

# EXPLORATIONS



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#### **Inside this Issue**

*How Contemplation is  
Working in Me*  
Suzanne Farnham

*Living Lives of Discernment*  
Martha Ishman

*Ask the Animals*  
Mike Croghan

*Listening with Heart*  
Bruce Ray

## **How Contemplation is Working in Me**

**Suzanne Farnham  
Founder**

My spiritual journey is one of emerging consciousness. What I am aware of is conscious, but this is only the tip of the iceberg—that which is above the surface. Beneath the surface is the unconscious, where everything I have ever seen or experienced, but no longer can remember, lies dormant. And it seems that the unconscious also connects me to all of creation and is the point of access to God's wisdom.

For me, access to the unconscious requires inner stillness—all thoughts in suspension, all feelings in suspension, and no words. This is contemplation.

It seems like my unconscious is embedded in my body, where God's presence permeates every cell. Currently, when I try to be centered I leave behind all mantras, sacred words, and verbal utterances. Instead, I simply try to become attuned to God's presence in every cell of my body—upon waking in the morning, when settling into bed at night, and at random times in between.

The journey continues. Amen.

## **Living Lives of Discernment**

**Martha Ishman  
Titusville, PA**

There were many times in my life that I fervently hoped that God would communicate with me by sliding a 3x5 card under my bedroom door. On the card would be God's explicit directions for me on what to do next. I suppose today it'd be more appropriate to wait for a text message. Either way, that was my first idea of what discernment was all about. Okay God, now what? Tell me.

However, discernment is more nuanced than that. Discernment, is about finding a way forward when God has placed something on your heart, but it also can be a way of life. There are many definitions of discernment. At its most basic, it is a process of discovering God's activity, movement, and direction in our lives.

*continued on p. 2*

If we use that definition as our starting point, we already see that discernment is not simply a decision. It is not one course of action over another. Rather, it is an ongoing process that occurs on many levels, sometimes simultaneously. A hallmark of good discernment is movement from confusion to clarity.

Due to the ongoing nature of it, discernment is open to the work of the Holy Spirit, to testing and to change. In order to be open to the Holy Spirit, we must notice what God is already doing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. When we step back from the daily rush from one appointment to the next, from one project to the next, from one place to the next, and take time to reflect, what do we see? What do we hear? Having done this, we also take the time to be in conversation with others, to test if what we have heard or seen is congruent with their sense of it. Finally, we must also be willing to recognize that discernments can change. As elusive as the whole process is, in the end, discerned truth is sturdy. It will stand up to testing and to the passage of time.

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It is also important to recognize that discernment involves more than prayer and holy conversation. Discernment is also revealed through our life circumstances. God does not call us into something new to the detriment of relationships that have been important to us. That is not to say that being called to something new will not be without pain or disruption. It may well be. However, our life circumstances might dictate that now is not the right time or there is not the right place. In the same way, discernment is sometimes revealed through an honest look at where we have already been. How have we seen God at work in our lives in the past may shed light on what God holds for us in the future.

As we intentionally engage the practice of discernment, we begin to recognize that we have developed a community of trust, a deepening of our own faith and a growing sense of God's leading. We begin to understand that we are not only seeking discernment but rather living lives of discernment. In the words of Henri Nouwen, discernment is "a lifelong commitment to 'remember God,' know who you are, and pay close attention to what the Spirit is saying today."

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*The Rev. Canon Martha Ishman is rector at St. James, Titusville, PA. In her work as Canon for Mission Development and Transition for the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania, she has led spiritual discernment groups using the book, Listening Hearts.*

**Ask the Animals** (a poetic response to Job 12:7-10)**Mike Croghan**  
Herndon, VA

Sister animals, living off the land, whose breath fills and animates you?  
Brother birds, soaring ever higher, whose is the wind that lifts you?  
Green siblings, fern and tree and bush, whose life flows through you?  
Swift swimmers of ocean, sound, and stream, who inspires your course?  
How can I ask you these questions? Who among us does not know  
that the Breath of God within us, quickening each of us, unites us all.

*Mike Croghan is a lay leader at Church of the Common Table in Vienna, Virginia. He develops phone and tablet apps for a living and is working on becoming a poet.*

**Listening with Heart****Bruce Ray**  
LaJolla, CA

I was introduced to the vision and work of Listening Hearts Ministries at a training retreat in San Diego. In practicing collective discernment—in venturing beyond our minds into the Spirit’s mind—we participants opened pathways in ourselves that allowed trust, vulnerability, playfulness, and friendship. I experienced the Spirit’s breath in my body. It quieted my mind, which had been anxious. It calmed my soul. These were moments in God’s wholeness and connection, of unexpected richness and deep belonging. These were moments of discerning God’s presence.

Discernment cannot come from our own understanding. It comes in trusting God’s presence and provision. It involves digesting God’s story, which encompasses both deep pain and triumphant glory.

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*In discerning the Spirit’s view, our life widens, deepens, and becomes bigger. We reframe our vision toward God’s salvation story, which integrates all the pieces.*

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We want to plan. We seek answers. The answer the Lord’s Prayer gives is the daily practice of seeking not answers but belonging in God and in one another. “Give us today our daily bread.” Feed one another. Be formed by God’s salvation story. We are to take our own story into God’s salvation story, holding our ambitions, emotions, thoughts, and circumstances lightly. Seeking God’s heart must be an everyday, not occasional, practice. God will put us in God’s salvation story. Discernment of the Spirit transforms our vision. It is more than seeing God. It is seeing from within the Body of Christ, from within God’s love. It is seeing from the center of our life, a center bigger than ourselves. It is seeing as God sees.

We often forget that we are called beyond our ordinary lives into God’s extraordinary life. We battle daily to answer questions, to solve problems. We worry. We hide our lamp under a bushel not using the tools the Spirit gives us. We forget God’s graciousness. God calls us to be in daily discernment. It is our daily bread. There we feed ourselves. There we feed one another.

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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.

*Through the practice of spiritual discernment, we walk close to God, the source of all comfort and wisdom. When we travel with God, all things work together for good.*

*—Keeping in Tune with God, p. 12*

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I work in an intensive care unit at a psychiatric hospital. I myself have a psychiatric diagnosis. In engagement with ourselves and our community, we practice discernment and healing, amidst life's tougher questions. Discernment begins with self-acceptance and with putting on God's hospitality (Luke 15:4-5). It transforms my being. It privileges me to see the world and myself afresh, with God's kindness, deeper and wider. So much of what we see and do not see depends on the framing of our story. The practice of discernment requires as large and fluid a frame as possible.

Before I leaned into God's hospitality, I leaned into our secular, less full and imaginative story of singular health and success. I identified with the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty. But I hoped against hope that I and all the king's horses and all the king's men, all our medicine and all our doctors, could put me together again. But my many pieces remained scattered where they had fallen, outside my frame. Lost, I asked for acceptance, communion, and discernment for God's imagination and creativity. In discerning the Spirit's view, our life widens, deepens, and becomes bigger. We reframe our vision toward God's salvation story, which integrates all the pieces.

Our listening hearts form us for reconciliation. We reframe our questions, desires, and longing. We receive imagination and creativity, hospitality and communion. Listening hearts are the glory of God, and "Christ now plays in ten thousand places" (Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'). I am thankful for the vision and the work of Listening Hearts Ministries.

*Bruce Ray lives in La Jolla, California and worships at St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church. He enjoys running and takes a course a semester at the diocesan seminary.*