

EXPLORATIONS



Phone: 410-366-1851
Fax: 410-243-7062
www.listeninghearts.org
<http://blog.listeninghearts.org>



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Inside this Issue

A Sacred Quest
Suzanne Farnham

in presence of eternity
Mike Croghan

Going Deeper
Sara Shisler Goff

A Sacred Quest

Suzanne Farnham

Founder

While God's presence permeates the entire universe, at the center of our being is a point of contact where God's center converges with our center. Here the Love and Truth of God can stream into us, casting light that illuminates the circumstances of our life.

Spiritual discernment is our QUEST to "be" at that center. This is not about getting answers but about opening ourselves to the Divine Presence that is ever with us. Our goal is to live in communion with God and all of God's amazing creation. Statements and answers tend to shut us down. Earnest QUESTions conceived in prayer can break us open to receive the love, truth, wisdom, and energy of God that can propel us forward filled with purpose.

In discernment we start with the rational by articulating questions to clarify our concerns and establish relevant information. We then identify options and evaluate them. These steps prepare our intellect.

Thereafter, the questions become searching, evocative—intended to uncover hidden fears, barriers, desires, and possibilities. These questions emerge from contemplative silence and tap into the imagination, evoking analogies, visual images, or musical associations from deep within.

Whenever our response prompts a surge of energy, we need to slow down. Fall into silence. Await further response. Eventually we frame follow-up questions that help us enter the flow of that creative expression that arose from the depths. We must be free enough to go wherever the Spirit may lead.

When a question springs forth from deep within, it can come to life in us, raise our level of consciousness, and guide us as we tread our path. Spiritual discernment is not a once in a while event. It is a way of being in which we journey, engulfed in God, moving forward one step at a time—as we continue to live the questions.

in presence of eternity

by mike croghan

from the august 2016 listening hearts training week for trainers retreat

enfolded in green arms of
 elder mountains settled
 peacefully beside
 wide water
 left behind by
 grim unyielding ice
 that pressed
 and pushed
 and shaped
 those massive
 mounds of earth
 in long-departed ages
 also
 by the humans who
 just yesterday in planet-time
 dammed up bold river's
 rushing flood
 in echo of
 a final fatal ceasing
 of relentless glacier's flow
 just so
 we mortal shapers in our turn
 will hurtle down that course
 toward our end
 but

 early friday morning
 just for fifteen timeless minutes
 all that
 shifting
 turning
 ending
 holds itself in silent stillness
 full of light
 and sound
 and life
 in glowing mist enveloped
 rising up from water
 draping everything
 in sheer white curtains
 luminescent beauty shining
 slowly
 imperceptibly
 concealing veil ascends
 now
 to reveal
 rich greens and browns of life
 abundant
 birds cry out in new day's bliss
 and while the mist recedes
 its tranquil moisture is renewed
 in tears of joy



Mike Croghan, a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, experiments in church community with the Church of the Common Table in Vienna, VA. He has been exploring poetry for the past several years with a growing sense of receptive wonder.

Going Deeper

Sara Shisler Goff
Baltimore, MD

I was not sure what to expect from the Training Week for Trainers. I knew we would be led through two “mini retreats,” one on baptism and one on “God’s time versus human time,” and then be invited to participate in discernment sessions, when we would alternate in the roles of convener, listener, focus person, and observer. This was my first opportunity to participate in a Listening Hearts program. I found myself eagerly anticipating our arrival at Suzanne Farnham’s cabin on Lake Abanakee in the Adirondack Mountains. The location was idyllic—a perfect place for a retreat. Marine biologist and author Wallace Nichols has come up with a name for the human-water connection we all share. He calls it “blue mind.” Nichols describes it as a “mildly meditative state characterized by calm, peacefulness, unity, and a sense of general happiness and satisfaction with life in the moment.” There are neurological connections in our brains, formed over millennia, that draw us to the water. I spent much of the week by the lake in this “blue mind” state.



It is difficult if not impossible to describe mystical experiences like the one I had during my discernment session. No “answer” had been given to the question I was asking, but at the same time a clarity had been found. We all felt it.

The training began with the retreat on baptism. We spent time meditating on the story of Noah and the flood, using clay to add a tactile element to the process. As I molded the sticky, smelly clay into a small ark I thought about how terrifying it must have been to be floating on miles of water while the rains kept pouring down, all the while in complete darkness. No windows on the ark. Just hot, smelly, stifling darkness. My chest tightened just imagining it.



And then there was the sense of relief when the door finally opened and the light and the fresh air flowed in, filling up the darkness. I thought about Noah sending out a small bird into the vast unknown, to see if there was anything left—a future they could place their hope in. First, the raven, who doesn’t come back. Then the dove, who returns with an olive branch! A sign of hope, of peace!

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MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH
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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 is an ever-evolving journey into God. It always sheds enough light to help us see the next step as we seek to follow our true path.
—*Keeping in Tune With God, p.28*

When it was my turn to be the focus person, the person presenting the issue for discernment, three of my fellow retreat participants listened attentively to me. At first they asked informational questions, to help us all focus on the issue at hand, and then slowly they allowed for more silence as my mind began to descend into my heart. I went deeper and deeper, down into the water, sinking into the dark blue. There I settled and waited, breathing slowly. I could breathe under the water. The option to be terrified of the unknown was there, but I felt safe, held. “Go deeper,” a voice called. I had always thought of myself as more of a surfer, up on top of the waves, moving and adapting to the fast-moving water, trying, and mostly succeeding, to stay on top and ride the wave into shore. But that is not where I was. I was deep *under* the water and I felt at home.

It is difficult if not impossible to describe mystical experiences like the one I had during my discernment session. No “answer” had been given to the question I was asking, but at the same time a clarity had been found. We all felt it. In that way, the process worked. Something shifted in me. I moved from being anxious about not knowing exactly what to do about the issue I was discerning to a sense of peace, which is one of the signs of the Spirit. I realized that what to do would be revealed in time. I was being called to go deeper into my relationship with God and to trust that from that deeper place, I would be led.

I can return to that place—go back underwater and dwell there in the blue, whenever I want. My body and soul now know how that feels. I go back there often, to remember—to hear the voice telling me again, “Go deeper.”

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.