

## EXPLORATIONS

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**We Are All Related****Laura McConnell, Listening Hearts Office Manager****Baltimore, MD**

As a longtime member of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, I have played a role over some years in the Baltimore Dakota Learning Camp Partnership (BDLC), building relationships with Native American friends and partners in Granite Falls, Minnesota. I always treasure the opportunity to travel out there to help run a summer education camp for the children and youth of the Upper Sioux Community, about two hours west of Minneapolis. It is a spiritually restorative experience, and it is always good to reconnect with our friends there. Baltimore Presbyterian children and youth also participate this camp, and adult members of Baltimore Presbyterian churches travel out there to help lead it.

As you might know, many Native Americans are also Christian, practicing their faith as Christian Missionaries taught them to do more than a century ago. One of our partner-leaders and a good friend in the Baltimore/Dakota Presbytery Partnership is Rev. Fern Cloud, pastor of Pejuhutazizi Presbyterian Church, located in the Upper Sioux Community. This church is just across the highway from the Upper Sioux Community Center where we hold the annual summer camp.

“Mitakuye Owasin”<sup>1</sup> is a Dakota term that means “we are all related,” or literally, “all my relatives.” This is something Native Americans believe, and it includes not only human beings, but all living creatures on earth (“four-leggeds,” as they are often referred to in Native books, as we humans are “two-leggeds”), and all of creation including Mother Earth herself. These words, I think, are important to keep close in your heart and mind during these times and a philosophy to pass on to our future generations. So, care for the earth and care for each other is care for ALL of creation, the “Circle of Life,” which is also central in Native American beliefs.

The care of creation and all of humanity is very important to our Dakota friends, and they like other closely-related tribes, strive to follow twelve virtues described in detail in the stories told by Rosebud Sioux and Lakota author, historian, and actor Joseph Marshall III. Sadly, Joseph died this past April. He was considered a great storyteller and tribal elder, and his stories live on in his many books, two of which the BDLC partnership uses to teach us about Native and Dakota/Lakota culture and values, *The Lakota Way* and *Returning to the Lakota Way*.

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I highly recommend these books if you are interested in learning more about Native and Dakota/Lakota culture and spirituality, and in general to strive to be a more humble, honest, and generous person. There is so much that's valuable to learn from our Native friends!

As I have read these books a few times over the years, I see some parallels in our Listening Hearts principles to the twelve Native American virtues. The Native virtues are: Humility, Perseverance, Respect, Honor, Love, Sacrifice, Truth, Compassion, Bravery, Fortitude, Generosity, and Wisdom. Limited space won't allow me to share stories for all twelve of these here, but I will mention a couple of them.

If you have ever studied Native American art and culture, you may have noticed a highly-revered animal figure depicted there: the White Buffalo Calf Maiden. The story goes that she appeared in a white mist one evening to two young hunters who were not having success during a time of great hardship for their people. The one young man, brash and arrogant, tried to take advantage of the maiden, and was destroyed. The other, showing humility, was spared and given instructions for using humility as an instrument for good for his village. Many great Native American leaders, including Crazy Horse, were considered humble and revered for their humility, despite accomplishing many impressive feats in battle and in other aspects of their lives. It was as if God (or as Crazy Horse may have believed, the Great Spirit) favored him and many other leaders like him for helping others without asking for accolades. If only some of our political leaders of today could learn and practice this virtue, along with many of the others!

The Listening Hearts *Primer on Spiritual Discernment*, devotes Topic 10 to Humility. Listening Hearts uses this *Primer* for many of our programs, and it is available for free download from the Listening Hearts website, <https://listeninghearts.org/resources/a-primer-on-spiritual-discernment/>. The *Primer* is a good synopsis of topics taken from our flagship Listening Hearts 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary book and from our *Keeping in Tune with God* book which was written primarily for clergy. I'll quote the Humility chapter directly: "Humility derives from being tuned in to the source of all creation, living in close relationship with the Giver of all gifts. Experiencing God's greatness reveals our own smallness. God alone sees all that is, visible and invisible—past, present, and into the future. People who put their trust in God's wisdom and goodness develop solid confidence that is not self-confidence; it is confidence in God. Humility is a strong, life-giving quality that comes in those who live in the flow of the Spirit. A person who is humble realizes his or her need for God and other people."

Our Native American friends also value time for silence, meditation, and contemplative prayer. A practice that we make time for at the beginning of our camp day is a prayer circle with burning sage, known as smudging. Rev. Fern Cloud goes to each person in the circle with the burning sage, and when it is our turn we each "bathe" ourselves in the smoke from the burning sage, while lifting up silent prayers for the day. Our Native friends believe the sage smoke even has disinfecting properties. It is a good way to center ourselves to prepare for our camp day.

The Listening Hearts *Spiritual Primer* Topic 3, is devoted to Centering Silence. I'll quote it now: "Centering silence is fundamental to the contemplative life in every major spiritual tradition. It involves being anchored to the center of your being and at the same time fully open to the invisible Spirit of Love and Truth. It is an immersion in the Divine Presence." Group meetings in a circle around a topic of discernment are a fundamental practice with Listening Hearts.

It is interesting to draw parallels between our Native friends' spirituality and our Christian traditions. We make the space and time for contemplation, silence, community, and connection. Listening Hearts does this very well. Our Native relations also do this very well. After all, mitakuye owasin! For some more information about Native culture, contact me at the Listening Hearts office, at [listening@listeninghearts.org](mailto:listening@listeninghearts.org).

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*Laura McConnell has been the Office Manager for Listening Hearts for about 10 years. She is a 25-year member of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, and was raised in Presbyterian and United Church of Christ traditions. Hailing originally from the Washington, D.C. area, she earned her B.A. from Hood College and a Master's in Publication Design from the University of Baltimore. She believes in making time and space for a faith practice and encourages others to do the same.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Voices of Pejuhutazizi: Dakota Stories and Storytellers*, Teresa Peterson and Walter LaBatte, Jr. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2022, p. 191, Glossary of Dakota terms.

## **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 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.

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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.

*Listening Hearts provides a modern gateway to understanding age-old insights. Call, discernment, and community are explored in practical terms, aiding individuals who seek to hear and understand God's call in their lives.*

*– Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations, p. 103*

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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 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.

*This article originally appeared in the Winter 2007 issue of Explorations. John M. Seeley, now retired from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, is a full time sculptor. He serves as a Verger and lay leader at Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore.*