

EXPLORATIONS



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Entering the Flow of the Spirit

**The Rev. Susan Marie Smith, PhD
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Recently married in Anchorage, Alaska in the 1980s, I was grateful to find a sanctuary at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church. At coffee one Wednesday morning after the early Eucharist, I sat next to a new gal, Brittany. “Isn’t this wonderful?!” she exuded. “Starting the day with Holy Communion is just the best.” I agreed. “Where do you go from here?” I asked. She identified her workplace, then described not her job but her true passion. “I’m the only Christian there,” she explained. “So I pray for everyone. We have offices on two floors, and I pray for each one each day.”

My critical brain wondered, How does she know she’s the only Christian? Then, If I had decided to start a prayer ministry, would I announce it to a stranger?

Brittany continued, “But the best thing happened, Sue! They hired another Christian! And she’s on the second floor. So we get together every day, and she prays for the second floor and I pray for the folks on my floor. God is so good!”

Many Episcopalians have inherited a bit of British reserve when it comes to sharing faith or feelings. I learned as a child to avoid “God-talk” as inappropriate in social settings. I was really uncomfortable listening to Brittany. But then I asked myself, Have I ever intentionally prayed for everyone in my workplace? We are clearly called to pray for others. Perhaps if I had a prayer partner, like Brittany, with whom to talk about this ministry, I might be less self-conscious about using God’s name or talking about prayer, even at work. I began to wonder why it seemed a social norm to keep God a shared secret, not to be overtly mentioned.

Everything changed, however, on one traumatic day soon after I met Brittany. My husband and I were in the car north of Anchorage on an empty road headed out to see an historic gold mine. He started yelling and threatening, as had often happened. I told him to stop the car, and I got out. I started walking. He drove on.

I crossed the street to head back to what meager civilization there was, miles and miles away, no water bottle, my mind swirling, my heart praying desperately. So vulnerable!!

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Eventually, he drove back beside me and asked me to get in. I walked around to the driver's side and we had a conversation. I was calm, clear, limit-setting, insistent. He became calmer. I got back in the car and we headed home. After a few moments, he turned toward me and asked, "How did you do that?"

"What?" I asked.

"I said terrible things to you. It was awful. But when I came back, you didn't yell back at me. You were firm but kind and loving. How did you do that?"

It took me a few minutes to process what he was admitting, and what he was asking. In his growing up, apparently meanness engendered more meanness. My response had been honest about what had happened, but also acknowledging of the core of goodness, God-ness, that we know abides in each of us. How *did* I do that?? The answer was immediately clear to me. *I had not been able to do such a thing. It was a gift of the Holy Spirit. And to claim credit for something so much larger than myself would have been wrong and untrue. And so, I found myself speaking God-talk for the first time in my life. "I was not able to do that," I admitted. "It was the Holy One who enabled me to respond in that way."*

Simple. True. Easy, even. And it didn't seem the least inappropriate. I realized that in my past life, the social norm against overtly giving God credit had led to an unexpected, unfortunate consequence: my hiding the Light under a bushel. What Brittany was doing and sharing now seemed the most normal and honest kind of conversation.

I had read the first Listening Hearts book and decided to try out the appendix guidelines for the functioning of a discernment group developed from the Quaker Clearness Committee model. I invited two contemplative friends who were willing to spend an afternoon with me. One read the steps and led us through the process. The silence was deep; the questions profound. By the end, I clearly knew what I had to do. Wow. This was a completely different way of praying for and with others. We were all honestly, unselfconsciously seeking the Spirit's guidance, together.

Still, I was glad, years later, to find a way to be overt about my relationship with and reliance on God without having to bear my feelings on my sleeve. It was in grad school when I had a hard decision to make and needed spiritual help. I had read the first *Listening Hearts* book and decided to try out the appendix guidelines for the functioning of a discernment group developed from the Quaker Clearness Committee model. I invited two contemplative friends who were willing to spend an afternoon with me. One read the steps and led us through the process. The silence was deep; the questions profound. By the end, I clearly knew what I had to do. Wow. This was a completely different way of praying for and with others. We were all honestly, unselfconsciously seeking the Spirit's guidance, together.

It was twenty more years before I, by then a priest, registered some parishioners and myself for a Listening Hearts training workshop. We took turns in the roles of focus person, discerner, convenor, and observer. Finally! It seemed obvious why we are members of the Body of Christ—to listen together for the Spirit, so that we can each be closer, deeper followers, guided by the Holy One. Witnessing the Spirit's care and wisdom was deeply moving. I consider the Listening Hearts communal discernment process to be one of the best things going in the Episcopal Church.

