and, once you have found your treasure, never letting it go.