

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 2

Spring 2011



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Reflections of a First Time Author

**The Rev. Timothy Grayson
Baltimore, MD**

“I always wanted to be a teacher and now I am one!” I enjoy that flawed and silly sentence for reasons I find difficult to explain. For me, it hints at the desire to achieve something significant, while acknowledging that in the very midst of celebrating the achievement an embarrassing flub could suddenly ruin everything. No doubt, the grammatically challenged teacher above might be led to question his calling when he realized his snafu. Similarly, as a priest who has been ordained for just three years, I confess to occasionally wondering how I ever agreed to help write a book with the bold title, *Keeping in Tune with God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Clergy*, published this spring. What could I possibly presume to tell other clergy about maintaining a close relationship with God when I am all too aware of my shortcomings in this regard?

Granted, the lead author of our book, Suzanne Farnham, is an experienced and gifted writer who is blessed with great insight into spiritual matters. However, I quickly began to realize the truth of the proverb, “Physician, heal thyself.” When I stopped worrying about my credentials as an author, I came to understand that the process of thinking through the challenges of how to remain anchored in God, despite all the busyness and responsibilities associated with running a church, might prove helpful not only to me but also to my colleagues in the ordained ministry.

I cannot say that I felt called by God to help write this book, but I came to believe over the ensuing weeks and months of manuscript preparation that at least part of God’s purpose for me was mysteriously being fulfilled in undertaking this work. A sentence from *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* comes to mind: “Sometimes a call comes through what is imposed on us. Teresa of Avila, for instance, wrote several books because her confessors told her to.”¹

The weekly writing meetings that Suzanne and I scheduled often took on the hallmarks of a discernment session. Sometimes, words would come to one of us so quickly that I, as the designated scribe, had trouble capturing them on my computer.

¹*Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, Morehouse, PA, 1991, p. 4

On other occasions, we would struggle with precisely how we wanted to express an idea, breaking into sighs of relief and gratitude when an apt phrase came to mind. While we may never have burst into tears that were “comforting and tranquilizing,”² at times we laughed so hard that we cried and had to impose a “time out” on ourselves before resuming work. Other signs of the Spirit’s presence frequently abounded during our writing sessions, including moments of peace, joy, clarity, and convergence.

Invariably, the limitations of our individual reasoning and perception reinforced why God often reveals part of the picture to one person and another part to another person, which helped to cement our collaborative efforts.³ I remember that Suzanne had asked me to do the first draft of a chapter on fostering collegial relationships among clergy, and I struggled with it. Whatever I wrote seemed stilted and I became quite frustrated. After reading my draft, Suzanne asked me simply to talk to her about the challenges that clergy face in their vocations. She encouraged me to describe how it might help clergy to share their experiences with their colleagues in an environment that served to both honor and foster the Spirit’s presence among the group members. As I talked in a kind of stream of consciousness fashion, Suzanne quickly scribbled notes on her pad. A week later, Suzanne presented me with a draft of the chapter. There were my thoughts on paper, only they had been filtered through the mind and experiences of a sympathetic “other.” The chapter did not require much work after that, and I am convinced that God’s grace was at work in its composition.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with Suzanne on *Keeping in Tune with God*, and I am grateful also to have received the gift of a better understanding of how God works on me. I will always remain an imperfect instrument, but with God’s help I hope to make some good music.

The Rev. Timothy H. Grayson is rector at the Episcopal Church of the Messiah in Baltimore. He has served on the board of Listening Hearts Ministries for the past three years. Keeping in Tune with God is fresh off the press.

Listening as a Way to Love

**R. Taylor McLean
Baltimore, MD**

We all know that listening is central to discernment ministry. After all, it’s in our name, Listening Hearts, or, more fully, listening hearts grounded in God. In our publications and programs, the listening is often focused on a particular person with a sense of call. As a part of our ministry, we suggest specific ways one can explore with others a sense of personal call.

Lately, however, I have been thinking about another more general role for listening: listening as a way to love those around us. It is haunting me that listening may be essential to loving our neighbor, that in order to love someone we must listen to them. This is a call that is always there for each of us, wherever we are and at all times.

A related thought that has stayed with me for several years is that God not only loves us but God loves through us; which is another way of saying that God has work for his people to do. Here, listening has a double role: listening to those around us as well as being attentive to the Lord’s presence with us. In a personal relationship with God, we experience God’s love for us and are able to pass it along.

