

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

VOLUME 18 NUMBER 2

Spring 2008



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Doing the Little Things

Meg Kimble
Annapolis, MD

It was hard to find the time and quiet I thought I needed for prayer when I had two small children demanding attention. One evening, while standing at the sink full of pots and pans, I was struck by the sudden quiet in the room. Everyone had found something else to do, leaving me alone with the dishes. Instead of grumbling or feeling resentful, I relished the calm of the moment and found myself praying. Not about anything urgent or life changing, my prayers were full of praise and thanksgiving while I went about the routine tasks. Instead of being tired or irritable after washing the dishes, I was refreshed. Since that evening I have placed a candle, a pot of herbs, and a cross on the windowsill over my kitchen sink. I think of it as my Martha corner. I have a Mary corner too, but it is not in the kitchen.

Several years later I read Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God* and remembered my kitchen moment as I read about his holy life. Despite having "a great aversion" to working in the monastery kitchen, Brother Lawrence was assigned there for fifteen years. A Carmelite kitchen brother of the seventeenth century who lived his life as prayer, this simple holy man found that "the thing that brought him joy was to do the little things for the love of God."¹ Brother Lawrence helped me to see that there is room in my prayer life for both the quiet contemplative prayer and the prayer that happens while I do the seemingly little things.

A dear friend of mine prays as she gardens, another while he plays the piano. My husband prays during his morning run. For me, cooking is a time of thanksgiving and prayer. Whatever our normal routine, whatever duties we face, we can approach each task prayerfully knowing that in the ordinary things of daily life we can encounter God.

¹ *Listening Hearts*, p. 139.

Following the Spirit into Imagery

**John Seeley
Baltimore, MD**

When we actively engage in communal discernment and follow the meanderings of the Spirit, the images we see, the sounds we hear, the intuitive thoughts we have, as well as our individual and collective experiences, enrich the discernment process. [*Grounded in God* discusses how tapping into the imagination enhances a group discernment process.]

One discernment group I participated in was working with a focus person (the one seeking discernment) who was a carpenter. The Spirit moved one of us to ask him the question “If you were a tool, what kind of tool would you be?” After a few moments of reflection, he responded, “I am a hammer.” We asked him what kind of hammer he was. He said, “I am a sledge hammer.” What does he do as a sledge hammer? “I break things, smash things, and tear things apart.” What kind of hammer would he choose if he could be another kind of hammer? He said, “A claw hammer.” Asked what a claw hammer does, he responded, “A claw hammer is used to drive nails, nail boards together, and build something.” What are you building? “I am building a comfortable, safe, warm place of refuge.” He said he wanted to be the claw hammer but felt more like the sledge hammer. Further questions helped him reflect on what he had to do to become the claw hammer in the context of the matter under discernment. Through continued prayer and reflection, he came to experience himself more as a claw hammer constructing a safe place of refuge.

By following the Spirit into the imagery from the focus person’s daily life, the group avoided the ever-present trap of problem solving and helped him see the issue under discernment in a new light.

As a carpenter, the focus person used tools in his work. He could relate to their use and could follow the analogous relationship to the issue under discernment. By encouraging him to imagine himself as a tool, the group offered him a way to explore the matter under discernment through his daily experience. As written out above, the questions and responses seem like sure, rapid shots from a nail gun. In reality, they were more like tentative taps with a tack hammer. Each of the questions and responses was framed with reflective silence and deep listening.

Over several sessions the group returned to the imagery of tools, their use and purpose, and how the image could illuminate the issue. Usually the focus person would first raise the negative attributes of a specific tool and then, through careful questioning by the group, would explore the positive qualities. The group was not concerned that the negative qualities surfaced first. We recognized that these negative attributes were related to the difficulties the focus person was facing in his daily life and the challenges he encountered in dealing with the issue. Had he bypassed the difficulties and immediately latched onto the positive qualities of the tools, we would have been concerned.