And it's available for everyone. I would make Listening Hearts part of Confirmation preparation so that those confirming their own promises and their openness to the Holy Spirit would have an intentional way to engage with others in their faith community and to pray for each other and to listen.

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I'm still not inclined to throw the name of God around in casual conversation. But I experience a line in one of Rumi's poems as utterly true: "Not for a second has this flowing toward me stopped nor slowed."¹ The Flow of the Spirit swirls within and around each and all. Is it not our goal to perceive it, honor it, lean into it, engage it, flow with it? And do we not want others to experience it also? Augustine spoke of preaching as the finger pointing to the moon (the Holy One). But are not all our selves, our lives, intended to become pointers to God? Should the Center of our Being—what we see and experience, appreciate and count on, trust in and hope for—really be unmentionable? If we, who profess to live in and for this Flowing, decline to give it its true name, how will others come to recognize this Holy Flow (Romans 10:14)? Spiritual discernment is one way to call upon God's name together. May it grow.

The Rev. Susan Marie Smith earned her Ph.D. in liturgy, preaching, and ritual from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, in 1980. In 2018, she completed The Art of Teaching Spiritual Discernment program with Listening Hearts. Her books are Christian Ritualizing and the Baptismal Process and Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual. After a seminary teaching stint and leading two Episcopal parishes, she has retired to Cincinnati, OH, where she is active in guiding lives of discernment and prayer and participates in environmental activism.

¹ For 60 years I have been forgetful every minute: / But not for a second has this flowing toward me stopped nor slowed. I deserve nothing. Today I realized, I am the guest the mystics speak of. / I play this living music for my host. Everything today is for the host. / Everything today is for the host. – Rumi

My Prayer

**Patricia M.C. Brown, Trustee
Severna Park, MD**

"Yahweh, my heart is not haughty, I do not set my sights too high. I have taken no part in great affairs, in wonders beyond my scope. No, I hold myself in quiet and silence, like a little child in its mother's arms, like a little child, so I keep myself. Let Israel hope in Yahweh henceforth and for ever." – Psalm 131 (NJB)

I do not remember specifically when this became "my prayer". . . sometime in my twenties, I am sure. Nor do I recall how I even knew about Psalm 131, not being a Bible reader in any true sense, although a regular attendee at my local Catholic church.

So why this prayer, for this twenty-something seeker of understanding—a stress-ball of sorts—aghast at the pain in the world while still trying to find her own path in the life she had been given? How was I to live in a world with such pain, injustice? What was my role? What was *I to do*? Psalm 131: a "song of trust." Trust in God. That was the prayer; that is what I held on to.

Later, in my thirties, another "prayer" came my way, through the reading of a book that would change my life on every level. In seeking, in whatever form, through whatever question, I recognized the act of discernment—to "separate," to "distinguish," to "sort out." But *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* gave me an insight I had yet to fully understand: that my seeking was a personal, intentional, desire to talk to God, to hear God, to converse with God—and to respond to God. "God often speaks through signs"—peace, joy, tears, convergence, persistence, and clarity. *Listening Hearts, 30th Anniversary Edition, pp. 39-40.*

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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.

It is in the here and now, the ordinary situation of normal life, that we find God.
— *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 30th Anniversary Edition, p. 33*

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And then, recently, my husband shared with me a new prayer, one written by the short-story writer Flannery O'Connor, while she was in *her* twenties, and published in 2013 in *A Prayer Journal*. O'Connor wrote: "[D]ear God please give me some place, no matter how small, but let me know it and keep it. If I am the one to wash the second step every day, let me know it and let me wash it and let my heart overflow with love washing it." Washing the second step. Think of the image, kneeling with soap, water, and a brush, scrubbing back and forth, in peace and with clarity. O'Connor's prayer—a prayer of discernment, listening, and trust—resonates. *"My heart is not haughty, I do not set my sights too high."*

Now in my sixties, I write in gratitude for the road walked, for the insights provided along the way, and for the abundance of love given and received over the years. As if to come full circle, recently my stepdaughter Mallory sent me a video version of Psalm 131—out of the blue. I do not know why she did this—perhaps only to share that she was then praying the prayer, with our eight-month-old granddaughter in her arms: *"...like a little child in its mother's arms, like a little child, so I keep myself."*

Patty Brown is a member of the Listening Hearts Board of Trustees, the wife of Listening Hearts co-author Joe Gill, and a self-proclaimed lifelong discerner of God's call in her life as daughter, sister, wife, stepmother, and healthcare executive.