



Free Listening Hearts Program Materials

Volume One: A Primer on Spiritual Discernment

This primer features a short concise treatise on each of twelve topics that provide a foundation for all that follows in Open Hearts. The entire section can be printed out to make a booklet. Or copies of each topic can be printed out separately to distribute as a basis for discussion at group gatherings. The topics addressed are fundamental to contemplative practice of all kinds.

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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 1

What is Discernment?

The verb “to discern” means to sort out, to sift through, to distinguish. It is not a specifically religious word—people use it in a wide range of contexts. However, when the verb “discern” becomes a noun, the term “discernment” is used primarily in faith based circles. The problem is that not everyone in the church understands it in the same way. There are at least three different types of discernment practiced in the church.

Listening Hearts discernment is spiritual discernment, or what St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits call discernment of spirits: distinguishing the Spirit of God from other spirits that influence us—such as the spirit of excellence, the spirit of winning, the spirit of a nation, the spirit of the times. Or, to put it in the vocabulary of call: distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that are telling us what to do—voices of our parents echoing through the years, voices of teachers and mentors who have been important to us, voices of friends and colleagues, voices of political and religious leaders, voices of the media. These voices may be good—God often speaks to us through them. But not everything they say is God’s word for us. And what may be God’s word for us in a given time and circumstance may not be God’s word for us in a similar situation at a different time in a different context. Spiritual discernment is a prayerful, informed effort to sort through all of this. Through it we are pointed in the right direction and shown the next step we are to take. To the extent that we develop a life of discernment with God at our side, the road in front of us continues to be illuminated.

Another kind of discernment is the discernment of gifts, sometimes called gifts identification. This type of discernment is scriptural and of clear value: if we know what our gifts are we can use them more consciously, with greater confidence, and thus more effectively. But discernment of gifts is not the same as discernment of call. In the Bible, over and over, God calls people to do things for which they are not the obvious choice, for which they do not seem to have the necessary qualifications. For instance, take Abraham and Sarah, childless and beyond childbearing age, called to become progenitors of an entire nation of people. Or Moses, who has difficulty speaking and is wanted for murder in

Egypt, being called to go to Pharaoh to ask him to let the Hebrew people go free. And there is Jesus, a gentle village carpenter called to become the Messiah when everyone was looking for a warrior-king. There are the apostles—ordinary everyday people with plenty of flaws—called to establish what would become the Christian religion. Part of the difficulty is that we often fail to grasp what qualities are most needed to do a job. And perhaps even more important: God seems to call people who clearly lack significant assets, so that we all can see that the person did not accomplish what they did because of any innate superiority, that the fruits that came were clearly the work of God. Beyond that, it also appears that God asks us to do what we know we are incapable of accomplishing. It is only as we respond affirmatively, obeying because we have confidence in God, that God provides us with what we need to fulfill the call.

A third kind of discernment is rational discernment in a Christian context. This is the most common type of discernment practiced in the church. It is based on a secular model that approaches a concern by thinking it through, engaging in discussion and debate, and making a decision. To put secular discernment into a Christian context, the process begins with prayers, applies Christian principles in the course of the deliberations, and likely ends with prayer. This all is good, but in spiritual discernment it is only preparation for the actual discernment, which involves immersion in the divine presence, imaginative engagement with the creative powers of the Spirit, and careful attention to signs of God's Spirit. Above all, spiritual discernment calls for deep prayerful listening and radical openness to the Spirit. Through it we grow into a closer relationship with God and other people. We develop a clearer sense of our path ahead, and become more at one with our own self.

Discernment can be like driving an automobile at night: the headlights cast only enough light for us to see the next small bit of road immediately in front of us.

– Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, p. 27



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 2

Formulating a Question for Discernment

Good spiritual discernment begins with discerning the question. The desire for the discernment comes from a gnawing concern, one you have been pondering, but unable to resolve. How you word your concern in the form of a question paves the way for all that follows. If you let prayer help shape your discernment question, you yourself undergo a subtle transformation in the process.

The first step is to hold your concern in centered silence for at least ten minutes, with your thoughts and feelings in suspended animation. After that, begin to word the question by addressing it to God: "God, how would you have me...?" This gets it out of your head where it is in your own control and into your spiritual heart, your gut, ready to be informed by the Spirit.

