

EXPLORATIONS

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Questions, Imagination, and Einstein

Suzanne Farnham
Founder

Posing questions and taking them into the imagination has been fundamental to Listening Hearts discernment from its inception. Only recently have I discovered that Albert Einstein approached both physics and the meaning of life by **wondering** about possible elements involved and how they interacted, **asking** questions, **pondering** them, **waiting** for an image to emerge from within, then **exploring** it. And finally, he **ruminated** on the image over time. This led to amazing insights into the universe—God's creation, seen and unseen.

Similarly, Listening Hearts discernment takes a specific matter of concern into centered silence and then converts it into a prayerfully conceived question that is concise, clear, and sharply focused. Once the question is firmly planted in the heart, the person or group looks for an image, visual or auditory, that connects with the question and taps into the imagination—perhaps a passage from Scripture, a scene from a movie, a character from a novel, an image from nature, or a piece of music. They then hold that image at their very center and try to be attuned to what it may suggest, letting reflective questions arise that may inform the matter under consideration. Without rushing, they allow time for threads to come together and reveal previously unseen patterns that slowly move them to new insight and a place of deep peace—the ultimate sign of the Spirit.

To balance the considerable time he spent in solitude, Einstein would get together with colleagues to exchange ideas and test hypotheses, generating energy within the group. Likewise, Listening Hearts encourages spiritual seekers to pursue God's guidance in small groups, contemplatively sharing thoughts of the heart with one another, igniting the flame of love and truth within those gathered as they look for signs of God's presence.

At this point in human history, science and religion are converging, pursuing the same mysteries, although from different perspectives and using different vocabularies. Einstein said that science without religion is lame and that religion without science is blind; he also said that logic can get us from A to B, but imagination can take us everywhere. Amen!

True Confessions

**The Rev. Timothy Grayson
Baltimore, MD**

Many years ago, I attended a three-day silent retreat at a beautiful, secluded retreat house on the outskirts of Baltimore City. After the initial shock of entering into the silence (with all the noises that the imposition of silence brings into one's head), I became accustomed to the gentle monastic rhythm of worshiping in the chapel five times a day, and the clamoring in my head receded. I enjoyed the peace.

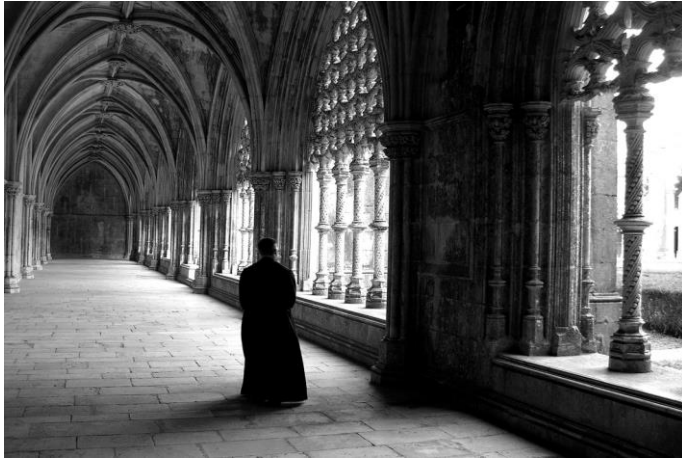
When it came time to leave, I was unprepared for the raucousness of my reentry into the outside world. It was as if someone had turned up the volume of the universe to maximum level. Car horns, ambulance sirens, and jet engines screeched and wailed like banshees. I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing after my self-imposed exile from the world. I remember thinking at the time, "Is this truly how we live and breathe and have our being?" as the sounds of the groaning universe assaulted my ears. The elusive peace that passes all understanding had dissipated in an instant. Unfortunately, I now recall that shock of reentry more vividly than the divine quiet I had enjoyed for three days.

The Apostle Paul states that our duty as Christians is to "pray without ceasing." I believe Paul had in mind not only that we should schedule specific times for prayer throughout the day but also that in moments of free time we should direct our thoughts to God, if only briefly, in order to remind ourselves who we are and whose we are.

Of course, much has been written about the pace and stress of life in the 21st century and how difficult it is to nurture and protect an inner core of peace as we go about our work, and even our play. We easily accept that this is our lot, "so we just get over it." Unfortunately, it is not just the external world that disrupts our attempts at maintaining an inner oasis of calm. We are too often the agents of our own distress, and for many of us, addiction to technology—particularly smart phones—is at the heart of our disease.

