

# EXPLORATIONS



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## **Discernment As Withdrawal And Return**

**Suzanne Farnham  
Founder**

Spiritual discernment taps into our yearning to enter the flow of the Spirit, so that we may be carried to a place of new perspective relative to an issue that concerns us. In Listening Hearts, this involves letting our mind descend to the center of our being, which is our spiritual heart, where God dwells most intimately within us.

We begin in the head, considering the question for discernment with our rational faculties. We then slow down and become more reflective, meandering at the semi conscious level for a while. From there, we go deeper toward our very center.

The center is a place of stillness where thoughts and feelings are suspended. We are at the level of God’s universal truth—and universal love. We are at one with all of creation. We are in the realm of the collective unconscious. At the center, God’s creative energy is most concentrated, most intense.

Sometimes there is something that we know deep inside, but do not realize we know, that begins to come into focus and rise to consciousness. At other times, the light of Christ within us illuminates a situation so that we start to see something that had not been visible to us before. At other times, we suddenly we find ourselves viewing the issue from an entirely new angle, from which it looks very different. Any of this is discernment emerging.

Listening Hearts involves a movement of withdrawal and return. Once we have lingered in the unconscious, we begin the return. First we identify signs of the Spirit we have experienced or observed. Next we try to get a sense of where those signs are pointing—to develop a sense of direction in relation to the question for discernment. After that, we articulate the primary thing we think God is trying to tell us. We next determine what we intend to do in response. Then we are ready to step back into the world of everyday life to act on our discernment.

*... the word is very near to you;  
it is in your mouth and in your heart,  
so that you can do it. (Deut. 30:14 – RSV)*

*continued on p. 2*

A word of caution: God does not work according to any timetable that we may set. Rather, God reveals to us what we are ready to hear when we are prepared to hear it. If we stay open and attentive to the divine presence, God will show us the way ahead, step-by-step, as we seek to move forward on our true path, one day at a time.

## **God Is Energy**

**Anne Rosenbaum  
Savannah, GA**

God is in us, runs through us and all about us.

God is energy –  
no beginning, no end, always transforming ...  
chemical, sound, radiant, nuclear, thermal, electromagnetic, mechanical –  
always changing from one form to another.  
Never disappearing, only changing.

No heaven. No hell. Just change.  
One “life” ends, another begins in a different form.  
On and on and on, eternally.

Like a Swedish Christmas angel chime  
where the chemical energy in the match gives new life to the candle,  
which burns, giving way to light and heat –  
moving air molecules,  
rising up to give motion to the angels.  
And as the angels strike the brass bells,  
new life arises in the form of sound energy –  
ringing forth until a human eardrum vibrates  
sending an electrical signal to the brain.  
And the energy transforms, on and on.

God is eternal energy.

*Anne Rosenbaum, a trained LHM discerner, lives in Savannah, Georgia. Recently retired as a school science specialist, she now enjoys volunteer and recreational pursuits.*

## **The Possibility of Being Heard**

**Jim Goodmann  
Sewanee, TN**

There is a quality to intensive group discernment with Listening Hearts that yields something more than a way forward in one’s life. It may be called a rearrangement of expectations. The work of discernment, of deep listening goes on; the discernment question that a participant brings definitely stays alive. It’s the angle of perspective on the question that changes as we adjust to a different light. That light, in part, is the compassionate presence of other listeners, along with a generous demarcation of time and space in the Listening Hearts structure. Spending three hours as a convener, or as discerners or the focus person, may seem like an extravagant use of time, but three hours may be what it takes to cultivate an attentive and open space for the divine presence to manifest itself as we listen to our lives and listen deeply to what is sounding through them.

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and for those who made in-kind contributions in 2017.*

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Over the four days of our retreat, my discernment question lived with many others, and though these questions were treated singly and carefully, they collectively became a part of the living communion that was formed across our time of being together as a small group. Such questions never live by themselves nor for us alone, anyway. A discernment group's coming together is always about more than just the questions that live within us. Although people may come seeking enrichment or light on their own choices and dilemmas, they will also grow in the capacity to see their questions as part of the larger constellation of the Spirit's work in creation and in the Church.

My own engagement with these and similar practices through circles of trust, VocationCARE and Living in the Green, reaffirms for me that what we often call a luxury—time—may be the one thing necessary if the Church is to become a genuinely courageous presence in the larger culture. A bold and courageous witness to the suffering of the world and an advocate for its amelioration can only be sustained by a persistent practice of listening deeply, prayerfully. Those sharing the witness of their lives through these circles and small groups may be participating in one of the largest rescue operations of our time—rescuing the Church from its own ego, from being fastened to thinking about its work as mainly maintenance or asset tending, of always doing it “this way.” The Spirit always moves far ahead of maintenance. In fact, the activity of the Spirit in these and like practices is an indicator of how we may flourish. The Holy Spirit is not high on self-referencing. It is focused rather on moving *us*.

*The wind [pneuma] blows where it pleases.  
You can hear its sound,  
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. – John 3:8 (NJB)*

John goes on to assert, “so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” These places of deep listening to the things that are most personal, most sacred to us are also kenotic spaces, spaces of self-emptying. It is our abnegation of interrogation, of cross-talk and analysis; and our embrace of silence and prayerful presence that allows for the struggle that needs to emerge and the open and honest questions the focus person needs to be asked. This is the kind of hard work that awakens courage and fuels an unguarded heart; the same work also questions our most long-lived assumptions about the way things *ought* to be.

One of the assumptions that we may leave by the wayside is addressed by Thomas Keating in his musings about the effects of contemplative practice: “The ultimate state to which we are called is beyond any fixed point of reference such as a self ... union with Christ leads to the death of our separate self-sense. It is to die to all separation, even to a self that has been transformed. It is to be one with God, not just to experience it.”<sup>1</sup> Listening Hearts provides spaces in which we might begin to open that great parable which is each life and our life together.

*James Goodmann, currently Associate Director of the Beecken Center of the School of Theology of the University of the South, has been involved in the higher education and non-profit worlds for twenty-five years. He is especially committed to weaving contemplative practice with social processes.*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Mystery of Christ*, pp. 56-57, as quoted in *The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living*, p. 72.

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#### MISSION STATEMENT

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.

*...God's creative energy is alive  
at all times in all places, ever ready  
for us to tap into so that it can flow  
freely into every molecule of our being.  
—Keeping in Tune With God, p. 31*

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### **“God is Love” is**

an aspiration,  
when the Universe  
senses in herself  
potential  
to treat herself  
with kindness.

a recognition,  
when the Universe  
spies her reflection  
in a still pool,  
and sees herself  
with simple clarity.

an invitation,  
when the Universe  
calls out to herself,  
imploring,  
coaxing,  
cajoling compassion.

a reverberation,  
when the Universe  
responds to this sense,  
this calling,  
this identity,  
and replies, yes, my love.

*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.*