The next step is to word the question so that it is open-ended, hospitable to new possibilities beyond what you currently perceive, so that you are available to be taken to new vistas and see new things. That means no multiple-choice questions, no "yes" or "no" questions. Such questions hem God in and hem you in as well.

Then continue in a prayerful mode until the question becomes a single interrogatory sentence that is clearly focused and open-ended. In spiritual discernment you are not looking for pat answers or blueprints, but for signs that point the direction and illuminate the path ahead.

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves.*

– Rainer Maria Rilke

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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 3

Centering Silence

Centering silence is fundamental to the contemplative life in every major spiritual tradition. It involves being anchored to the center of your being and at the same time fully open to the invisible Spirit of Love and Truth. It is an immersion in the Divine Presence.

To get started, schedule a regular time for intentional silence each day, or at least several days a week. If you are unaccustomed to such silence, perhaps begin with two minutes, then gradually increase the amount of time to ten minutes, then possibly work your way up to twenty minutes. During this period of stillness, try to ignore all thoughts and feelings. Do not fight them; simply pay them no heed. Let them come and let them go so that they sort of float by at the periphery. To help draw you back when you find yourself slipping into a thinking mode, choose a word to serve as your sacred word that you can silently utter to ease you back into stillness. A short word, no more than two syllables, is best. Examples of possible words are "peace," "rest," "come," "love," "God," "be." Any time that you begin to get distracted, let that word take you out of your head and back to your center.

No one way is the right way to go about this. Different things work for different people. And what works best for a one person at a given time may not be the same at another stage of his or her journey. If one thing is not working for you, try something else.

Some people find it most effective to sit upright in a firm chair; others prefer to sit in a lotus position on the ground or floor; some even stay centered best when soaking in a bathtub full of warm water. Others find it easier to be prayerful if moving: walking, gently running or swimming, or on a treadmill or exercise bike—some kind of activity that does not have distractions and does not require concentration in a way that riding a bike in traffic does. Still others can easily sit still, but have trouble centering down unless they can move something in their hands, for instance by holding a ball of clay in their hands.

If feasible, designate a spot as your special place for this time of centering. Quiet pleasant surroundings are most conducive to becoming still within. Let people who might intrude

know that you are reserving this space at whatever the time so that they do not interrupt you during this.

As you build centered silence into your life, you are cultivating a centeredness that eventually will stay with you through the activity of daily life and that you can readily access in the midst of turmoil. Regardless of the specifics of how you arrive at centered silence, you are merging with the Source of life and goodness, which slowly leads to peace, integration, and fullness of life.

*While practicing inner prayer
do not permit yourself
any concepts, images, or visions.*

– St. Nil Sorski, a Russian ascetic writer in the 15th century



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 4

Applying the Mind

Life in the Spirit involves the whole person. Sound discernment builds upon vigorous mental activity. Assemble the best relevant information possible. Examine it. Discuss it. Evaluate it. Develop options. Consider the pros and cons. Weigh the options. Make a preliminary decision.

Russian Orthodox contemplatives in the latter part of the nineteenth century habitually spoke of letting the mind descend into the heart. This is not saying to dispose of your mind or to ignore it. It implies that you conscientiously apply your mind, then let it descend to the very center of your being where God dwells in stillness, where body, mind, and spirit can become unified. Thus the mind becomes strengthened and fortified as it is integrated with both the body and the spirit.

Thus, in spiritual discernment there is a time to concentrate on using the intellect, a time to fall into centered silence, a time to allow integration, then a time to take action to do the work that will produce fruits.

Mature spiritual discernment begins with vigorous mental activity.

– Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 25.

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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 5

Detachment: Letting Go

Every major contemplative tradition places a high value on detachment, which means not clinging to anything—money, material possessions, personal relationships, opinions, convictions, not even our ideas about God. This does not mean that these things cannot be important to us. They can be very important. But they must not become our God.

