

# EXPLORATIONS



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#### Inside this Issue

##### *Let's Truly Listen*

Suzanne Farnham and  
Frances Sullinger

##### *Graced Moments*

Larry Ehren

##### *When the going Gets Tough...*

Katrina Kenison

## Let's Truly Listen

**Suzanne Farnham, Founder, Baltimore, MD**  
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A deep yearning for peace and unity persists amid the turmoil of a world divided by conflict and opposing interests. To assuage that intense longing, we must seek common ground, which can be achieved through respectful listening.

Although there is no quick fix, each of us can make a sincere effort to bring about a culture that encourages a more harmonious social order. When we truly listen to one another, we begin to break down barriers of hard judgment among friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues.

Toward this end, we have recast the Listening Hearts Discernment Listening Guidelines (designed for group deliberations) into seven simple steps to help us truly listen in our daily lives:

1. Relax and totally let down your defenses so you can fully receive what the speaker is saying.
2. Listen with your eyes, your ears, and your entire self.
3. Before responding, take a moment to absorb what the person has said.
4. Refrain from interrupting.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while the other person is speaking.
6. Ask thoughtful questions to deepen your understanding of what has been said.
7. Perhaps invite the person to say something about their life experience that has informed what they are saying.

The Discernment Listening Guidelines from which these seven steps were derived first appeared in our book *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. They can be downloaded from the Listening Hearts website [www.listeninghearts.org](http://www.listeninghearts.org). These guidelines have informed all aspects of our work with congregations, dioceses, governing groups, committees, and commissions. They are fundamental to our leader training and have been key to spiritual conflict resolution.

We of Listening Hearts commit ourselves to sharing the resources we have developed, products of more than thirty years of teaching the art of deep listening. We seek to share them beyond our current audience, to engage people of good will wherever they are and wherever they may be in their life journeys.

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People who hold different values may never agree with each other, but we can come to appreciate one another's points of view and deep-seated desires. All of us yearn to be understood.

*...let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. — James 1:19*

*Suzanne Farnham, an Executive Senior Program Associate, is the founder of Listening Hearts Ministries, coauthor of the Listening Hearts series of books, the original architect of the Listening Hearts programs, and serves on the Board of Trustees. She has been leading programs from coast to coast for close to thirty years.*

*Frances Sullinger, also an Executive Senior Program Associate, was trained in Listening Hearts discernment in 1990, then as a trainer in 2001. She is also an active Listening Hearts trustee. Frances took a lead in developing the Community Discernment of Calls to Ministry program and is active in the Church at both the parish and diocesan levels. Her background includes teaching at the university level as well as facilitating professional seminars as a foreign service officer with the State Department.*

## Graced Moments

**Larry Ehren  
Overland Park, KS**

It is always a joy when new things emerge that you did not anticipate. One might call these surprise experiences synchronicity; others might refer to them as “graced moments.”

Last spring, I participated in a week-long training with Listening Hearts Ministries. The focus of the week was to learn how to discern God's call in community. The Listening Hearts model for group discernment is a unique blend of Quaker, Ignatian, and Benedictine spiritualities. While the background and process of communal discernment are clearly outlined in the book, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, the experience of practicing discernment in a cohort of fellow pilgrims is the best way to learn this mode of decision making. Each participant brings to the training a real-life issue for discernment. This practice of spiritual discernment concerning an issue in your life incorporates prayer, deep listening to others, silence, sharing personal aspects of life in a safe environment, gradually building trust, having the best interest of one another, and being committed to the process. Discernment needs to be experienced to be integrated into one's heart and life. At the end of the time together, not only did I experience the reality of a community of faith, but I also had a sense of empowerment to train others.

I have experienced communal discernment in the past, while I was a member of the Jesuit religious order in my twenties and during my doctoral coursework in Christian spirituality at Virginia Theological Seminary. Participating in discernment with a wide variety of people who did not know one another before our week of training produced surprising results. We represented very different lifestyles, ages, professions, backgrounds, and regions of the country, and yet we journeyed well with one another.

I find I can use the Listening Hearts model in several ways in my work in the Episcopal Church. It is being incorporated into the ministry discernment process that my diocese uses for lay licensed ministries and ordained ministries. Listening Hearts methods are being added to the adult catechumenate ministry, which is to assist newly baptized, confirmed, or received adults in discerning how they will use their gifts in ministry. Currently, I am using the discernment model found in Listening Hearts' second book, *Grounded in God*, to assist an ecumenical group in determining their future.

I consider the week of learning and practicing spiritual discernment with Listening Hearts as a series of graced moments. Graced moments, I believe, are very real experiences during which you are touched by God, and after which you are really never the same. They can be strong or rather subtle. Within yourself, you may feel one or more signs of God's Spirit: a sense of joy, a feeling of new life and delight that is not fleeting, a peace that is deep and lasting, or a sense of being connected to other people or something larger than yourself. These sacred moments can be small or big, in solitude or in community, in formal prayer or in everyday life. You may notice them in the moment or upon reflection of the past. Most important, you have an inner sense that they are pure gifts that you did not create yourself. In one sense they are unsettling, because they have the ability to transform you, which can feel frightening and energizing at the same time.

I am deeply struck by my recent discovery that the Listening Hearts discernment model can be implemented in a number of pastoral applications in my life. Eureka!

Indeed, these have been Graced moments.

*Larry Ehren, Episcopal priest at Saint Mary Magdalene Episcopal Church in West Missouri, is a faculty member of the Bishop Kemper School for Ministry and a catechist for Baptized for Life, a discipleship ministry initiative in the Episcopal Church.*

## **When the Going Gets Tough...**

**Katrina Kenison  
New Hampshire**

When the going gets tough may I resist my first impulse to wade in, fix, explain, resolve, and restore.

May I sit down instead.

When the going gets tough may I be quiet.

May I steep for a while in stillness.

When the going gets tough may I have faith that things are unfolding as they are meant to.

May I remember that my life is what it is, not what I ask for.

May I find the strength to bear it, the grace to accept it, the faith to embrace it.

When the going gets tough may I practice with what I'm given, rather than wish for something else.

When the going gets tough may I assume nothing.

May I not take it personally.

May I opt for trust over doubt, compassion over suspicion, vulnerability over vengeance.

When the going gets tough may I open my heart before I open my mouth.

When the going gets tough may I be the first to apologize.

May I leave it at that.

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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.

*“We need to listen with our bodies as well as with our minds, for God speaks to us through our pains and pleasures, through our wills, emotions, and senses. To hear, we must listen with every fiber of our being.”*

*— Listening Hearts, p. 27*

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May I bend with all my being toward forgiveness.

When the going gets tough may I look for a door to step through rather than a wall to hide behind.

When the going gets tough may I turn my gaze up to the sky above my head, rather than down to the mess at my feet.

May I count my blessings.

When the going gets tough may I pause, reach out a hand, and make the way easier for someone else.

When the going gets tough may I remember that I’m not alone.

May I be kind.

When the going gets tough may I choose love over fear.

Every time.

*Katrina’s poem was sent to Listening Hearts by a Listening Hearts program participant, Dr. Mary Chandler Bolin, in May 2020. Katrina Kenison is a spiritual author of several books, and a former literary editor at Houghton Mifflin publishers. She is the subject of a recent podcast: “A Way to Garden.” She lives with her family in rural New Hampshire. Her blog can be found at [www.katrinakenison.com](http://www.katrinakenison.com)*