I remember reading how a Russian monk, determined to remain completely centered in God throughout the day, walked across the country with his head bowed, constantly repeating what came to be known as the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We constantly see people walking with heads bowed, but they are in thrall to a device that will claim their devotion 24/7 unless they consciously detach themselves from its insidious demands. In a recent article in *Christian Century* magazine, ("Manufactured Disruption: Why we keep checking our phones," June 10, 2015), author Jeff Vogel refers to the phenomenon of "checking"—whether it be e-mail, Facebook, or the headlines—and asks, "Why do we return again and again, as if observing a device-driven liturgy of the hours?" He notes how this phenomenon reflects the incipient narcissism of our day, and he goes on to suggest that, "in addition to the desire simply to look, we are in pursuit of interruption. We are creating an occurrence when there is none because we want something—anything—to happen. No doubt it's a minor foible, but it has implications for the life of faith, particularly the life of prayer.

Vogel compares our habit of constantly checking our cell phones to the acedia or spiritual listlessness experienced by the monks in the Egyptian desert, as described by the fourth-century monk, Evagrius, who called this acedia the “noonday demon.” The Apostle Paul



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Ironically, just a few days after I read this article my cell phone was stolen and I was forced to live device-free for three days. I was actually surprised at how easily I adapted to not being able to immediately respond to phone calls, text messages, and e-mails, let alone check my favorite golf app and the weather forecast. I felt more in charge of my time and curiously liberated. I also think my prayer life benefited. For one thing, I was unable to reflexively check messages immediately after emerging from a time of centering prayer and so I stayed centered longer. In retrospect, the thief did me a favor. I now keep a close eye on my “checking” habit and consider myself to be in recovery. I pray it will last.

The Rev. Timothy H. Grayson, Listening Hearts trustee and author of Keeping in Tune with God, is rector at the Episcopal Church of the Messiah in Baltimore.

How to Discern One’s Own Racial and Ethnic Prejudices

Wars of aggression to acquire land or subjugate people span history, causing political and economic inequality and creating tensions that lead to prejudices that become deeply ingrained. This prejudice gets passed on broadly and often below the surface, through cultures and families. A deeper level of racism finds its place in the unconscious. A series of personal assaults or insults or a even a single incident can instill fear manifesting itself in automatic, unconscious associations triggered when encountering a person from the so-called “other group.” Contemporary neuroscience, using electrodes that identify activity within specific portions of the brain, provide evidence of this. Only as we become conscious of our own racism can we remedy it. Here are some guidelines to help discern our own racial and ethnic prejudices:

1. Looking back over your life, starting with early childhood, ask: What can I remember about becoming aware of racial and ethnic prejudice? To what extent has my awareness of prejudice in society come from family members, or friends, or schoolmates, or the work environment? To what extent has possible racial prejudice within me resulted from specific personal experiences or public incidents? How have I responded to racial jokes? How has my life experience influenced my feelings and treatment of people in these “other groups. Have I evolved—am I evolving—in my feelings toward these “other groups,” and if so, in what ways?

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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.

When we open ourselves to God's presence and abandon ourselves to divine truth, the creative power of God's love stirs within us. We begin to see things that we never saw before.

—Keeping in Tune with God, p.16

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2. To get in touch with unconscious attitudes and responses requires empty space in one's daily life, time when you are alone and mentally disengaged: not reading, not surfing the web, not watching TV, not listening to the radio, not listening to music. You can be walking or running or swimming, riding an exercise bike or walking on a treadmill. You can be sitting in a quiet place or soaking in the bathtub. Silent, solitary time built into your life will let your list of questions float about, within and around you.
 3. As things begin to surface, talk with trusted friends about your findings and personal discoveries. Tell them some of the memories, stories, and incidents from your life that seem most important in shaping your attitudes towards people of different races and ethnicities. Ask them to share their impressions and thoughts about what you have told them. Sometimes we cannot see our own behavior and attitudes clearly, and need to rely on others to be "mirrors" for us.

It can take a very long time to shed prejudice completely, possibly even a lifetime. Doing so is a way to inner peace for us and the various communities of which we are a part.

This is a condensed version. To read full text and Part II—addressing racial and ethnic prejudices, go to Listening Hearts Ministries web site at: <http://listeninghearts.org/how-to-discern-ones-own-racial-and-ethnic-prejudices/>