

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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A Prayer for Humility

Suzanne Farnham
Founder and Program Director

Ever-loving God, you see all things, know all that is or ever has been, and perceive reality in its entirety. No human being, or any group of human beings—no matter how educated, experienced, and holy—can comprehend the fullness of your truth.

Help us to grasp this. It is only when we come to acknowledge the gulf between our own limited nature and your infinite nature—and we honor it—that humility will well up within us.

Reluctantly we accept that our own understanding of people, situations, and issues is minuscule next to yours. We slowly come to know that we have to surrender ourselves, our souls, bodies, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and convictions to you. And so we find ourselves ready to plead with you to inform, re-form, and transform us. We realize that we need you to refine our views, though the fire may be hot. We trust your goodness and deep compassion for us and for every living person.

As humility takes hold, we sense that every person, thing, and situation has something to teach us, that it is our sacred obligation to open our eyes and ears and hearts to discover what is ours to learn. Help us, dear God, to listen with compassionate hearts, even to those we do not trust.

These are terrifying times: The church is fractured; our nation is polarized; our world seethes with anger and hostility. You have called us to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). It is our sacred duty to cultivate a culture of humility, where seeds of healing and reconciliation can take root and grow strong.

Gracious God of love and truth, give us hearts that dare to listen, unafraid to trust you, hearts that surge with love. Amen.

I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace—Eph. 4:1-3

Discernment and Human Autonomy

R. Taylor McLean
Baltimore, MD

There is a certain autonomy to creation; the universe pretty well runs itself. The process, the physics and chemistry, are well established, predictable and reliable, at least at a macro level, from bacteria to elephants and from sand to stars. True, at the subatomic level there is an inherent unpredictability and openness, so the future of the universe is not fixed, as in the clockwork model. Nevertheless, the universe, including its life forms, gets along quite well by itself.

And then, within the universe and arising out of its laws, constants, and processes, an animal evolves—you and me—that has the capacity to apprehend and to some extent understand the process itself. Not only that, but we human beings have the ability to fiddle with it all, and so we create flying machines, medicines, and music. We have a certain autonomy. We can manage or mismanage things on our own. We can make value judgments and act on them with a certain freedom.

However, the waters are muddied considerably by the persistent experience of the divine by human beings. Particularly in our own tradition in the last four thousand years or so, beginning with the experience of Abraham, we have the unfolding story of a creator God who reaches out to particular people and who is interested in all that is. The story tells of various human beings who have not only experienced God reaching out to them but who have been given marching orders as well.

“We may ask for God’s guidance; we may ask for God’s light; but we get nowhere as long as we remain at the center, in effect telling God, “This is what we are doing, come along and help us.”

At critical times in the life of the early Church the experience of God’s intervention is recorded and dramatic. For example, in the encounter between Simon Peter, the staunch Jew, and Cornelius and his Roman household a message of universality for the new church comes directly from God. Similarly, Paul’s encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus is another example of God’s direct intervention in the life and being of the new church at a vital time.

By such exceptional and dramatic encounters the course of history has been decisively influenced. The laws of physics and chemistry are not changed. The universe process remains the same. The autonomy and capacities of human beings have not been diminished, but God has reached out with work for his people to do.

For most of us, however, the God who reaches out to us also leaves us to our own devices. Our autonomy, our need to exercise personal judgment and to initiate a course of action are respected. So what is the role of discernment in these more usual cases, when God is not reaching out and shaking us by the shoulders? And here the answer seems to turn on who is at the center. We may ask for God’s guidance; we may ask for God’s light; but we get nowhere as long as we remain at the center, in effect telling God, “This is what we are doing, come along and help us.” Rather, what we are called to do is a radical turning, a *metanoia*, where God is at the center, where we are God’s people. It is this getting of the self out of the center that leads to our becoming God’s fruitful people, able to be about God’s work to the glory of God.

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Discernment and... *(continued from page 2)*

At what point does our legitimate responsibility for exercising personal judgment in responding to God's call slip into a pursuit of our own agenda and we find ourselves praying, "God help us with what we want to do—smooth the way." My experience at our Listening Hearts' trustees meetings has something to say about this tension between an imminent and purposeful God on the one hand and our autonomy and need to exercise our own personal judgment on the other.

Again the key point for us is the same: Who is at the center? Are we in Listening Hearts moving from having ourselves at the center, with our self-assertion and our fears and anxieties for our fragile and often cash-strapped ministry, to having God at the center, where the reference is not "our God" but "God, whose we are." And what a difference it makes who is at the center. Fear and anxiety recede as we come into right relationship. Peace and joy suffuse our work. And remarkably our autonomy, our judgment, our being, when centered in God, seem to blossom along with our particular individualities. God at the center makes all the difference.

So, the question, it turns out, is not how a self-sufficient universe and the special independence and capacities of one of its life forms, human beings, can be reconciled with discernment. Rather, the question is, Who is at the center? When God is at the center and we become listening hearts, grounded in God, the question melts away and we become God's useful and joyful people.

R. Taylor McLean, President of the Board of Trustees and co-author of Listening Hearts and Grounded in God, is an attorney in Baltimore, MD.

Rare Beasts and Coming Home

Meg Kimble
Annapolis, MD

*He is the Way.
Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness;
you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.
He is the Truth.
Seek him in the kingdom of Anxiety:
you will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.
He is the Life.
Love him in the World of the Flesh:
and at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

— W. H. Auden
(Collected Poems: Auden (Vintage, International))

I first heard these words by the poet W. H. Auden at the wedding of dear friends. The occasion was also the first time I was able to be in church after a devastating first round of chemotherapy.

My husband and I had been living with fear, pain, and anxiety since my initial diagnosis, but as I lay rigid on my bed anticipating the next bout of nausea I heard as if spoken aloud, "Be still and know that I am God," and some of the fear and tension began to ease. A few days later, listening to Auden's poem for the first time, I knew I could face the days ahead surrounded and upheld by love.

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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.

And the Lord will guide you continually.
— Isa. 58:11

Rare Beasts and... *(continued from page 3)*

The text is part of a major work, *For the Time Being*, which Auden wrote between 1941 and 1942. He intended it to be part of a Christmas oratorio, with music composed by his friend Benjamin Britten. That work was never completed, though other composers since have been inspired by the fantastic images of the poem. Auden, writing during some of the darkest and most anxious days of World War II quotes from the Gospel of John (14:6) and urges us to “follow him,” “seek him,” and to “love him.” Then, with exceptional poetic language, Auden describes the result of such spiritual discernment: seeking the kingdom of God, the recognition of His presence, and the joy of the Beloved. Auden later wrote about his own renewal of faith that “Christianity is a way, not a state, and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become.” A rare beast indeed.

I have learned that when I can be still and remember that Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life,” the paralyzing darkness of my own kingdom of Anxiety recedes. I can begin to see and appreciate the sometimes comical “rare beasts” and even appreciate the adventure that sometimes feels more like riding an enormous, terrifying roller coaster. A few months ago, when I knew that I was going to have to leave a ministry and a community that I dearly loved and that was comfortably familiar, I lived again in that anxious place; but almost from the first I knew to wait in prayer, listening with an open heart and mind. Now I find myself part of the Listening Hearts Ministries, blessed to have come to a place that seems to have been expecting me. I am looking forward to the adventure and joy of being a part of this ministry that intentionally listens for the voice of God and whose mission is to teach the practice of spiritual discernment.

Meg Kimble, Executive Assistant to the Program Director and Trustees of Listening Hearts Ministries, also serves as Coordinator of Education for Ministry for the Diocese of Maryland.