

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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A Crack at the Right Time

Nancy Holloman-Peede
Alexandria, Virginia

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

----Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music*

I often marvel at God's sense of humor and timing when it comes to holy encounters. Contrary to the grand stories we are taught as children, God meets us more often in quite ordinary ways and routine places. Perhaps God uses these mundane encounters in our lives to remind us that our relationship with the divine encompasses the whole of our lives. This is the kind of relationship God wants to have with us: a deep and intimate relationship even when the trumpets are silent and Magnificats are flat. Especially then, I suppose.

My most memorable encounters with God started with a crack. Nothing dramatic, nothing showy, nothing particularly religious; it was just a crack. At least that was my impression at age six when I first kneeled to look through the crack between the boards on the dock.

Our family's weekend visits to the lake cabin created the landscape for this opening in my life. Not long after arriving at the cabin, we kids would head out in all directions looking for arrowheads, or better yet, buried treasure. It was a great springboard to something deeper, and I must have been looking for something deeper, which may be why I became so drawn to the crack in the dock.

There was something about kneeling down--before nature, before life, before God--that formed in me a path, an opening to the sacred. For hours, I would rest on the sun-baked boards peering through the cracks--into the deep below and within. I seemed to sense that by holding vigil on a crusty old dock I would discover the answers--or at least the questions--to life lived in deep places. A lot became familiar to me as I learned to wait for the unknown to emerge. *I* became familiar. *Life* became familiar. *God* became familiar.

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A Crack At The Right Time *(continued from page 1)*

These early encounters with the divine all started as simply and unassumingly as looking a little closer at an opening below my feet. Could it be that peering into a lake for hours, for years, and knowing more about what lies beneath a crack on a dock on a summer's day in Georgia, than anyone could ever care about knowing becomes *an opening to a world within the routines of life*, where God forms nothing less than a miracle of grace deep within us? I believe.

Isn't it just like God to enter our lives with such lackluster? I am not the first to proclaim the presence of God in the ordinary, but this unexpected-in-the-ordinary divine encounter has been seared so deep within me that I call it my "inner icon." Experience has proved to me that listening for God's voice or discerning God's leading may be a lot closer than we realize *or desire*. And therein lies the rub. Especially then, I believe, God's silent, ineffable, grace is at work.

I continue to carry this internal icon with me, even after 25 years of ministry, as I seek to discern God's leading in my own life and in the life of those who come to me for spiritual direction. Whether a person is discerning God's direction in the big questions of life or in the mundane and routine rhythm of life either will require a person to listen with the heart to the Spirit's nudges and prompting through prayerful silence, patience, and an open spirit. Nothing elaborate. No magical methods. For any ole place is God's place, and discerning those unexpected encounters with God in the mundane moments of our lives will take nothing short of a lifetime devoted to living in deep places!

Nancy Holloman-Peede, Minister for Community Involvement at Westwood Baptist Church in Springfield, VA also serves as a spiritual director and retreat leader.

The Power of Listening

Lisa Curtis
Vienna, Virginia

"We learned... to merely listen or ask questions, and allow the Holy Spirit space and time to work within the individual."

I was going through a major life transition, experiencing great confusion and discomfort, seeking a way out of a dilemma, when my parish offered a book group reading and discussing *Listening Hearts*. In the midst of my personal crisis, I found a new perspective on decisionmaking. I learned that instead of looking for a quick-fix solution, to escape from a painful situation, sometimes it is necessary to stay in the "place our battles are being fought," waiting patiently and hopefully for the Lord to provide the answers.

In our fast-paced lifestyles and results-oriented culture, waiting patiently on God can be a challenge. *Listening Hearts* provides a template for engaging in a serious discernment process that seeks to filter out the myriad outside voices that can distract and mislead us, opening the way for the Spirit to guide us to a place of peace and clarity where we sense that we are following God's will for our lives.

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The Power of Listening *(continued from page 2)*

This past summer I participated in another Listening Hearts opportunity, this time with a group that had been discussing the biblical virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, self-control, faith, hope, and love. Although my spiritual life had always involved personal prayer, reading and meditating on Scripture, and worshiping within a church community, I discovered in these discussions the importance of also interacting within a small group of people of faith who challenge, support, and disciple one another.

Listening Hearts helped us develop our listening skills and provided guidelines to maintain a sense of God's presence during our meetings. We learned that when someone raised an issue that was troubling, perhaps we did not need to provide answers to resolve the issue, but rather to merely listen or ask questions, and to allow the Holy Spirit space and time to work within the individual.

Lisa Curtis, who attends Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, VA, works part time with Senator Lugar and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee handling South Asia issues.

Spiritual Discernment for Decision-Making Groups in the Church

Stephanie Hull
Baltimore, MD

A large part of the church's work takes place in the governing bodies and working committees of congregations. Meetings often open with prayer and/or meditation, include business items and reports, some of which require decisions that need time for discussion and debate, and conclude with prayer. This procedure can produce efficient meetings as well as good decisions and actions. It works well for routine noncontroversial issues if the meeting's agenda is limited. But, what happens when a divisive issue comes up or when the agenda is very long?

Spiritual discernment offers another dimension of great value to decision-making groups. Through constant prayer, fact gathering, silence, sensitivity to signs of the Holy Spirit, listening with the senses, imagination, intuition, and feelings, a group moves toward spiritual consensus. Sometimes spiritual consensus occurs spontaneously, when suddenly out of chaos an answer becomes clear to everyone. More typically, the consensus occurs less dramatically, growing slowly over time.

Achieving consensus can be aided if a group decides to adopt discernment practices and trusts that as the practices are pursued the Holy Spirit will consistently guide the group's deliberations and actions regardless of their difficulty or the press of time. The deliberate practice of spiritual discernment radically changes a group's dynamics. The responsibility of the group is not merely to pose a question and develop a solution; it is to focus prayer around an issue and wait for the direction and clarity that can come through alertness to the Holy Spirit. This practice consciously places God in the driver's seat. Group members simply become diligent antennae. They send out the questions they think are right and then they listen.

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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.



“As we listen to God in prayer and through one another, we grow in Christian community and in our sense of God’s path for us.”

— Listening Hearts, p. 61

Spiritual Discernment for...

Spiritual discernment requires letting go of preconceived notions of how a group should work. Over time, groups that practice spiritual discernment become better at being open to the movement of the Spirit, to hearing God’s voice, and to recognizing the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells the Galatians “...*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” Groups that practice spiritual discernment experience this fruit even in the midst of turmoil. Spiritual discernment makes meeting preparation and participation a conscious act of worship. It enables people to serve the church while simultaneously deepening their relationship to God and one another. Meetings are enlivened through the creative power of the Holy Spirit and a calm confidence that God is in charge. Decisions are made more efficiently. Everyone feels heard. People are energized. The work of church gets done. Participants are nurtured.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. -- Acts 2:12

Stephanie Hull, co-author of Grounded in God and a Senior Program Associate with Listening Hearts Ministries, attends Memorial Church, Baltimore, where she has served as a vestry member and senior warden.