One of the guidelines for Listening Hearts discernment is to hold your desires and opinions—even your convictions—lightly. At first, this may not make sense, because convictions by definition are deeply held beliefs. But this guideline does not ask that we throw away our convictions. It only tells us to hold them lightly—as in open hands. Try to imagine yourself sitting with your hands gently open in front of you—your palms up with your convictions resting gently upon them for anyone to see, anyone to examine. You are safe because if they are of God, no one can take them away from you. But if you are clenching them in a closed fist, intense with negative vibrations, or holding them tight to your chest, anyone who disagrees with you will likely stay away and never see what you have to offer. If you are serene and open and vulnerable, those who disagree with you can safely draw closer. If they do, there is a possibility that they may grasp the wisdom of what they now are beginning to see. From a practical standpoint, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Consider another aspect of this openness. If you are clinging to your convictions, you are restricting the flow of the Spirit. Your convictions may be basically correct, but conceivably they need to be modified or refined, maybe strengthened. If you are holding them tight, you are inhibiting their growth and development—they become calcified. Spiritual maturity requires that we fully open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit so that God can continue to fine-tune our desires and convictions. Thus the oft-repeated words “let go and let God.”

*Holding on to what is good (a form of attachment) holds us back from finding what is better.
Thus, detachment frees us to move continually toward a higher good.*

– Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 21



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 6

Engaging the Imagination

In more than twenty-five years of Listening Hearts experience, every dramatic breakthrough in discernment has come through a creative encounter with an art form or an image from nature or a relevant analogy. This usually comes after the period of preparation that includes prayer, formulating the discernment question, assembling the best information possible, identifying options, weighing them and coming to a preliminary position on the matter under consideration.

At this time, the real discernment begins. A productive way to proceed is to engage the imagination. One way to go about that is to select a category that appeals to you and feels right for you at this moment. Some examples: the visual arts, music, sports, science, literature, or natural beauty. If you love sports you could open yourself to a sports analogy that might inform your concern. If you are a music lover, is there a particular piece of music that expresses your feelings as you consider the issue before you? If your favorite pastime is reading novels, is there a character in a novel that reminds you of yourself at this time? But do not try to think of an analogy or an historical character or an image from nature. Instead, take your question and your situation into centering silence and hold them at your very center (your gut at the pit of your abdomen, the center of your balance). If you establish a category and stay centered, in time something is likely to spring up from your depths. If it does, engage with it. Explore associations. In your imagination try to experience sights and sounds, taste, smells and textures. What do they suggest to you? What do they tell you about yourself? How do they inform the question? Release yourself to the flow of the Spirit to go wherever that may take you.

You may need to conclude because of time or you may simply sense that it is time to move on. Ideally, two more steps will follow in whatever sequence fits your circumstances. One, it is important to observe and interpret the signs of the Spirit, which you will find as topic 8 of this Primer. And second, if at all possible, find at least one other person of spiritual depth with whom you can share your reflections in a contemplative manner (see Topic 8 of this Primer).

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Symbols that bubble to the surface from deep within have the power to carry us to new places that can broaden our perspective, refine our concept of truth, deepen our compassion and draw us into more intimate relationships with God and other people.

– Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 31



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 7

Contemplative Sharing

At the heart of spiritual discernment is contemplative sharing, which combines reverent listening with articulating thoughts and feelings that percolate up from within. This presupposes that some serious inquiry has taken place beforehand.

Discernment begins with a real life concern. Next comes rational consideration of the stated issue: assemble information and ideas; engage in study, discussion, and possibly debate; then identify options and weigh them. After that it is time to transition from the head into the heart. Meditation exercises that tap into the imagination provide a good bridge for this. A wide range of creative meditation options can be found in sections three, four, and eight of this Open Hearts document. Such meditation will quiet the soul and bring forth rich material for reflective sharing. The time has come to move to a deeper place and stay there. The time is ripe to alternate between profound silence and sharing the thoughts of ones heart with others.

The ideal number of people for contemplative sharing probably is four. Yet if only one other person is available, it can be fruitful between two people. At the other end of the spectrum, sometimes there are reasons for a large group to want to share reflections as a group of the whole. This can work well if the participants are sufficiently experienced or if small group sharing immediately precedes the large group sharing.

