

EXPLORATIONS



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Waiting for the Spirit

**Angela Gusa
 Portland, OR**

One Saturday last fall I was fortunate to be part of a Listening Hearts retreat designed to help each of the eight ministry commissions in our parish build discernment principles into the way they conduct their business. Retreats with fellow members of my commission, Spiritual Formation, have been highlights of my spiritual life, so I looked forward to a restorative day of quiet contemplation.

Each ministry brought a question for discernment, and my group's question was "God, what are you calling us to and how will we know we are doing it?" Midway through the day each group was given an exercise: to choose and briefly reflect on a



Scripture reading that resonated in relation to our question. Then, each member took several Wikki sticks (colorful, wax-infused yarn sticks, similar to pipe cleaners), found a comfortable spot to meditate, shaped and reshaped the Wikki sticks, and journaled reflections. As we took our sticks, we nervously wondered aloud how we would know what to do with them and whether we might somehow fail to create something illuminating or "right." And there was our challenge, beautifully laid out before us. In this exercise, how would we discern God's voice through all the other voices, including our own intellectual and rational voices? How would we slow down and listen, waiting quietly for the Spirit to reveal what lay deep within our hearts?

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Our morning immersion in guided prayer, song, meditation, and silence had created a sense of calm and peacefulness that prepared us for this exercise. As I sat down in the sunny courtyard and began the meditation, my Wikki sticks sculpture seemed to take shape on its own. Affirming my strong sense of being on a path, a feeling of joy and peace washed over me as I sat in the sun and watched my sculpture take form. To my surprise, the response to our discernment question came as my hands created this tiny sculpture. The brilliant sun cast its shadow onto the sheet of white paper on which my sculpture sat, making it more wonderful and multidimensional than what I had created on my own. God had taken my creation and made something more complex, more profound—and completely unexpected.

Our message that day was for us to prayerfully continue our work as a commission, listening and looking for signs of the Spirit to let us know that the seeds we were scattering are taking root...

As our group came back together to share our reflections, a sense of common understanding rose among us. God had responded to our question, but not in the sense that we had anticipated. The message we received that day was for us to prayerfully continue our work as a commission, listening and looking for signs of the Spirit to let us know that the seeds we were scattering were taking root, and for us to continue to leave space for the mystery of God to create something much more wonderful than we could ever plan—and it might be revealed in unexpected ways.

Settling in to write this article about my experience, I wondered how I would know what to share from my Listening Hearts retreat. I had ideas about message and topics to cover and I had concerns about whether my writing would be inspirational or “right.” As I studied my discerning hearts retreat notes I had my “Aha!” moment. I’d written, “I am off the hook.” What a freedom it is to understand that I don’t need to have the answers! Once again, I was reminded to quiet my mind as I open to God, wait and listen for the Spirit.



I will pray that we can follow where God is guiding us. I pray we will watch for God to create something deeper, more complex, and more beautiful from our acts than anything we could imagine.

Angela Gusa, a member of the Spiritual Formation Commission and active in other groups at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Portland, Oregon, also enjoys cycling, kayaking, hiking, and skiing. Angela and her husband have a large vegetable garden and keep chickens.

A Flashlight and a Compass

**Suzanne Farnham
Founder**

Spiritual discernment is like making your way through a forest at night with a flashlight and compass to guide you. With the flashlight, you can see the compass, which tells you in what direction you are heading as your location changes from minute to minute. The flashlight also illuminates obstacles as you approach them and reveals possible ways around them.

Only as you move a little farther can you see the next small bit of terrain. Even then, you will be able to see what is there only if you have kept the flashlight and compass. Leave the flashlight and compass behind and you end up walking in circles, going nowhere.

In spiritual discernment it is the Divine Light that we must carry with us wherever we go. We cannot sit with it, chart our path, then take off and leave it behind. Spiritual discernment requires a continuing close relationship. If we hold the Light securely and proceed with reverence, it will shine on our path as we move. If we immerse ourselves in that Divine Presence with heart and mind opened wide, eventually our inner compass will start to point the way.



If we hold the Light securely and proceed with reverence, it will shine on our path as we move. If we immerse ourselves in that Divine Presence with heart and mind opened wide, eventually our inner compass will start to point the way.

It is possible to pursue spiritual discernment (the search to find the next step God would have us take) in isolation, but if we find kindred spirits to travel with us, we will have a veritable search party providing us with multiple pairs of eyes. The light within each member of the group can be cast in a different direction as the group scans a wider swath of the surrounding territory. Then, when a particular feature needs to be examined more closely, all lights can converge to produce a stronger, more focused light. Moreover, each person brings an inner compass. Even if one person drops a flashlight or compass, losing it in the dark, or should one member's light grow dim for some reason, the group still has light and direction to recover what was lost.

When dedicated spiritual companions set out as a group in covenant with one another, not only can they better see the way forward; they are likely to find themselves drawn into closer, deeper, more meaningful relationships with God and one another.

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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 the waters of the Spirit within us
converge, they turn into springs that
release the life-giving power of God
into the world, to refresh and renew
all creation.*

—Keeping in Tune With God, p. 42
