

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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Traversing God's Mysterious Ways

Suzanne Farnham
Founder and Program Director

Every day we make choices that have an impact on other people and on the creation God holds so dear. I was first drawn to the study of discernment because I wanted my choices to be consistent with God's desires for me. I assumed that if I learned the principles of discernment and applied them conscientiously, I would be led to right decisions.

But over time I have come to see with increasing clarity that our comprehension of God's will is always incomplete. An intricate web connects a vast array of people and events, much of it hidden from the human eye. Often things are not as they appear to be, and consequences are not what we expected. God's ways are profoundly mysterious. We can never know how much our actions are aligned with God.

Nevertheless, I can say with confidence that anyone who seriously tries to follow the path of spiritual discernment will grow ever closer to God and will develop ever stronger relationships with people—and ultimately will see God bring forth abundant good out of choices made with a humble, listening heart.

A Prayer for Discernment

Lord God,

We come searching for Your wisdom.

Grant us the ability to be still and listen. [Pause for silence]

We bring our hopes and fears, our expectations and misgivings.

Grant us the courage to trust You. [Pause for silence]

Show us the path; keep us steadfast.

May we keep our eye forever focused on You. [Pause for silence]

Amen

Alice C. Dorrance, a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is coordinator of the newsletter, Explorations, and facilitates a spiritual discernment group at The Church of the Advent, Spartanburg, SC.

Where the Spirit is Free to Lead

John M. Seeley
Baltimore, MD

Over the years I have been part of many Listening Hearts discernment groups, as convener, focus person, and discernment team member. I have mentored Listening Hearts discernment training sessions and participated in group meetings and parish committees where the Listening Hearts guidelines were practiced. Issues have included exploring a call to ordained ministry; how to pursue one's own ministry when one's spouse has been called to move to another state; how to honor marriage, spouse, family, and self in the face of divorce; decisions about church space allocations, the parish profile, a congregation's response to issues like blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of gay clergy; and many other callings and "simple" discernments.

My experience is that discernment groups really do work. To be honest, in the beginning I was skeptical. I didn't really believe that spiritual discernment could work. It goes against common sense. How can a diverse group of individuals discern a call, explore an issue, and come to a resolution without hurting one another? Can individuals really set aside their preconceived ideas and personal biases? Can people really wait quietly and prayerfully to allow the Holy Spirit to stir and inspire them?

The Listening Hearts guidelines establish an atmosphere of honesty, respect, and trust in which love and compassion open our ears, hearts, and minds to the creative power of the Holy Spirit. In the presence of the Spirit, egos, prejudices, and personal agendas can be set aside.

...I am filled with awe and wonder as the group members prayerfully speak and listen to each other and to the silent stirrings of the Holy Spirit moving among and inspiring them.