For optimum contemplative sharing, everyone arrives in silence at an appointed time, gathering in a pre-designated spot that is quiet and free of interruptions, with the appropriate number of chairs set up in an intimate circle. Once everyone has arrived, the silence continues for a couple of minutes. Then, in no particular sequence, each person takes one turn to share reflections around whatever issue he or she is addressing. No one is obligated to share, but in most cases, doing so leads to additional insight for the person sharing as well as those who are listening.

During this period of shared reflections, everyone listens with reverent attention to the person speaking—making no comments, asking no questions, expressing neither

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approval nor disapproval—trying to be fully present to God at the center of the person speaking, allowing silence to envelop each person’s words. The intent of this is to serve as a non-threatening prayerful presence in which a person can freely explore his or her inmost thoughts and feelings without being interrupted. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears. Listen with your entire self—body, mind, and spirit. Let the divine presence penetrate the group. Pause between speakers so that everyone can absorb what has been said.

Once everyone has had sufficient opportunity to speak, additional reflections may be offered in the same contemplative manner to the extent that time permits.

No single person is facilitator for this sharing. It is everyone’s privilege and responsibility to help the group stay on course. When the time to conclude approaches, one person or more concludes by offering an appropriate Scripture text, a short prayer, or a closing thought to pull the reflections together.

The heart is the hub of all sacred spaces; go there and roam.

– Source unknown



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 8

Signs of the Spirit

In spiritual discernment, when a good way forward starts to dawn, there remains the question, "Is it God that is speaking or is it some other spirit, some other voice?" The way to evaluate this is to look for signs of the Spirit that manifested themselves as the discernment was unfolding.

There is only one sign that must always be experienced in order to bring the discernment to a conclusion. That sign is a deep peace—not to be confused with a false peace that comes from glossing over differences and unresolved concerns, creating a superficial sense of harmony and well-being. With the peace of God, a profound calm settles in deep down after all of the turbulence and turmoil associated with the situation has been prayerfully confronted. If any feelings of agitation linger, that is a negative sign that indicates a need to continue focused discernment.

Some other signs to look for:

- **Convergence:** Various things that occurred independently and at different times, and heretofore had not seemed to be related to one another, all of a sudden converge and fit together, informing one another.
- **Persistence:** The same message keeps coming through unrelated channels and in different ways.
- **Tears that do not fatigue:** These are the cleansing tears of the Spirit, so even if you cry hard and long, you do not feel tired.
- **Disorientation, followed by a sense of clarity:** This occurs when a previous comprehension of truth gets shaken up and a higher truth falls into place.
- **Sudden sense of clarity:** Totally unanticipated, all of a sudden something significant becomes clear in a vivid way.
- **Joy:** Radiance swells up from within you and anyone else who is engaged.
- **Energy!!:** If we are getting the message right, we are infused with the energy to act on it. If we think we are called to do something, but we have no energy to do it and would have to force ourselves to do anything, we may have the general idea right, but

something is askew. Some aspect of what we are hearing must be incomplete or slightly off course. That means we need to take additional time and continue with the discernment.

Signs of the Spirit point the direction. They do not provide a roadmap. To the extent that we continue to walk with God, we will keep moving in the right direction. As we cultivate a life of discernment, the divine light continues to illuminate the path ahead, casting light on any missteps and revealing the way forward.

We can never be certain that we are hearing God correctly. It is unlikely that all the signs will be present in any given circumstance. We interpret signals as ably as we can, and move forward to act on what we believe God is asking of us, always listening and asking God to continue to guide us

– Farnham, Hull, and McLean, *Grounded in God*, pp. 29 & 30



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 9

Spiritual Consensus

Spiritual consensus is secular consensus with an added dimension. Consensus literally means perceiving together. No votes are taken. It is not majority rule. It calls for an approach to deliberations in which those involved look for common ground. People articulate their views fully and honestly, which requires an atmosphere of mutual respect. Members of the group listen to one another with an eye to bringing things together. Consensus does not imply unanimity. Rather, consensus rises to the surface as those present feel sufficient opportunity to articulate their thoughts and voice their concerns. It is important that everyone involved is able to express themselves freely. When a sense of the group emerges, some people may not fully agree with it, but they are willing to accept it if they genuinely feel that their views have been expressed adequately and considered with respect.

