

EXPLORATIONS



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Why Contemplate?

Suzanne Farnham
Founder

Contemplative prayer asks that you take time to become still, open your total self to God, and let go of your thoughts and feelings so they merely hover at the periphery. It asks you to let your mind descend to the center of your being, where God dwells in a special way, and to remain there for a time to bathe in God's presence.

Since God is the source of everything that ever has been, perceives all, and permeates all that exists, lingering in the divine presence connects you in some degree to all that is—seen and unseen. Potentially, this draws you closer to all of creation, deepens your personal relationships, and increases your understanding of people and situations far away and near, drawing you into an ever more intimate relationship with God.

You still exercise your mental capabilities to the fullest, stay alert to your feelings and tend to your worldly responsibilities with diligence. But during times of contemplation, all of these must remain in the background. When we combine these threads of our lives with contemplation, each informs the other and each brings strength to the other.

There is no right way to practice contemplative prayer. Some people find that sitting upright in a straight chair suits them well. For others, sitting in a lotus position works best. Still others stay centered more easily when walking or running, swimming or riding an exercise bike. Certain people find becoming centered is aided by holding something in their hand—a special stone, a smooth wooden cross, prayer beads, a lump of clay, or a squeezable ball. The optimal length of contemplative silence and the best time of day to withdraw into contemplation vary from person to person. It takes trial and error to learn what works for you. Even then, what suits you best may very well change as you or your circumstances alter.

Starting and developing the practice of contemplative prayer tend to require self-discipline. Eventually contemplation may evolve into a natural part of your life. In time, signs of the Spirit may start to spring forth: increased empathy, surging energy, sudden insights, bursts of creativity, joy, or a deep sense of peace, to name some.

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So now the question to ask may become, Why *not* contemplate?

Sear into your heart the words of Jesus: *Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened unto you.* Matt. 7:7.

Life in Discernment

Sara Shisler Goff
Baltimore, MD

Throughout my life I have felt a strong call to “seek the Lord’s presence” (Psalm 27:8) and to spend time with God. When the practice of spiritual discernment was introduced to me during the ordination process, it felt natural, exciting, and daunting all at the same time. I felt God trying to get my attention, and it was helpful to be shown ways to pay attention to God—sitting in silence, responding to thoughtful questions from others, meditation on Scripture and other spiritual writings.

During this time of vocational discernment, I sensed that I was having one of the most important experiences of my life. I was intentionally devoting time, energy, and resources toward the work of drawing closer to God and, through that relationship, was figuring out what I was meant to do with my life. I never doubted that I had a call from God, because I believe that everyone has a call from God. The question was, Did my call include ordination?

God is continuously working in us and transforming us into the people God is calling us to be. Discernment is an ongoing part of that process.

The process of discernment took years. While I was going through it, I often found myself discouraged that I had not yet come to a clear understanding. The external timetables of my seminary and diocese were chugging along, yet I often felt that I could see only the next right step or glimpses into what the future could be, rather than visualize the road map for the path ahead. This was not only frustrating to me but also discouraging to some who were monitoring my discernment process, for I did not always articulate my priestly call in terms they could recognize or understand. One of the perils of living in this time of major transition and re-formation in the Church is that discerning what is yet to be created involves a great deal of imagination and courage—two things the institutional Church can at times inspire and at other times stifle.

There have been times in my life since ordination when I have felt self-critical, even feeling shame for *still* being in discernment, whether in regard to the next phase of ministry, a decision involving my family, or my role in the larger work of the Church. I had understood spiritual discernment as an event with an ending. Yes, I eventually discerned that I was called to the priesthood, and that call was affirmed by my community; but while that initial question was answered, there have been and continue to be subsequent questions along my vocational journey.

When consensus is reached or a decision is made, that particular time of discernment may come to an end, but a new season of discernment is always around the corner. I am learning to accept and even celebrate this. God is continuously working in us and transforming us into the people God is calling us to be. Discernment is an ongoing part of that process. If we are always becoming, then we are always, in some sense, discerning.

I am grateful to have had a formal experience of spiritual discernment and for the communities and people with whom I have practiced spiritual discernment since then. My hope is that Listening Hearts can help more and more people to grow in their understanding of spiritual discernment and to have the opportunity to practice with others who are committed to sacred listening. Intentional spiritual discernment is one of the greatest gifts of Christian community.

The Rev. Sara Shisler Goff is the director of communications and ministry development for Listening Hearts. She is also the co-pastor and co-founder of the Slate Project, an ecumenical Christian community that gathers online and face-to-face in Baltimore, Maryland.

Quotes and Photos from the August 2016 Training Week for Trainers



Four students (Norma Williamson, Sara Shisler Goff, Heather Goff, and Mike Croghan) and two leaders (Frances Sullinger and Suzanne Farnham) spent the last week of August together at Suzanne's family cabin on the shore of Lake Abanakee in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains of New York State, participating in Listening Hearts "Training Week for Trainers", and equipping the students to help local communities begin their own Listening Hearts discernment ministries. What follows are some quotes and photos from the participants in this life-giving experience.

"It was a time to go deep, to listen intently for the voice of God within myself, and to learn how to help others hear God's call in their own lives."

"I felt honored and joyful to see the clarity of God's call emerge during the discernment sessions."

"The discernment session in which I was a focus person was incredible ...one of the deepest spiritual experiences of my life."

"I found the times of meditation very fruitful as well as the sharing and reflecting on the meditations. I thought there was a good mix of sensory activities and providing for different learning styles."

"The retreat was well designed and presented—all had the chance to participate and were encouraged but not forced to do so."



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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.

Our calls are always evolving. If we are to respond, we need to listen, not only today, but as today evolves into tomorrow.

—Listening Hearts, p.14

“The retreat was well designed to enable the experience of various ways of hearing God, including silence, various imaginative, creative processes, listening to others, and in reflecting on times of crisis.”

“A clearer sense of my own true path. This retreat has quieted me and enabled me to settle in spiritually.”

“The program was well designed to encourage me to stretch my awareness of God’s time, to think about time in general in a variety of ways.”

“I was moved deeply—and prompted to serious spiritual self-work—by the drama and dance meditations.”

“This retreat has me reflecting deeply on the nature of eternity and our relationship to it.”