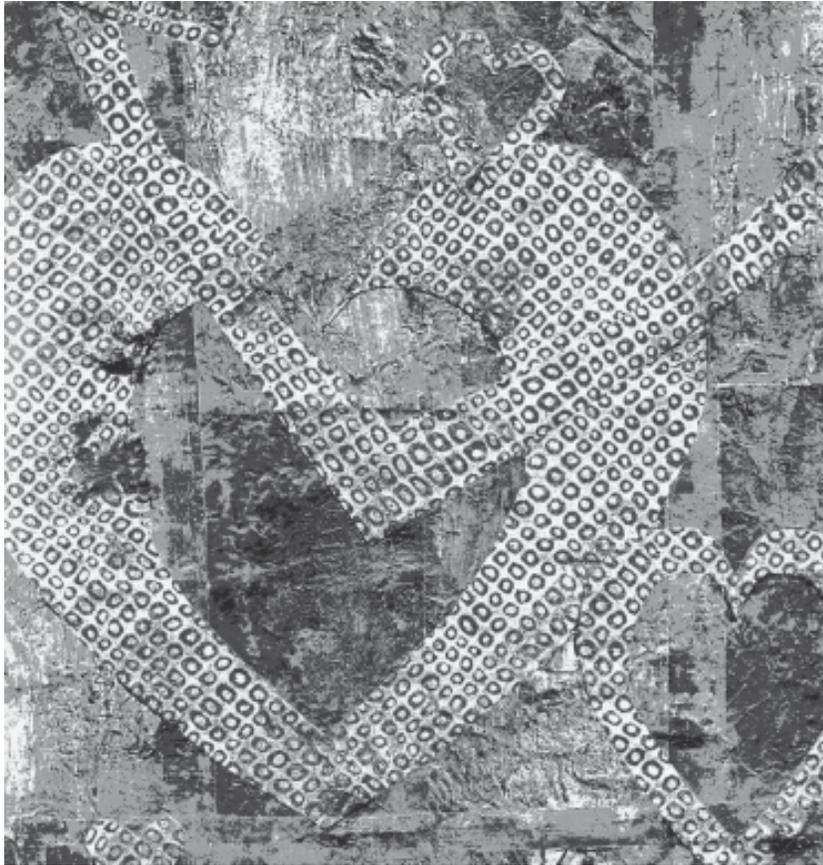
I believe there are two keys to effective discernment, love and prayer. In the context of spiritual discernment, love—the love of God and our love for one another—brings out the necessary compassionate commitment to the common good that draws the individuals together. Love animates, inspires, and supports the group members as they explore the difficult and sometimes painful issues surrounding the questions under discernment. In this atmosphere of love and support, it is almost inevitable that we will be led by the Spirit to a common understanding so that we develop consensus without causing ill will.

Prayer, the second key, is an active expression of our love for others and our faith that God will guide us. Prayer is an invitation that asks the Spirit to join in the conversation. The Spirit is always present. But if we do not issue the invitation for the Spirit to join us in our discernment, we are more likely to ignore her silent, persistent movement and direction. In the company of the Spirit, active listening, open sharing, welcoming silence, willing participation, hopeful anticipation, and gratitude all become part of our prayer. Every laugh or tear, every action taken or not taken, and

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Listening Hearts

C. Robin Janning
Plymouth, Michigan



In silence, beauty and its echo pass around and through the dancer.

This is part of our Listening Hearts Time Retreat. We sit in silence watching by the small light of candles. The dancer is grace-full and she sows that grace like seeds in each of our listening hearts.

At first, we hold the silence tightly in fists of anticipation. The dancer reassures the silence as she moves round and round, passing in and through silence, urging us to listen more deeply. Then, expectation falls from our shoulders.

With each circuit of the dancer, time passes. The story told in this silent passing, wraps around us and we begin to travel with her. Spirit knits it all together—knits us all together.

Our presence supports the dancer and the silence deepens. A profound bonding occurs. We take the light offered by the dancer. With the light we become as shadows moving around the dancer. We feel time moving, we see the path it creates, and all of this . . . in silence.

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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.

The silence of prayerful listening is not so much the absence of talk as it is presence to the Word.

— Listening Hearts, p. 61

Where the Spirit is free... *(continued from page 2)*

every word spoken or left unsaid becomes part of our prayer. The Spirit leads and we follow in discernment.

In a group, you can sense when the Spirit has not been invited in. The silence becomes heavy and stifling. Questions and responses become dull. We shift and squirm, as tomorrow's agenda becomes more real and meaningful than the issues under discernment. This can be an indication that the group has gone as far as it can go in a specific session. It can also mean "wait," "stop," or "no." On the other hand, it can mean that we need to take time to bring the session back to life. Sometimes returning to centering silence or intentionally reissuing an invitation to the Spirit can revive the session. When a group is immersed in God's presence, the Spirit leads the way.

No matter which role I take in any given discernment session, I am filled with awe and wonder as the group members prayerfully speak and listen to each other and to the silent stirrings of the Holy Spirit moving among and inspiring them. Occasions of group discernment can serve as living testimony that the Lord is alive and among us.

John M. Seeley, a sculptor and teacher living in Baltimore, Maryland, has been an active member of the Listening Hearts ministry team at Memorial Church for over ten years.