Generic consensus is primarily rational. Spiritual consensus incorporates rational thinking, but goes beyond it to draw the group together, heart as well as mind. This is where the signs of the Spirit come in (see this Primer, Topic 8). The more signs that appear and the stronger they are, the clearer the spiritual consensus, which requires a deep serenity plus some combination of joy, energy, and/or other indications of the Spirit experienced by the group. If anyone present feels a lingering sense of agitation, it is extremely important that he or she speak up, because that is a negative sign that signals a lack of God's peace, and indicates that more prayer and discernment are needed.

The quest for spiritual consensus draws a group closer to the Source of all that is. Even when the issue is controversial, members of the group deepen their bonds with one another.

By seeking to dwell at God's center where all things are in right relationship, members of the group become one.

– Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 34



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 10

Humility

Here's a huge paradox: Jesus tells us that people who become humble are exalted, while those who exalt themselves are humbled. The word humility comes from the Latin word *humus* that means soil, earth. It connotes being down-to-earth, grounded, unpretentious. Not a door mat. No inferiority complex. Easily acknowledging deficiencies and mistakes. Grateful for assets and accomplishments with no feelings of superiority, just gratitude.

Humility derives from being tuned-in to the Source of all creation, living in close relationship with the Giver of all gifts. Experiencing God's greatness reveals our own smallness. God alone sees all that is, visible and invisible—past, present, and into the future. People who put their trust in God's wisdom and goodness develop solid confidence that is not self-confidence; it is confidence in God. Humility is a strong, life-giving quality that comes to those who live in the flow of the Spirit. A person who is humble realizes his or her need for God and other people.

...our perception of people, situations, events, and issues is limited by time, geography, culture, and personality type. God alone sees all things from every possible perspective—past, present, and future.

– Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 17



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 11

Taking Action!

In spiritual discernment the intent is that we act on what we hear, that we obey the signs we see. The word obey derives from the Latin word *audire*, which means to hear. When you truly hear a sacred message, you obey!

Yet, spiritual discernment is always tentative. We never can be sure that our understanding of what was said is precisely right. So we never proceed with arrogance. We continue to listen even as we move forward, so that the living Spirit of Love and Truth can continue to guide us, recalculating the path as we deviate from it. In other words, we continue in a mode of discernment even as we move ahead.

When it is a group with specified responsibilities that is in discernment around a common issue, it is important to distil the consensus into a clear statement of a single sentence that summarizes the sense of the group. Then, to put into writing a concise plan of action listing who is going to do what to begin the follow-through on the discernment. This includes naming a person who will make sure that these initial tasks are completed. It helps to establish a deadline for each to-do item.

Spiritual discernment is a quest to uncover signs that point the way ahead so that we travel in the right direction. Once we see those signs, it is incumbent upon us to follow where they lead.

If we love God, we want to live in harmony with God—we want to hear what God has to say, and we want to act on what we hear.

– Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*, p. 12



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 12

And Fruits Appear in the Fullness of Time

Fruitfulness is the only sign of the Spirit that does not point the way forward in discernment. This particular sign comes later, letting us know that we heard the call correctly and managed to stay on the path. When God asks something of us, it is for a purpose and will bring forth fruit in the fullness of time. When we see good results spring forth as we act on our discernment, it is an indication that we got the message right.

However, it is important to realize that we ourselves do not necessarily get to see the fruits. You may impact the life of another person in profound ways, but in some cases you may never know anything about it. Conceivably, you may not even know the person. In other cases, it can take years and years for fruit to appear. Consider the artist Vincent Van Gogh, who died in poverty, unappreciated as an artist. It was only after his death that his impact on the world of art grew immense and the value of his paintings skyrocketed. Or what about Abraham Lincoln? He died having no inkling of the extent to which he influenced history. There is no way he could have comprehended the magnitude of his legacy. If we cultivate a habit of discernment and try to stay in a close relationship with God, our lives will be fruitful whether or not we get to see the results.

As the waters of the Spirit within us converge, they turn into springs that release the life-giving power of God into the world, to refresh and renew all creation.

- Farnham and Grayson, *Keeping in Tune with God*, p. 42



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A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 13

Discernment as Withdrawal and Return

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)*

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.

– Suzanne Farnham, Spring 2018 *Explorations*, Vol. 28 Number 2, pp. 1-2