

# EXPLORATIONS



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**Listen, Listen to the Holy Spirit** Mary Chandler Bolin  
 Lexington, KY

*The long and winding road that leads to your door will never disappear. I've seen that road before. It always leads me here. Lead me to your door.* (The Beatles, 1970)

On a mountaintop in Lee County, southeastern Kentucky, an old jukebox named Oscar played out this familiar tune during an evening at the 1973 junior youth conference, which I was attending for the first time. Never could I have anticipated the truly life-changing impact that week would launch for me—spiritually, interpersonally, vocationally, emotionally, psychologically. Through June 1977 I attended every camp, lock-in weekend, Good Shepherd youth group, and other event open to me. In the intervening 40+ years on my spiritual road, I have staffed at least twenty-five Senior Youth Conferences at the Domain. Recently, as I prepared for a Listening Hearts retreat, my first thought was of these familiar song lyrics, for they echo my spiritual journey—a road with many miles, twists and turns, and leading me back to the door where the Holy Spirit and I continue to exchange the question, “What would you have me do?”

Now, as I reflect on that Listening Hearts retreat and my life, it occurs to me that the answer to the question is “trust the process.” This concept is a familiar one, for much of my life’s work has been as a guide, a facilitator, and a healer in the therapeutic process. Since spending a blessed week with my mother in hospice during Lent 2017, I have pondered what my next chapters may hold. Unlike my characteristic administrator urge to start strategic planning, I have spent the past two years in patient but active waiting.

Our discernment group brought me into renewed awareness of my need for deep, prolonged silences—to *listen, listen, listen* to the Holy Spirit. I had the experience of several “thin places” where heaven and earth come closer; for example, one evening when a storm was blowing outside (which is not typically comforting to me) and as we were speaking of the movement of the Spirit, the wind shifted from seeming tumultuous to seeming almost a melody. As a singer, this made perfect sense to me—breath is the most basic element of support, preparation, and flow in singing. I am now more aware of breezes, and am reminded that the Spirit is present.

Similarly, I am deeply aware of how the Spirit continues to work in my life—most often in very unexpected ways! When I mentioned to a university colleague my recent spiritual retreat and reading some of Parker Palmer’s writings, she immediately said that she had read him and heard him speak! Not knowing her well, I had been unaware of her spiritual interests. Recently, she shared with me her current project to have a physically accessible labyrinth constructed in a local park. She had no idea that I’m drawn to labyrinths anywhere I go. I walked a labyrinth during the Listening Hearts retreat; there I began to explore how I might include a labyrinth in the small yard of the childhood home I am renovating. Beyond nurturing my own soul, building a labyrinth on family soil will connect me to my late parents—to my father, who taught me to appreciate a good power tool, and to my mother, who loved the garden most of all.

So, in my own life and in future work guiding others, I will hold deeply to the theme “trust the process” and listen for the Spirit.

*When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me speaking words of wisdom, let it be. And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me speaking words of wisdom, let it be. (The Beatles, 1970)*

*Mary Chandler Bolin is a cradle Episcopalian, university administrator, and licensed psychologist whose professional focus is on youth and emerging adults. Her next chapters are likely to incorporate discernment, photography, seeking out “thin places” and labyrinth meditation.*

## Lying in the Hammock

**Susan Dean  
Seattle, WA**

Once upon a time, about twenty years ago, I went on a silent retreat in Sedalia, Colorado. I was very tired from helping my extended family, so I spent my retreat lying in a hammock. Every morning I went to see Sr. Eleanor, my spiritual director, and every morning Sr. Eleanor said, “I don’t have anything to say to you. Just keep lying in the hammock.” She was very wise. My last day I went in to say good-bye to her and she said, “I’m only going to ask you to do one



thing: pray about what you want.” Immediately two things came up simultaneously for me: “I want to be a priest and I want to build a house of prayer.” The first, being a priest, wasn’t a surprise; I’d started discerning a call to the priesthood with some members of my home church. The gift was realizing that I truly *wanted* it! But building a house of prayer was a huge mystery. It took almost fifteen years for Underhill House to unfold. I believe that God had tucked that desire deep within my heart, and I have wondered whether I ever would have discovered it if I had not gone into that deep silence.