² Ibid. p. 46

³ Ibid. p. 55

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So how do you and I go about listening in a way that allows God to love through us? Happily, in this venture, our Lord does not leave us only to our own devices. Rather he calls us into an ongoing personal relationship with him and warns us that without a closeness that amounts to a mutual indwelling, we are destined to fall short. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” the Lord says to us, and adds, “Those who abide in me and I in them, those are the ones who bear much fruit, for without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). When we are close to the Lord, we see others with a compassion that is otherwise just not there. I think that is why Paul repeatedly emphasizes in his letters that we are the Lord’s, that we put on the Lord, that we dwell in Christ, and the like.

When a friend of mine was at the farmers market under the viaduct some years ago, he saw the face of Christ in a homeless person who lived there. This has informed and liberated his encounters with strangers ever since. Here is an awareness that enables us to be God’s useful people, the body of Christ.

If you would like to continue this conversation, I look forward to exploring with you these thoughts about the relationship between listening and loving, the Lord’s use of us as instruments of his love, and his enabling presence with us.

R. Taylor McLean is one of the authors of both Listening Hearts and Grounded in God and has been active in Listening Hearts Ministries since its inception. If you would like to participate in this conversation, please visit our meditation blog, Heartlinks, at <http://blog.listeninghearts.org> where we are featuring this article along with readers’ comments. You can also find a link to the conversation on our website, www.listeninghearts.org.

Spiritual Curiosity

**The Rev. Bruce McPherson
Annapolis, MD**

Faith can be described as a “right brain” enterprise in a “left brain” world. The left side of the brain is the seat of arithmetic and logic. The dominance of the left brain has been true for hundreds of years and is our legacy from the Enlightenment, that period of time beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries when philosophers and writers believed that human reason could combat ignorance, superstition, and despotism to create a better world. The thesis was that eventually everything could be understood and that progress was inevitable through intellectual inquiry. As it has turned out, progress is not inevitable, despotism has not been eliminated, and what it means to be human and alive is no better understood than before. The scientific method does not work in every circumstance; things do not always add up to ten; life is asymmetrical. The right side of the brain is the seat of music, poetry, story, and, it would seem, faith. It is clear that we need to balance the left side with the right.

Karen Armstrong describes this dual way of thinking and acquiring knowledge as *logos* and *mythos*. This was the way of the ancient Greeks. For them, no one way of arriving at the truth was more important than the other. Logos is the rational, pragmatic way of functioning and understanding the world. It is the left brain. On the other hand, “the mythos of a society,” she writes, “provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives; it directed their attention to the eternal and the universal. It was also rooted in what we would call the unconscious mind.”¹

¹Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, p. xv.

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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.

...as we respond to God's love with growing trust and gratitude, we experience God's faithfulness and find that God's work is being done through us.

—Grounded in God, p.42

Spiritual Curiosity, continued

Logos, the left brain, cannot make sense of tragedy nor can it ease sorrow and pain. We need mythos, a spiritual approach to the eternal. In order for our lives to have meaning, for our spirits to become open and compassionate, we need to develop our right brains. We need a healthy dose of spiritual curiosity.

Listening Hearts is for the spiritually curious. Listening Hearts is for those who want, or perhaps need, to develop the right brain. If we are to understand something of what it means to be human and alive, we must necessarily examine our interior lives, what we might call our unconscious. That was precisely my experience with Listening Hearts. It happens that I became involved with Listening Hearts at a time in my life when I realized that everything isn't always logical. It was then that I needed to probe the depth of my interior life and, as if by divine providence, Listening Hearts was there.

I am persuaded that all of us are spiritually curious people. We are pilgrims in search of something "more." The "more" that we seek, and the "more" that makes sense out of life, we call God. And it is right and important that we seek knowledge of God and of God's will for each of us. Listening Hearts will not help us decide what color to paint the living room or how to balance the budget, but its programs make us richer and more balanced. It develops the right brain and it is for spiritually curious people like me ... and you.

The Rev. W. Bruce McPherson, an Episcopal priest and trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, has been associated with the ministry for many years. Bruce is a vocational interim rector and has served churches in the Dioceses of Maryland, Virginia and Washington, DC over the past fifteen years.