

EXPLORATIONS

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Discernment and Confidentiality

Nathan LeRud
Portland, OR

From *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*:

It is essential that what goes on in the meeting be absolutely confidential unless the focus person expressly chooses otherwise. If the focus person wants to initiate talk with a member of the group at a future date, that is permissible. No discerner should ever initiate any discussion of the subject with anyone outside of the meeting except at the focus person's request. (81)

Confidentiality in discernment is for the purpose of ensuring a safe and supportive space, both for the focus person and for the members of the discernment group. This principle is perhaps obvious and may seem to require little unpacking. However, confidentiality is not the same as keeping secrets, and discernment groups should be careful to maintain the first while avoiding the second. Secrets create a strong but ultimately false sense of community; they have the potential to create in-groups and out-groups, binding members together based on codes, customs, knowledge, and understanding that are intentionally kept from others. Because secrets comprise knowledge available only to a few, they carry power. They designate the secret-holder as different and set apart. Those with whom the secret-holder deigns to share are made to feel special. Many groups sustain their sense of belonging and sometimes their reason for existence by the holding and sharing of secret knowledge, unique customs, and special or sacred tasks.

In discernment groups the focus persons are engaged in asking deep questions about their lives. Those who are gathered to help discern are entrusted with a sacred task. The sacredness of the discernment group is found in the openness and honesty the group models in asking its questions. A discernment group is actually called to bring secrets into the light, to encourage the voicing of unvoiced thoughts, to help provide shape and context for deeply held sensations. This is the opposite of secret holding.

Some matters, however, are private. The matters dealt with in discernment are sacred ones that touch the very center of human lives. Discussing them asks a great deal of vulnerability and courage from all members of the group, not just the focus person. This vulnerability requires some protection, in the same way that a seedling springing from the earth may require some protection from harsh elements and wildlife that threaten it. Committing to confidentiality becomes a means by which the discernment group can “hold” focus persons, keeping them safe while new life and growth emerge.

Because they are taking on the greatest vulnerability, focus persons are given agency to manage the confidentiality they need to explore safely. Some will want to talk with everyone they meet about their discernment; these individuals may need the group’s assistance to slow down and take a breath, letting things emerge in God’s time. Others will take longer to be vulnerable and open in a group and will perhaps require more frequent reminders of the safety that confidentiality ensures. In all of the group’s conversation, it should be kept in mind that confidentiality is not the same as keeping secrets.

The discernment group’s task, however, is not simply confidentiality but stewardship of the sacred: it is in vulnerability, trust, and openness to God in community that discernment happens. Creating the environment where this may be safely and joyfully experienced is the sacred task of the discernment group.

The Reverend Nathan LeRud is Canon for Spiritual Formation at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon. He joined the Board of Trustees of Listening Hearts Ministries in 2012.

Wait, Listen, Surrender

**Joan Diver
Boston, MA**

"You can't know where you are going until you know where you have been," a friend told me. "Why don't you write about six or eight spiritual experiences, just for yourself." Before following her advice, I went on a two-week retreat, then sat quietly under a tree waiting for inspiration. What emerged was the first sentence of what has become, twenty years later, a fifteen-chapter book with the working title *When Spirit Calls: Daring to Listen*. While it is one person's story of opening the heart, I hope it will help others to reflect on how Spirit moves in their lives.

I had known for two years that I would leave my prestigious position as the head of a charitable foundation, but I didn't know when or why. The call finally came in an unlikely place, a sarcophagus in the Great Pyramid of Giza. Our group had been meditating at temples along the Nile River, and this was the final stop. We climbed up to the pyramid's King's Chamber at sunrise and sat in a silent meditation circle. Soon it was my turn to follow an ancient tradition and lie in the chamber's sarcophagus. As I waited for the gods to speak, what came was not a voice from on high but a commitment from my own inner core: “With full faith and trust, I accept the power and responsibility I have been given. I will go forth in Thy service. I will do IT.” I didn't know what IT was, but I knew I would be led. Three weeks later, I gave up my job to follow my spiritual path and be trained as a spiritual healer.

