

EXPLORATIONS



Phone: 410-366-1851
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www.listeninghearts.org
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The Spiritual Quest

**Suzanne Farnham
Founder**

The tangible and the intangible

We inhabit two worlds. One is visible, tangible, and audible. It can be smelled and tasted. What lies within it can be measured and weighed. The rational part of our brain can process its activity. We begin to be aware of this world at the moment of birth. This is the world we consciously know.

Less obvious is the world of the unconscious and semiconscious. This sphere we can neither perceive directly through our senses nor measure with precision. We can only observe its influence indirectly, perceiving its impact, its fruits, its manifestation. This is the spiritual world.

These two worlds inform and influence each other. Until recently it was thought that the human mind was roughly one-third conscious and two-thirds unconscious. Advances in neuroscience suggest that the unconscious is even more dominant, that the mind is closer to ninety percent unconscious and roughly only ten percent conscious. Our consciousness is like the tip of an iceberg, the part visible above the surface. Our spiritual longings come from a profound desire to bring what is deep within to the surface, to know it. From that desire springs a yearning for God, who encompasses both the tangible, physical world and the intangible, spiritual realm. It is God who can integrate the two to bring forth unity, harmony, and wholeness.

This is the spiritual quest.

Principles turned bottom side up

The moment a baby is born, he or she experiences the tangible material world. Over time, people assimilate the patterns and practices of human nature and of human society.

The principles that govern the spiritual realm are more elusive and very different, yet they have a powerful impact on all that transpires here on earth. Imagine yourself walking on top of a vast mirror surface. If you look down everything beneath the surface appears bottom side up. This earthly life is somewhat like that. All the activity that takes place below the surface, which is most of what shapes the events in our life, operates on what seems to us to be inverted principles. Recall what the Bible tells us about deeper realities: the last shall be first; the meek shall inherit the earth; in weakness we find strength; out of death comes life; darkness and light are both alike.

This kind of prayer clears the way for God's compassion and truth to flow into us, to come ever more fully alive in us, and ultimately be transmitted to those around us. This is the way of spiritual discernment.

Therefore, the procedures for spiritual discernment depart from the norms of secular deliberation. In spiritual discernment we are trying to let what we know at some level, yet cannot consciously comprehend, rise to the surface. We are trying to enter the flow of the Spirit of God, who perceives all that is. So, once we have exhausted our worldly, rational, and analytical capabilities, we let our mind and all that it has grasped descend into the center of our being, there to simply rest in God. We need to linger there for a while; we do not want our mind to suddenly pop back into our head. At this point we avoid discussion and debate. We also avoid affirmation and condemnation, both of which tend to make the recipient self-conscious. We even avoid comforting one another or seeking comfort, because doing so at this time can disrupt the hidden work of the Spirit. We actually avoid thinking. It is almost like being in suspended animation lest we miss a still small voice or some gentle movement of the Spirit.

To unify the visible, tangible activity of our daily life with the powerful creative activity of the world that is neither visible nor tangible, on occasion we need to be attentive primarily to one domain or the other. At most times, however, it is more fruitful to mesh the two together, which is what Paul recommended when he implored us to pray without ceasing. This does not mean talking to God twenty-four hours a day. Rather, it means being tuned in to God's presence night and day. It asks that we live in a constant state of undefended openness to God, who sees all and comprehends everything seen and unseen—past, present, and future. This kind of prayer clears the way for God's compassion and truth to flow into us, to come ever more fully alive in us, and ultimately be transmitted to those around us. This is the way of spiritual discernment.

This is the way of Listening Hearts.

Reclaiming the Words of Faith

**Rachel Evangeline Barham
Washington, DC**

Last Advent, when I discovered that the National Cathedral bookstore was sold out of daily devotionals, I decided it would be a good spiritual practice to write my own. What emerged from that exercise was not great literature but a much-deepened appreciation for reading the Scriptures every day, thereby reclaiming the words of my own faith—words that are now less a part of American conversation than in the past.

Some of the most important words in our faith are those that Christians throughout the ages have chosen for use in Sunday liturgies. These are the words that are so powerful that they have become part of the centering experience of weekly worship. Stumbling upon these words in my daily readings has created a new dimension of the liturgy for me, enhancing and deepening my experience of worship as I recall the biblical context. One of the first marks I made in the Bible I inherited from my father was to underline a passage that I was used to hearing in the liturgy: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. But only speak the word, and my soul shall be healed.” In some liturgical traditions, these mysterious sentences are spoken by the congregation at the most hallowed point of the liturgy, just before receiving communion. If I ever knew where they came from, I had forgotten: this is the supplication to Jesus uttered by a centurion, an important military man whose servant was suffering from paralysis. The centurion recognized and revered his healing authority (even though he was not a follower of Jesus) and had faith that Jesus could heal with just a word. Jesus did heal the servant, and he publicly held up the centurion’s faith as an example.

The words of our faith are stories that need to be told over and over, and we discover new insights as we reread them and tell them to other people.

I knew that the Lord’s Prayer came from the Bible but had forgotten its context—right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which is jam-packed with Jesus’s most radical teachings. I certainly had it memorized as a small child, as did people who lived hundreds of years ago. When I pray this prayer now, I find that it is impossible to say it by rote. Remembering the context has enriched my understanding of it.

The beauty, wisdom, mystery, and guidance embedded in Scripture had always been there in the back of my mind, part of the fabric of my faith. But it was only when I began practicing daily Bible reading that I gained a new intimate relationship with the Scriptures. A recurring phrase in the Psalms is “I will meditate on your commandments day and night”; I am beginning to be able to access the words of the Scriptures when I need them. The more I practice the words of my faith, the more I find that they are there for me, whether I’m awake at three in the morning, stuck in traffic, or going through a trying time.

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES
3000 CHESTNUT AVENUE
SUITE 100B
BALTIMORE, MD 21211

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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.

The elements of spiritual discernment are internal, inaudible and invisible. As they coalesce over time, they gather strength to nourish the forces of wholeness in the visible, tangible world. Each element makes an essential contribution.
—Keeping in Tune With God, p. 41

It's a crowded market for words, and most of us are out of practice with the words of our faith. I think a lot of people are afraid of the commitment, of failing to keep it when we're running late or we just don't feel like reading. I decided to give myself an out; daily Scripture reading, prayer, and other devotion should not be a source of guilt. If I have to skip a day, I try at least to read a psalm or say one of the prayers I've memorized while I'm brushing my teeth, but I don't pressure myself to go back and try to read what I've skipped. I've found, though, that reading Scripture is habit forming. I find myself going back to read yesterday's Gospel anyway—not out of guilt or obligation, but out of curiosity. The words of our faith are stories that need to be told over and over, and we discover new insights as we reread them and tell them to other people.

If you really can't think of committing to a daily reading, try memorizing a prayer or a short passage from a psalm that you can recite to yourself when you're waiting in line someplace. You'll find yourself wanting to share the words of faith with people throughout the day as you invite the grounding presence of Scripture into your life.

Rachel Evangeline Barham is a freelance classical singer who serves on the vestry at the Church of the Epiphany in downtown Washington, D.C. When she is not singing or writing or cooking, she is probably either watching birds from her stand-up paddleboard or pulling something up from the backyard vegetable garden she shares with her spouse, James Rogers.