

## EXPLORATIONS

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**Seeing with Our Ears, Listening with Our Eyes**

**Janet Aldrich  
 Baltimore, MD**

When my sister and I were little, we once asked each other the odd question, “Would you rather be deaf or blind?” My sister, a singer from a very young age, readily declared, “Blind. I could not live if I could not listen to music!” It was a harder choice for me, but since older sister Allison had already claimed “blind,” I voted for “deaf.” It was true, I could not imagine navigating life without color, visual wordplay, sunsets, and the night sky. As we grew older, read about Helen Keller, and met blind and deaf friends who had compensated richly for their altered senses all their lives, the either/or distinction became more nuanced.

The Listening Hearts discernment process produces the same nuances and adaptability. Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward write in *Listening Hearts: Discerning God’s Call in Community*: “In sharing our thoughts with others, surprising insights often emerge—opening our eyes to what we have seen and our ears to what we have heard. This can transform and liberate us beyond our limited expectations.” I would add to this insight, “listening with our eyes and seeing with our ears.” Sitting across from each other in discernment circles, often with a “God candle” in the center, we readily begin to *see* into each other’s words and to *listen* for signs of the Spirit manifested in the sparkle in eyes, smiles on faces, or tears on cheeks.

Psychotherapist Sue Patton Theol writes: “Deep listening is miraculous for the listener and the speaker. When someone receives us with open-hearted, non-judging, intensely interested listening, our spirits expand.” Our bodies and spirits react in ways only God can bring about, all because our human eyes and ears are choreographed into no-holds-barred partnership with one another.

While technically, the words for *hear* and *listen* share some of the same ancient roots (more in a minute), we often use them quite differently in Western world contexts. I *hear* noises all around me all day long. I may notice them, be annoyed by them or lured by them, or shut them out entirely. On the other hand, when I *take time* to hear something, I become a *listener*, absorbing more elements and intentionality behind the sound.

In circles of discernment, it is impossible merely to hear what is being shared without making time and space to be open to the Spirit. The Rev. Timothy Grayson has observed, “Openness to the Spirit may lead the Spirit to reveal to the group what has not been shared but needs to be heard.”

That said, even in a developed practice of listening, there is often a primal desire to reply with thoughts running through our heads, to compensate for our sense of “not knowing” with answers, rather than to give way to the movement of the Spirit and open our eyes and ears to extended possibility. To listen in the context of spiritual discernment is to empty ourselves of our own agendas and sense of control in order to be filled with heightened awareness and vulnerability. Professor Jennifer Kaalund at Iona University puts it this way: “Deep listening is the idea that we listen with compassion. We listen to understand and finally we listen with intention, specifically the intention to act. In other words, to open one’s ears is to open one’s heart.”



*Listen to the trees grow*

Kaalund’s notion brings me to the Old English derivations of the words to hear and to listen. Although from different roots, both mean “to attend to, to obey.” Ongoing stages of listening and discerning in community catapult us into a commitment to discipleship, the desire to take our gleanings from the Holy Spirit and move into acts of compassion and response to needs of the world, as spelled out in the Gospels and other sacred texts.

God gives us ears and eyes not simply to bring pleasures of Bach cantatas, sunsets, starlit skies,

and color palates to our daily lives but to carry us into community with one another as we discern and navigate God’s call in our individual and collective lives.

I have spoken only of the gifts of eyes and ears as vehicles for God’s grace. I am moved to close with a reflection by Frederick Buechner that generously lavishes the rest of our senses into our work with God and one another. “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

*Janet Aldrich is Director of Communications and Ministry Development for Listening Hearts Ministries. When not at Listening Hearts, she is a member of St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in West Baltimore, devotes herself to the growing lives of eight godchildren, collects contemporary poetry, and swims long distances while praying and musing on life.*

*Photo credit: cushmok (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/cushmok>)*

## The Language of Silence

**Paula Franck  
Bellingham, WA**

I first became acquainted with Listening Hearts when I participated in a seven-day training session in 2002. The combination of reflection, small group discussion, worship, practicing of new skills, and building of community contributed to a rich learning and spiritual experience. Although I didn't realize it at the time, what I learned then laid the foundation for my current work as a spiritual director.

The objectives and techniques of spiritual direction and Listening Hearts are essentially the same. But, whereas spiritual direction is usually a one-on-one relationship between a director and directee, the stated vision of Listening Hearts is to "help people hear God's call through community." According to Spiritual Directors International, a multifaith organization that serves and supports spiritual direction ministries, spiritual direction encompasses: integration of spirituality into the whole of life; guidance in prayer and meditation; spiritual support, especially during times of transition or crisis; a vehicle through which God's grace, healing, and growth can happen; an opportunity to tell our stories and see the Spirit at work in our lives. These goals and values are shared by Listening Hearts programs.

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*Through this experience I began to understand the paradoxical nature of profound silence  
— a loud silence in which God's voice comes from deep within.  
"Sheer silence" does not necessarily mean a lack of physical sound  
but instead a sense of internal quiet.*

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In *The Discerning Heart* by Wilkie and Noreen Au, Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest and author, is quoted as saying, "You have within yourself the answer to every question you propose – if you only knew how to look for it." Thus the role of a spiritual director, as well as a Listening Hearts focus group, is not to provide the answers but to create space so that an individual can move towards a sense of clearness through prayerful listening and clarifying questions.

Integral to both spiritual direction and Listening Hearts discernment is the importance of silence. Meister Eckhart, a thirteenth century theologian and mystic, described silence as a "language that is infinitely deeper, more far reaching, more understanding, more compassionate, and more eternal than any other language."

One of my favorite passages in Scripture is the story of the prophet Elijah, who experienced God in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:9-16). A few years ago, I traveled to Israel to participate in "The Palestine of Jesus," a course at St. George's College in Jerusalem, which included an optional trip to the Sinai Desert. I was eagerly anticipating the Sinai excursion because I wanted to experience the silence of the desert – to have my own Elijah moment.

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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.

*...if we continue forward in an intimate relationship with God, keeping our inner ears and eyes alert, God will guide us, defend us, and comfort us without ceasing.*  
—*Keeping in Tune With God, p. 28*

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My opportunity came one afternoon when we were given free time to do whatever we liked as long as we stayed within sight of the tour vehicles. I found a cave-like place in a niche between some rocks. There I was sheltered from the hot sun and had an unobstructed view of the desert terrain. I took off my shoes, dug my toes into the warm, coarse sand, and just sat and listened. There was a slight breeze and the sound of the blowing sand was like a soft hissing. Through this experience I began to understand the paradoxical nature of profound silence – a loud silence in which God’s voice comes from deep within. “Sheer silence” does not necessarily mean a lack of physical sound but instead a sense of internal quiet.

French composer Claude Debussy observed that “music is not in the notes but in the silence between them.” It is in silence that we, like Elijah, hear God speaking to us most loudly and clearly. As Listening Hearts says, “silence is prayerful listening.”

This prayerful listening lies at the heart of both spiritual direction and Listening Hearts as the work of God takes place in the depths of quiet.

*Paula Franck served as Canon for Education and Christian Formation in the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis. Now living in Bellingham, Washington, she is a spiritual director, church consultant, and editor for Scripture of Synthesis Publications.*