The book tells of my own healing journey through different traditions in exotic places and to unseen dimensions of consciousness. It is filled with stories of waiting, listening, surrender, and doing—some dramatic, some everyday. But the story of writing the book has had its own cycles and rhythms. There have been the stories I was never going to write, because they were too strange or too personal. When they wouldn't stop speaking in my head, I would have

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to listen and surrender to their demands. There were the other calls in my life that asked that I let go of the writing for months or a year at a time – calls to join the staff at my Episcopal Church, to study theology, to move across the country. There have been the fallow times of writing drivel, waiting for the clear voice to emerge. There were the issues that came up that conflicted with my truth. I would have to be led into fear and let go of what was holding me back. And there have been the five years since the manuscript was done, when family and friends kept pressuring me to "do something!" I would follow leads but could never give in to the temptation to self-publish, because it didn't feel right at the time. The title of the book reminded me, I would have to wait for Spirit's call.

Now an agent has miraculously appeared and I have turned my manuscript over to an experienced editor to help shorten the book. I wait, wondering which of my precious words will be cut, which favorite stories will be left on the cutting room floor. It is a small surrender, and the editor has thanked me for my trust. But by my surrendering to the cuts (at least some of them!), perhaps the book will get published and I will have done IT. But then, I suspect that IT is what we do every day.

We wait, we listen, we surrender ourselves, and then – we do!
Howard Thurman

Joan Diver loves writing, is a former trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is engaged in healing prayer and other ministries at Trinity Church in the City of Boston, and leads the Development Council for the upcoming documentary The Psalm of Howard Thurman, by filmmaker Arleigh Prelow.

“Listen, Listen, Love, Love”

**Nancy Burch
Warrenton, VA**

Recently I served on a discernment commission for an ordination candidate, and our book was *Listening Hearts*. A critical aspect of spiritual discernment is the practice of deep listening—listening to each member of the group and to God. During the commission's meetings, I found myself in an inner struggle over whether to express a personal concern. After spending many days in quiet contemplation to monitor my own reactions, I felt God giving me the courage to speak up. It turned out that other members of the group felt the same way. This created an opening for further prayer and discussion. We experienced a major shift in our discernment, followed by a peace that settled in our hearts.

This experience reminded me of how important the practice of spiritual discernment has been in my own life and how it has led me to my calling to prison chaplaincy. In 1993, God led me to Kairos Prison Ministry. The Kairos motto is “Listen, Listen, Love, Love,” which has a real synchronicity with *Listening Hearts*. In this area of ministry, I have found *Listening Hearts* to be very useful to me on a personal level, because it has taught me, among other things, to listen with my heart, not just my ears.

There are five key elements in the Kairos ministry: the three-day weekend, the instructional reunion, prayer and share group fellowship, monthly reunions with the team, and a two-day retreat. At the instructional reunion, the first talk is entitled “Spiritual Listening.” We impart to the residents (Kairos does not refer to prisoners as inmates) some of the basic skills of intense listening, as a means of ministering to each other. Listening with our hearts is one of the most wonderful gifts we can give another person, because it honors that person and affirms his or her worth. It enables us to minister compassionately and nonjudgmentally and to be totally present for each other.

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Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

Spiritual discernment does not produce a road map. Rather, it helps the traveler notice the signs that God provides, to interpret them, and finally, to follow them.
—Keeping in Tune With God, p. 12

Listening Hearts and its companion book, *Grounded in God*, are wonderful resources—not just for discerning call, but for helping us to “be still and know that I am God.”

Since 1964 Nancy Burch, a native of England, has lived in the United States and worked in the oil industry. She volunteers at Learning Ally, where she records textbooks for sight-impaired students. In addition to her work with Kairos Prison Ministry, she serves as a lay eucharistic minister and lay preacher at St. Patrick’s Anglo-Vietnamese Episcopal Church in Falls Church, Virginia.