Underhill House, a quiet place to pause for prayer in Seattle, is named for Evelyn Underhill, an English mystic who wrote extensively about the spiritual life. Speaking about change *within* us, she said “prayer is the grass roots of change that leads us to service in the world.”

This past April I was pleased to join Lama Kelsang Dukpa (Buddhist), Rabbi Ted Falcon (Jewish), Imam Jamal Rahman (Muslim), and Murali Venkatrao (Hindu) at a bookshop in Seattle for a gathering described as “an interfaith global healing meditation dedicated to coming together across cultures and creeds and offering healing prayers and intention to the world.” The event offered silence, chanting, and an invitation to everyone to light votive candles, and each of the five faith representatives had a short opportunity to share. My role was to represent the “contemplative Christian community.” I chose to relate my lying-in-the-hammock story. Then I added this: There is a story in Christian Scripture about a woman who wants to be healed so badly that she quietly moves through a crowd and sneaks up behind Jesus to touch just the hem of his robe. Jesus is startled, but he tells her that her faith has made her whole.

I concluded my sharing with the interfaith group at the bookshop with these words, which I offer here:

My prayer, and my invitation, is that we and others in the world will form holy habits of entering into deep silence...that silence where peace passes all understanding...where the deepest desires of our own hearts may be revealed...where we know and are known by the presence of the Holy.

May we have the faith to enter into the silence, where we may touch the hem of the Holy to be healed, that by our healing we may become sisters and brothers to participate in the healing of our own communities and the world.

*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](http://www.underhillhouse.org).*

## **Discerning in Community**

**D.W. Morrill  
South Orange, NJ**

Discerning the voice of God is not new to many of us. It may happen when we are pondering a complex set of issues or when we least expect it. But how many of us have had the opportunity to discern in community with a group of fellow Christians?

On a Saturday, a small group of parishioners at the Church of St. Luke in the Fields in Manhattan had just such an opportunity. At 9 a.m. we met with Susan Heath, a warm, gentle but firm, and engaging facilitator with Listening Hearts. She started by welcoming us and establishing the ground rules for the day, providing us a safe space where we could all feel comfortable in actively taking part and sharing our experiences. We began by praying for the Holy Spirit to be among us and to guide us throughout the day. There were periods of prayer, meditation/reflection, singing, discussion, and art and writing activities. A relationship of trust grew quickly in the group which offered me a safe environment in which to discern and share openly and fully.

Newly retired, I had been in discernment for several months over how I should spend my time. My major activities and interests included reading and writing poetry, as well as group singing and music more generally. I experienced two clear discernments that day. The first came during one of our morning reflections. I discerned that a writing business I had started working on actually felt not that important. The second discernment was more of a sign: when I walked across the room to get materials for a creative writing or fine arts exercise in the afternoon, I chose drawing paper and markers instead of writing materials. I just happened to be holding a Listening Hearts songbook in my hand, and as I placed the paper and markers on top of it, the sign was immediately clear: “Try some fine arts on a foundation of music.”

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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.

*By putting ourselves in God's hands, we allow the Spirit of love and truth to bring a new dimension to our consciousness.*

*—Keeping in Tune with God, p. 27*

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All of this was significant and meaningful in so many ways. In particular, these discernments revolutionized my understanding of the place music has in my life: music is the very foundation of my life, not simply an interest; it is not to be treated casually. This has given me much more satisfaction in my musical endeavors and added a measure of motivation that I had not previously been able to tap into or even known existed.

I have followed both discernments since, and both have borne fruit. Not moving ahead with the part-time writing business freed up a considerable amount of time for music and art. My foundation of music has been significantly strengthened and expanded by my taking on new and very exciting singing projects and by resuming the guitar playing of my youth. In those days I played popular music on an acoustic guitar. Now I am learning classical guitar and playing Spanish music on a flamenco guitar. In addition, I started experimenting with watercolor and acrylic paint. This has given me a much-needed outlet for mere play and fun.

Where will any of this lead? That I can't say, but I *can* say I firmly believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to "break through" when we discern in community.

*D.W. Morrill, a retired teacher and academic administrator, attended a Listening Hearts program called How to Listen for the Voice of God in the spring of 2019.*