

EXPLORATIONS



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One Parish's Experience in Discerning... Everything!

Rev. Grey Maggiano
Baltimore, MD

*'Where shall the word be found, and where will the word
resound? Not here. There is not enough silence.'*

- TS Eliot, Ash Wednesday

One of the truly unexpected joys of being called as rector of Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore has been reimmersing myself in the Listening Hearts process. As part of the ordination discernment process in the Diocese of Virginia, my parish formed a Listening Hearts discernment group to help me discern my own call to ordained ministry. In fact, one of the stories I tell about my discernment process is how Listening Hearts "ruined" me for life outside the Church. Prior to beginning the discernment process, I had an aggressive, fast-paced position in the foreign policy world. I was frequently called to defend U.S. government positions in national and international forums and had to be quick with responses, producing canned answers to questions that weren't asked, often beginning my statement before the other had finished speaking. But as I started using Listening Hearts practices in my own spiritual discernment, I found my effectiveness slipping. I have a profound memory of leaving a significant interagency meeting on global drug trafficking and realizing I hadn't spoken once!

Fortunately, through my own discernment I learned two things: (1) I was called to a profoundly different kind of work; and (2) by talking less, listening more, and really internalizing the unheard voices in the room, I could actually be more effective in both the board room and the pulpit. So when shortly after I arrived at Memorial, the vestry suggested that we return to using Listening Hearts guiding principles for organizing our vestry and our common life, I gave an enthusiastic "Yes!"

Now, some would say this is a very bad idea. Yes, spiritual discernment has its place, but can it really be used to run a vestry meeting? How do you keep minutes? How do you make decisions? What if we can't agree on who will bring cake to coffee hour?!

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But at Memorial we believe that committing ourselves to prayerful contemplation is never a bad idea. An important aspect of our Christian common life is to offer opportunities to disengage from the hectic, fast-paced world around us and offer time for prayer, for silence, and for listening to God. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, for the Word to resound, first we must have silence. Particularly in these hectic times, anything we can do to move our parishioners and our staff out of the headspace of the “outside world” and into a more authentic relationship with the divine is time well spent. Now, I have spent a fair amount of time studying Scripture, and I never noticed Jesus using Robert’s Rules of Order; but I did see him and his disciples praying, listening, stepping back and stepping away, and reorienting themselves towards what truly matters.

Spiritual discernment has its place, but can it really be used to run a vestry meeting?

Of course, embracing Listening Hearts methods as a parish and actually using them to run a vestry meeting are very different things. If we walked in cold to discern everything, we might never walk out again! This refocusing has caused us to do three things: (1) Focus less on doing *everything* and more on a few core principles. What are the things only *we* can do? And what can we encourage others to take on? (2) Do more prep-work between meetings (pre-discernment if you will) to find out whether a specific topic really is in need of discernment that month. Maybe buildings and grounds doesn’t need to be an agenda item this month? Maybe cake preparation never does?! (3) Ground our vestry meetings in Scripture and prayer. Instead of beginning and ending with sometimes rushed prayers and reflections, we spend the majority of the meeting in prayer. We create rituals around our work—reading the guidelines, studying Scripture, allowing for silence—that keep us more connected to God and to each other than motions and counter-motions, votes and abstentions. I used to leave vestry meetings tired and drained, wondering why I was spending so much time with my best people doing decidedly non-churchy things.

As often as possible I ask, “Does this take you closer to God?” Or, in Eliot’s parlance, “Where can the word be found?” At Memorial the Word continues to be found at our altar and in our pulpit; also, however, in our vestry room, our committee meetings, our weekly staff gathering, and everywhere, we begin with a simple statement from the *Listening Discernment Guidelines*, “Take time to become settled in God’s presence.”

The Rev. Grey Maggiano is the rector of Memorial Episcopal Church in Bolton Hill, Baltimore. He has also served parishes in Miami, Florida and Sterling, Virginia. Prior to entering seminary, Grey was a Presidential Management Fellow and Foreign Affairs Officer focused on justice reform efforts in Afghanistan.

A Quiet Place to Pause for Prayer

**Susan Dean
Seattle, WA**

I was sitting in the green lawn chair by the entrance to the courtyard when I saw an older woman pause to read our sandwich board.

“Does it cost?” she asked.

“No,” I replied, “it’s free.”

“And I can go in right now?” she asked.

“Yes, you are welcome to go in.”

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and for those who made in-kind contributions in 2016.*

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She walked slowly up the courtyard stairs, under the dogwood, past the geraniums, and entered our candlelit space. I peeked in and saw her sit in front of the artwork closest to the door. She put her gallon of milk on one side of the chair, her small grocery bag on the other. I thought I saw her shoulders drop, relaxed. Quietly she sat, for maybe ten minutes, then she gathered her belongings and left.

Located on Capitol Hill in Seattle, Underhill House is a quiet place to pause for prayer or meditation, or simply to come out of the noise of life and gather one's thoughts. If guests desire, someone can sit with them in a space set aside for listening, and then offer prayer, silently or aloud.

Evelyn Underhill, for whom the ministry is named, taught that the two most important spiritual practices are prayer and serving the poor. We hope our ministry is consonant with her life and teaching. We welcome people of all faiths and no faith, and we have a strong commitment to inviting people of low and no income, as well as those who have resources, to Underhill House. People who are home-blessed and home-less are welcome. We desire Underhill House to be a place where people whom our culture splits apart can reconverge, a place where people from all walks of life can be together, a place where community can grow.

In a world where people seem increasingly suspicious and afraid of one another, we hope to be a safe place to gather people who might not otherwise be in one another's presence.

My hunch is that the woman with her gallon of milk has family in Ethiopia or Somalia. With her, as she sat in the silence, were a young man from China we know is a student at the University of Washington and a woman with flowing hair who comes to us from her yoga class. In a world where people seem increasingly suspicious and afraid of one another, we hope to be a safe place to gather people who might not otherwise be in one another's presence. There's comfort in being still together, even when you don't know anything about each other. Fear may begin to melt.

Inside the house we are quiet. When the weather is pleasant, more guests sit in the courtyard. It's quiet there, too, but I notice that the guests are more inclined to whisper "hello" when someone joins them in that space. I wonder, will they speak when they bump into each other in the checkout line at the grocery store: "Didn't I see you at Underhill House last week?"

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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 draw together with truly listening hearts, we enter into communion with one another and with God.

—Listening Hearts, p.2

I'd love to tell you the deeply touching stories the guests share with us, but we listen and hold their stories in sacred confidence. They may be grieving over recent losses of loved ones; puzzling over changing jobs; struggling with addiction, where to live, how to live ... the variety of life that each of us faces as human beings. They share their vulnerability, trusting that we will not judge but will be present with them as they suffer and present with them as they celebrate. We try to do our best.

Recently I read about a psychiatrist who claims that all mental illness is basically loneliness. There may be physical grounds, he said, but what activates the illness is loneliness. I believe we're created to be in community.

Although I have no professional credentials, I suspect that a man who recently sat at the edge of our courtyard may have some struggles with mental health. He and I sat almost entirely in silence for nearly two hours, maybe twelve feet apart, and I sensed that we formed a small community. And, I confess, after two hours, I was less afraid of him.

As he walked by me on his way out, I told him, "You're welcome to come sit here again next week while we're open." "Thank you," he said, which I heard as an automatic response. Then he stopped and looked me in the eye. "Thank you," he said, as though he had begun to trust my invitation.

I hope he comes back.

The Rev. Susan Dean is the founder and executive director of Underhill House, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia. Visit them at www.underhillhouse.org.