

EXPLORATIONS



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Saying Yes

**Patty Brown
 Baltimore, MD**

On a Saturday morning at Holy Cross Faith Memorial Church in Pawley’s Island, South Carolina, my husband, Joe Gill, opened the Listening Hearts Day of Discernment with a cautionary note. Quoting a Jesuit scholar, Joe said, “It is a presumption that any group of relatively good Christians can at the drop of a hat enter in discernment of God’s will and do it with a few prayers and a lot of hot debate.”

After discussion, this question settled on the group: Is it, indeed, presumptuous to believe that we can hear God calling us, talking to us, directing us? Exploring this question, Joe and I and twenty-six participants moved through our day of discernment without hot debate but with silence and hymns, imagination, and Scripture, waiting, listening, hoping. We described *discernment* as finding the next step in the service of God, as an experience that occurs most often when we are in close relation with the Lord. In both large and small groups, and individual experiences, we found a place to enter into the discernment of God’s call.

Two moments are worthy of mention. In one session, we asked people to engage with Scripture in a variety of ways, including writing a prayer based on a set of quotes we provided. One fellow, Mike, chose Psalm 37:7 “Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently.” As Mike later reported, after spending 45 minutes in contemplation and finding himself “working in a dry well,” he went back to his small group and, in 30 seconds, wrote the following poem—a series of questions and answers between Mike and God. He then read them aloud, slowly:

<i>If?</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>But!</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Later?</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Now?</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Really?</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>No!</i>	<i>Yes</i>
<i>Yes?</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Mike asked whether (“If?” and “But!”) and when (“Later?” and “Now?”), and God said, “Yes.” In God’s *yes*, Mike seemed to find his own *yes*—to God.

In another session we asked people to engage their imaginations and draw with colored markers. Participants who felt moved to do so shared their pictures with the group, placing them on the floor in the center of the semicircle, for all to see. As we gazed at each drawing, one after the other, the room became all the more quiet. A shared meditation brought us into—kept us in—the present. Being in the present opened us to the presence of the living God among us. “For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst” Matt. 18:20.

A month later I and my fellow Listening Hearts trustees gathered in silence and meditation at a weekend retreat. Freed by the absence of my Blackberry, I found myself living in, being in, the present. In this space, perusing *The Living Bible*, I discovered these words: “Take care to live in Me, and let Me live in you.” I turned them over in my mind and in my heart. And I heard my own *yes*: “I will.” “I will.” “I will.”

And so I ask myself, Is it presumptuous to assume that I, in my own life’s journey, can discern God’s call? I don’t know. For me, to know that there is even a possibility of discerning God’s will for me and my life . . . well, it is a gift like no other gifts.

A prayer by Thomas Merton reminds us, “the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so.” It goes on, “But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing.”

Seeking to hear God’s will in our life requires a willingness to surrender: to take the time to quiet our soul and open our heart to the voice of the Lord. It is, I believe, work. It is not passive but an active commitment to reaching God, in the way He calls us to do. It is prayer, but more. It is a conversation. It is constant and it is beautiful.

It is, to me, peace.

Patty Brown is a member of the Listening Hearts Board of Trustees, the wife of Listening Hearts coauthor Joe Gill, and a self-proclaimed lifelong discerner of God’s call in her life as daughter, sister, wife, stepmother, and professional.

Day of Discernment at Holy Cross Faith Memorial Church

**Eulalie Fenhagen
Pawley’s Island, SC**

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” - 1Thess. 2:8

Each of the twenty-six participants brought to the workshop a question and a commitment to listen to the voice of the Spirit from within and without. As one after another honestly and courageously offered questions aloud, I experienced an epiphany: we are a community of people in transition, hungry, hurting, yearning for healing. I was struck with the range of concerns and the opening of hearts to the true ministry we have with one another: through hope and compassion for ourselves and others we find the love of God. I also realized that, despite all the activity that makes up the life of a church, there are few opportunities that really touch the depth of our souls. This space together, this workshop, and its able leadership, enabled that touch.

As the day unfolded, we were instructed on how to really listen. I was not alone in learning how hard it is merely to be present to another—not to respond, address, intervene, encourage, or challenge—just to honor the pain and questions by listening deeply.

