

EXPLORATIONS



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Helping Others Find Their Way

**Katherine Drew DeBoalt
Baltimore Sun**

To stay in step with a rapidly changing world, Listening Hearts continually adjusts the way it goes about its work. Nevertheless, as illustrated by the article below, published in the Baltimore Sun Magazine in 1992, nearly a quarter of a century ago, our ministry has stayed focused on its core values, and its central message remains what it has been from the beginning.

In a world where best-selling paperbacks are snatched off the shelves by the millions, a book that sold 5,000 copies in its first year may not sound wildly popular. But consider that Listening Hearts is being read and taught at seminaries and parishes from Baltimore to Australia. Written by Bolton Hill resident Suzanne Farnham and three co-authors, this book draws on spiritual writings from the last 2,000 years. Mrs. Farnham says it was written to help readers hear God's call and to distinguish his voice from all the other voices -- those of culture, peer pressure, and ego -- that clamor at us in our secular lives. This unassuming little paperback is a collection of ideas on finding one's path in life, she says.

Since its debut a year ago, Listening Hearts has become a handbook for congregations and other communities wishing to offer their members a form of peer support that the book calls a "discernment group." The methods are rooted in the Quaker tradition of calling a group together to help individuals answer questions in their lives, Mrs. Farnham says.

Discernment groups are structured forums. Participants are encouraged to be non-judgmental, to ask questions rather than to dispense advice, to be equals not experts, and to listen with their hearts. "A person who is listening with their heart is listening with their mind and their feelings and their senses in a quiet kind of way," Mrs. Farnham says. "We're trying to encourage people to slow down and listen with their whole selves to other people's whole selves."

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Mrs. Farnham says she wrestled for years to find her own path in life but never intended to write a book on the subject.

Q: How do you answer people when they ask what the book is about?

A: A lot depends on who's asking me the question. My generic answer is that we've written a book about trying to identify what one's true path is. Basically I believe that every person is created as a unique human being with a unique combination of qualities and talents. Everyone has the potential to make a contribution to the world. Really what we are doing is giving people the tools to get in touch with that potential.

Q: Since you didn't intend to write a book, what did you originally set out to do?

A: I was committed to discerning my path in life and to living that out, but I always found myself groping in the dark. In terms of the literature available, I knew everything I needed to know was out there someplace, but I was looking for something that pulled it all together. . . . What struck me was that if you could combine the Quaker process [of group discernment] with the wisdom and experience of other traditions, then you'd really have something. I came to realize that there are a lot of strands of spirituality that are relatively ignorant of other strands of spirituality, and I got very interested in the idea of pulling everything together.

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[of group discernment] with the wisdom and experience of other traditions, then
you'd really have something.*

Q: Can the book be used by someone who is not a member of a faith community where group discernment can be practiced?

A: The book can be helpful to almost anyone who reads it, reflects on it, and tries to apply the ideas to his or her life. If a person is a part of a community that reads the book then the benefits multiply and the insights expand. It can help people who are wrestling with any kind of decision or issue. For instance, it can help someone who is trying to reorder priorities, struggling with a personal relationship, or trying to make a career decision.

Q: In some ways, it doesn't sound like a religious book at all.

A: We actually thought about writing it in non-religious terms. But then we thought we, as Christians, sometimes read Buddhist or Hindu literature and we were able to draw from it and translate it into our Christian vocabulary. We are Christians, so we decided to write in our vocabulary, but the ideas are really quite universal.

Q: Do you think the din of modern life has made it harder for people to listen with their hearts?

A: I'm not sure that's necessarily true. I'm not sure that 50 years ago people were better listeners just because their lives weren't as complicated as ours, because you can actually live a pretty simple life and still be busy all the time. There are other cultures, such as the Native American and some Eastern cultures that are more geared toward this kind of listening. I think Western culture traditionally may just be less adept at it.

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The Labyrinth: A Sacred Space, ancient Pattern

**Alice Dorrance
Spartanburg, SC**

There is a mysterious quality to labyrinths that has fascinated and drawn people for thousands of years. The nature of a path leading to the center holds a unique power: the ancient pattern circles, bends toward the center, turns away, and then completes itself in the center. In 324 CE Crete, at twelfth-century Chartres Cathedral, and now in modern day Christianity's contemplative era, labyrinths have been found in most cultures and have been described as mystical, spiritual, and transformational. A rhythm emerges while one walks slowly, one foot in front of the other; the rhythm allows the heart to rest in the presence of the Holy. While walking this way, it is natural to become quiet and listen to your inner self. This sacred space, this divine imprint, offers a safe place to hear your truth and listen to it, to speak your truth and follow it.



The beauty of the labyrinth is in its simplicity. Nothing is needed but you and the labyrinth. There are no rules. Just show up and walk. There is no “right way.” The path becomes your journey that day, and each time you walk it, the experience is new. There is one way in to the center and the same way out. Unlike in a maze, there are no tricks or dead ends. Walking in can be seen as leaving everything behind, as in shedding or letting go. Spending time in the center can give a sense

of having arrived and feeling a closeness to God. Following the path out is preparation to re-enter the world while pondering what might come next.

Choosing an intention for your walk sets forth a consciousness that gives power to the experience. The intention can be in the form of a statement or a question. Before you begin, spend a few minutes focusing your thoughts. What do you need for today? Where is your heart leading you? Are you looking for healing, guidance, comfort in grief; are you making intercession for someone else; or are you just ready to rejoice in silence and wonder?

If there is no labyrinth nearby, a couple of alternatives can simulate walking it. Allowing your finger to follow a design on paper can offer an authentic experience. I like to use a lap labyrinth made of wood and let my finger settle in the groove of the path. Before starting, find a quiet spot without interruptions, take a few moments to be still and set an intention, just as recommended when walking a full-sized labyrinth. You may be surprised that merely using your finger can invite the heart to be touched in a deep way.

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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.

*Developing into the people God created us to be requires a mysterious journey that defies logic. It involves exploring questions that have no definitive answers...
—Keeping in Tune with God, p.29*

The result may be a feeling of centeredness, a fresh perspective, or release from burdensome thoughts—each interaction with the labyrinth is different. Whatever happens is a gift—all in God’s time and in God’s way.

Another way to engage with the labyrinth is to create your own in your yard or indoors or on the beach. I have a seven-circuit pattern on my lawn, laid down with nautical rope. It is not permanent; I can pick it up and store it in a box. There is no maintenance and the lawn can be mowed. It’s enjoyable to lay it down, walk it, tend it, and invite friends to come walk. The design must be a simple one that can be recreated easily. Each aspect of tending my labyrinth is spiritually nourishing and fulfilling for me. The space has a holy quality. Is it because labyrinths have been in existence and been used as a sacred tool for a very, very long time? Is it because people have experienced God’s presence on them?

A labyrinth can be useful no matter where you are on your path in life. It can offer the universal gift of peace. The labyrinth is not for everyone, but I hope you will give it a try.

Alice Dorrance, a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is coordinator of the newsletter, Explorations, and facilitates a spiritual discernment group at The Church of the Advent, Spartanburg, SC.