The group was willing to enter into the images from the focus person’s life. We helped him imagine himself as part of the image. Through our careful questioning we helped him experience the negative aspects and encouraged him to reflect on the positive qualities of the vision. By following the Spirit into the imagery from the focus person’s daily life, the group avoided the ever-present trap of problem solving and helped him see the issue under discernment in a new light.

John Seeley is a sculptor and teacher in Baltimore, MD

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*Thank you to the many friends who share in the work of
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A Week in Heaven

Judith A. Bowers
Vienna, VA

A week in heaven – that’s how I describe my week with several men and women learning to be Listening Hearts trainers in April 2007. I had experienced heaven in bits and pieces before but never in a long, sustained way, and not with people I had not known before.

Strangers to each other at first, we moved toward a deep and lasting bond in a way that was out of and beyond time. We were enabled to do this in great part by the session design, with its physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions. Each of us had the chance to share, to observe, to reflect, in a variety of ways. The physical activities, as well as the six discernment sessions, our daily worship times, and reflections on what we were learning, let us be honest, vulnerable, and open in a very short time. The closeness and sharing did not feel false or contrived, either.

As one who usually lives in the head and heart only, I found that the physical activities opened me up. Working with clay, drawing, using body movement, all felt awkward and uncomfortable, initially. It helped that each of us was going through these exercises at the same time. Gradually, doing them became more comfortable and proved rewarding.

Feelings and thoughts seemed to surface freely, for each of us. In no way forced to feel or say anything, we shared what we felt and thought. Tears were common. During our mealtimes, our playful sides often emerged; we laughed a lot. We were creative, funny, joyful, tearful, playful, deep. I thought, if the world could know this, experience this, we would truly live in peace.

Strangers to each other at first, we moved toward a deep and lasting bond in a way that was out of and beyond time.

Visual imagery was an especially powerful part of the week for me. Images often come to me during discernment sessions in my home church and in my life in general. During our week, images flowed to me during reflection, the physical activities, and the discernment sessions. They were especially plentiful during the session in which I was the focus person. The three discerners’ intense and prayerful listening, questions, and reflections helped me think with the inner eye. The prayerful presence of the observers also enriched the session for me.

The visual images culminated when I saw my writing talent (which I had often neglected and rejected during my life) buried in a field with the earth surrounding it, in an open grave. The silver talent lay there, a heavy gleaming block. Then, suddenly, it was lifted up and set down beside me on the couch, to my left. This shining silver stone, a lodestone, was so physically real that on some level, I could touch it. On some level the others saw it too. I sensed then that a deep change had occurred, and I knew I could not ignore or minimize my writing again.

In the months since the training, the stone has released in me writing of all sorts, which I have set down: ideas, which I am pursuing, even a song I heard clearly in a dream in which I saw, through an open window, another view of heaven.

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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.

*When people gather intent upon centering in God and listening to one another, they fashion an atmosphere of hospitality to the Spirit.
—Grounded in God, p. 51*

A Week...

Our training group has continued to communicate since our week together. The lasting closeness reaffirms for me the beauty created in each of us by G-d.¹ I also bear deeper admiration for the ways of Listening Hearts, for the wisdom distilled in the training materials, the excellence of the trainers, and the gifts released in the discernment process, whether in the individual seeking G-d's will or in the group desiring to know it.

I can still today feel myself right back in the experience of that week, in the rooms of the lovely retreat house in Maryland. So intense was my life there that it's as if it were imprinted physically onto my skin and embedded in my cells, as though I were living in more than one dimension and am living there still.

That week in heaven continues to bless me. I am grateful more than ever to the G-d Who designed heaven and us to be together always and Who shows each of us the way to get there.

¹The spelling "G-d" is used to show reverence, in the sense that no one name can define or represent the divinity, and so a letter is left out as illustration of this fact.

Judith A. Bowers loves being a wife, mother, sister, friend, and child of G-d, and loves writing, participating in enriching ministries at her church, reading, and playing with new puppy Lily.