And I learned a lesson about trust. The exercise of drawing was freeing for me. At the end of my creative play I saw something in my picture that I hadn't intended or expected, a revelation I didn't even know I needed to express. The drawing began with a central oval shape of intertwining colors, an image of our interconnected lives. Then a golden outer coating expressed the enfolding of the Holy Spirit that surrounds us. There was a movement of the lines upward that suggested a surge of gratitude or thanksgiving. At the top of the oval there was an opening that this energy seemed directed toward. There was an open shape that received it. I looked at it as I finished and it seemed to be a face. I had the overpowering feeling that I was looking into the mystery of God.

In less than a day, what a journey for my soul!

Eulalie Fenhagen, a former trustee of Listening Hearts, loves poetry, reading, and writing, and is active in her church, Holy Cross Faith Memorial in Pawley's Island, SC. She participates in a group designed to offer food for the soul whose members refer to it as the Soul Food Group.

How to be With a Family When a Loved One Dies

This article was originally published as part of our series, Do It Yourself Discernment, an online collection of Practical Outlines for All Occasions. Every six weeks a new title is added on the Listening Hearts website. Topics range from dealing with a job loss to discussing troubling matters with teens. A group of five people works collaboratively to develop each piece. Find more at: blog.listeninghearts.org/practical.

Many people may be uncertain as to how to be with family members who are experiencing the death of someone they love. Questions arise for those who want to reach out: How can I be available? How can I be of help? How do I express my condolences? How can I be a loving, caring presence at such a time? Listening Hearts offers guidelines that may help you discern ways to be present at such times. As you consider these guidelines, be aware that "family" may include treasured friends, caregivers and others close to the person who died.

1. Be aware of your own feelings and reactions to the death. Consider how they may impact your interaction with the family. Self-awareness is important when discerning how and when to reach out to others close to one who has died.
2. Hold the one who has died in your heart, praying for peace, release and wholeness. Hold in your heart those closest to the person. Try to develop an understanding of where they are in relation to the situation. Look for indications of the presence and movement of the Spirit, such as compassion, calmness, insight, clarity and peace as to how to be with family members.
3. Consider the variety of ways you may reach out, given your sense of the person and your discernment. Letters and notes can be sustaining, offering words of compassion and love, perhaps some personal memories/recollections of the one who has died, a special poem or prayer, or a picture you may have of the person. These tangible offerings are often kept by the recipient and re-visited, offering ongoing and sustaining moments as the person transitions into the future. Some families provide for online opportunities to share, such as a "Book of Memories," or protected website/blogs for sharing memorial tributes and reflections. Offer only that which has evolved out of your careful and loving discernment and reflection.
4. With visits, food offerings, flowers, donations and the like, defer to the wishes of the recipients and their desires for people reaching out to them. Respect their decisions as to what they perceive they need at this time. Find out if there are persons designated by the family to help coordinate such activities. Work through them. A family may have delegated oversight to trusted individuals as members face many immediate decisions and activities, yet have need for rest and quiet.

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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.

We must fling the doors of our soul wide open to God if we are to enter wholeheartedly into spiritual discernment.

—Keeping in Tune With God, p.15

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5. Listening is often the most important gift you can give. People who have lost a family member or a treasured friend may want to share “what happened.” “Telling the story,” even repetitively, may be part of their healing process as they try to make some meaning out of what has happened. Sharing memories and even laughing at funny stories may also be healing and restorative for families. Be aware that individuals may not yet be ready to talk about what has happened, and that sometimes the best gift you can give is simply to be present with them in their grief. Listening is a task of the whole heart and asks us to be fully open and attentive to the speaker – quieting our reactions, thoughts and ideas. Hopefully, we enter into a listening stance with the assistance and guidance of the Spirit helping us to listen and see with the eyes and ears of the heart.
 6. Hold your desires, opinions and convictions so lightly that you are able to release them and their power over you when you are reaching out to someone. If your advice is sought, avoid any “fix-it” mentality. With the help of the Spirit simply gently guide the conversation into the person’s own reflections and ideas or towards appropriate resources that may assist with decisions.
 7. Be aware that there is no set time frame for grief or for integrating the event of the death of a loved one into one’s life going forward. Even as time passes there are opportunities for you to reach out in love and support. Such times may occur at the anniversary of the death, at a special time like Thanksgiving and Christmas, or at family events when someone who has died may be lovingly remembered.
 8. Carry the family members on your heart and lift them up in your prayers. Prayer is a powerful way to be there for someone and to share your presence. Many speak of the sense of being prayed for and how others’ prayers have comforted, supported, strengthened and sustained them.