

EXPLORATIONS

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*Highlights from our 30 years
 of Listening Hearts
 Ministries including*

Suzanne Farnham

R. Taylor McLean

The Rt. Rev. Ted Eastman

Joan Diver

A Prayer by Thomas Merton

Introduction to Our 30th Anniversary Issue

Suzanne Farnham, Founder

Thirty years ago, seeds about the Quaker Clearness Committee sown by Parker Palmer cross-pollinated with a comment made by Sister Patricia Scanlan of the Baltimore Carmel that information about discernment is embedded in all of the spiritual classics. This fed into my then unfulfilled yearning to understand what spiritual discernment is and how to go about it. I put together a proposal for a “Christian Vocation Research Project” to develop a program that would integrate insights drawn from the accumulated experience of various faith traditions into a Quaker model for discerning call in community. Memorial Church, Baltimore, readily endorsed it as a parish project and designated a hundred dollars as start-up money. Soon thereafter the Diocese of Maryland provided five hundred dollars to purchase the needed books. Within a few months some forty people were involved in the effort.

This issue of EXPLORATIONS takes us on a stroll down Memory Lane, offering a small scrapbook of vignettes from various Listening Hearts publications over time, images of the ministry as it has unfolded. While the ministry continues to evolve as our culture rapidly changes, the underlying principles—deeply rooted in accumulated wisdom and experience of the centuries—remain firm. Read and enjoy!

A Name Change

R. Taylor McLean, Trustee, 1996

The Christian Vocation Research Project had been underway four years when *Listening Hearts* was published in May 1991. Until then the phrase “listening hearts” had not been associated with our ministry. Rather, we were known as the Christian Vocation Project, and our work centered around discernment of call within an individual’s faith community. This is still true of us today—with a difference. Now, after more than five years of steady sales and use, *Listening Hearts*, the book, has become increasingly influential in how we are identified. People refer to us as Listening Hearts rather than the Christian Vocation Project. Thus ... we are consciously referring to ourselves in our new brochure and information folder as Listening Hearts Ministries. In doing so, we are adopting the name that others have already bestowed on us. Listening Hearts Ministries ... it has a good ring to it.

Select Quotations from Listening Hearts Publications

Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 20th Anniversary Edition (2011)

- Spiritual discernment is not about telling each other what to do. Spiritual discernment is about trusting the fact that all of us are made in God's image and all of us have access to God's call for our lives. It is about practicing the disciplines required to help ourselves and each other heal the internal wounds and surmount the external obstacles that keep us from hearing that call. p. xvi
- The silence of prayerful listening is not so much the absence of talk as it is the presence to the Word. p. 53
- We can never achieve wholeness simply by ourselves but only together with others. p. 49

Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations (1996)

- In group deliberations, discernment involves coming together with open hearts and open minds to seek God's wisdom around issues important to the community. The first order of business is to become attuned to God's presence within and among those assembled. p. 7-8
- God speaks through people, through events, and through the circumstances of our lives. Most especially, God speaks through the community gathered in the spirit of prayerful listening. Groups that nurture the practice of reverent listening in their lives apart as well as in their times together grow closer to one another as they grow closer to God. p. 14
- We cannot achieve spiritual consensus by merely fine-tuning group skills and techniques. Although spiritual consensus takes practice, ultimately it comes as a grace-filled gift from God. Those who await the Spirit as they confront their common concerns can hope to experience the love of God bonding them together in heart and mind. p. 34-35

Keeping in Tune with God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Clergy (2011)

- Ultimately, spiritual discernment challenges us to trust the profound wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness of God. On occasion, the direction that seemed clear to us during prayer one morning may be shrouded in mist the next day, leading us to question not only our own judgment but also the guidance of God that we are diligently seeking....Spiritual discernment is an ever-evolving journey to God. It always sheds enough light to help us see the next step as we seek to follow our own true path. p. 28
- When clergy engage congregations and other groupings in centered listening and consensus building, they develop and strengthen the discipline of discernment within themselves while cultivating discerning communities. p. 33
- The path to deep collegiality among ordained ministers begins when clergy recognize that they share a common mission. It opens up as they develop watchful eyes that observe the Spirit working in each other. It continues to open before them if a gentle atmosphere of compassion and respect makes it safe for them to share the thoughts of their heart, no matter what those thoughts may be. p. 37

For more information on these books and other resources, please visit the **Books** link under **Resources** on the Listening Hearts website at www.listeninghearts.org.

Excerpts from Articles in Past Issues of *Explorations*

Consensus Through Christ in Community

Suzanne Farnham, Founder, 1992

... A belief that God becomes manifest through prayerful consensus is fundamental to discernment groups. Consensus is cultivated through trust that the Spirit can draw receptive hearts together to find a new perspective. It rests upon our confidence that God casts light through persons. It asks of us a willingness to see things in a new light, and it emerges through prayerful listening as the gathered community waits upon the Spirit. It gives flesh to Jesus' words: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

Meditation on a Pine Cone

The Rt. Rev. A. Theodore Eastman, Former Trustee, 1997

As summer comes to an end and autumn begins, here is a wonderful poem celebrating the seasons of our own spiritual lives.

... Embraced in the peace of your fragrant forest,
 your home,
 your tomb,
 I stand in wonder once again of God's incredible creativity.
 In my small grove of listening hearts,
 new seed is generated in abundance.
 Ideas fall into yearning soil,
 close by attentive trunks
 Or blown afar by holy wind.
 Some take hold.
 New shoots spring forth.
 The grove becomes a forest.
 This is the mystery of God's creation.
 And we are blessed to live within its life-giving cycle,
 as creatures of God,
 as creators with God.

Healing of the Spirit

Joan Diver, Former Trustee, 2001

Listening Hearts Ministries defines itself as a ministry of spiritual discernment, helping people of the Church to learn to hear God's voice in their personal situations and in the work of Church committees and governing bodies. As I have grown in my experience of Listening Hearts, I have come to see it as a ministry of healing, as well. Spiritual healing is the healing that takes place not in the operating room, but in one's heart. It is the process of opening oneself to wherever God is leading. It is the process of going through and beyond the limitations of our emotional and mental responses, to find freedom in aligning ourselves with the power of God's love. It is the process of bringing the mind, body, and spirit into wholeness of becoming one with God.

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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.

*Do you have the patience to wait
until the mud settles and the water is
clear? Can you remain unmoving till
the right action arises by itself?
—Tao Te Chang*

A Prayer of Thomas Merton

God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore, we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.

Thoughts in Solitude, p. 83, adapted