

EXPLORATIONS



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My Experience with Prayerful Listening

**Frances Sullinger
 Centreville, VA**

Some years ago, when I was elected to serve on my parish vestry, I found a contentious group vying to impose their views, certainly not making a spiritual experience out of their deliberations. Not having been aware of the atmosphere prior to joining the vestry, I was thoroughly taken aback. In response I took it upon myself to introduce the group to the Listening Hearts Discernment Listening Guidelines. I was delighted to find that these guidelines quickly changed the dynamics of the meetings. Almost immediately members of the group became more courteous to one another and began to respect each other's ideas. Soon we were acting like a discerning body, open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our deliberations. We grew closer to God and one another while the church benefited from the Spirit-led work of this governing board.

We learned to not interrupt the person speaking, to refrain from challenging what others were saying, and to listen to the group as a whole, even those who had not spoken aloud. The hardest and most important guideline was to hold lightly our own preconceived desires and opinions, as in open hands. As we might say in my native Texas, "Get off the horse that you rode in on." Leave it outside while seeking spiritual discernment.

DISCERNMENT LISTENING



*The Goal of
 Spiritual Discernment
 is to receive
 God's Guidance.*

► *Guidelines*

1. Take time to become settled in God's presence.
2. Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, imagination, and rational faculties).
3. Do not interrupt.
4. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
6. Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experiences. Avoid being hypothetical. Steer away from broad generalizations.
7. Do not challenge what others say.
8. Listen to the group as a whole — to those who have not spoken aloud as well as to those who have.
9. Generally, leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time yourself.
10. Hold your desires and opinions — even your convictions — lightly.

From *Grounded in God*, Revised edition
 Farnham, Hull, and McLean
 Morehouse Publishing

(Continued)

Subsequently, I led a number of vestry retreats for other churches. Suspecting that the vestry members might be satisfied with the way they were conducting business, I was skeptical that they would be open to the discernment approach to doing church business. Yet, time after time I saw staid fiduciary thought turn into joyous spiritual striving to discern God's will in their work. One vestry posted the ten Listening Guidelines in the room where most committees met. I recently checked and found out that after ten years the poster is still there!

Another group that I recently led in Guided Discernment, via Zoom, let me know that they are continuing to work with their congregation through a transition and continuing to use the guidelines.

When I served on a Search Committee to select a new rector for our parish, we asked Stephanie Hull, one of the authors of *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, to spend a day with our members, some of whom had never heard of Listening Hearts. It was a wonderful time. We immediately redubbed ourselves "the Discernment Committee" rather than the Search Committee. We listened "with our entire selves" to each other and to members of our congregation, as well as to candidates and their families. The result was welcomed by the entire congregation. As we discerned whom God was calling to be our spiritual leader, that candidate was also listening as God called him to us.

Open listening is also of prime importance in personal relationships, in everyday conversation, but especially when gathering with a group to discern a path forward. Here are the Discernment Listening Guidelines, printed as Appendix 1 of *Grounded in God*:

1. Take time to become settled in God's presence.
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3. Do not interrupt.
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10. Hold your desires and opinions—even your convictions—lightly.

The guidelines are also available for free download from the website www.listeninghearts.org, or if you would like to purchase a laminated copy (as pictured on page one), please contact the Listening Hearts office at listening@listeninghearts.org.

May we all live in the spirit of St. Benedict, who bids us to listen with the ear of our heart.

Frances Sullinger is one of two Executive Program Associates for Listening Hearts and is also a Trustee. A retired foreign service officer, she lives in Virginia near her daughter and grandchildren.

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and for those who made in-kind contributions in 2021.*

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What Does it Mean to Truly Listen?

**Susan Heath
New York, NY**

When I was a child and misbehaved badly, my father would launch into a scolding. I quickly learned how to shut my ears and pretend I wasn't there. Exasperated, my father would blare, "How Many Times Do I Have to Tell You Not to . . . ?" To which my response eventually became, "Three times, Daddy. It always takes me three times, so I can figure out what to say."

Over the years, I've found that I still shut my ears when someone is saying something that causes me discomfort or consternation. And while my ears are shut, my stomach clenched and heart constricted, my mind starts spinning a response to override the mounting tension. It's no wonder that I have found the Listening Guideline "Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking" challenging—so challenging that it has invited me to explore and begin to understand what it means to truly listen.



Photo by @stellabella @Twenty20 Stock Images.

I've discovered, oddly enough, that truly listening begins with learning to settle into silence, for silence is the first language of God. In it we can come to know ourselves and see ourselves as God sees us. In silence we can begin to accept ourselves just as we are, with no need to prove ourselves by speaking. Breathing in God's breath, centering ourselves in God's faithful presence, we are able to become still and allow our minds to descend to our hearts, where we can let go of the felt pressure to break the silence with our thoughts. Breathing in God's breath, we are able to enter into the quiet receptivity of God's love and guidance and the working of His Holy Spirit within us.

. . . for silence is the first language of God. In it we can come to know ourselves and see ourselves as God sees us. In silence we can begin to accept ourselves just as we are, with no need to prove ourselves by speaking.

Once grounded in God's presence, we are able to become open and receptive to what is. We listen to another with our rational capabilities as we hear the who, what, when, and where of their story. With soft eyes we observe body language—posture, gestures, eye movements—for messages about how a person is feeling about what they are saying. More deeply, and more mysteriously, we listen with our whole selves for the how and why—for the meaning and revelation—of what someone is saying. We open our full being to receive images, words, or symbols in our mind's eye that point to the truth.

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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.

*Silence creates space for us
to get in touch with God at our center.
— Keeping in Tune with God, p. 41*

We notice sensations in our own bodies, as our intuition guides us to a deeper knowing, a knowing beyond and above that which we receive through our senses and rational thought processes. We open our listening heart fully so that we are free to receive, welcome, and accept the speaking heart of another.

Listening. Just listening with an open mind and open heart, without judging or trying to fix someone; allowing someone to breathe freely and speak the truth is gift. It is a gift of more than presence. It is an act of holy acceptance and witness to the truth of another, a way of fully seeing and coming to know another.

Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said we are to love our neighbors as ourselves?

Susan Heath is a trained Senior Program Associate for Listening Hearts Ministries. She lives in New York and is an active lay eucharistic minister/visitor, healing prayer minister, and lay pastoral caregiver with St. Michael's Church. She also serves on the Episcopal Diocese of New York Commission on Ministry (COM), and she is a Diocesan Spiritual Discernment Facilitator.