
PRAYERFUL LISTENING

Cultivating
Discernment
in Community

BY LOIS A. LINDBLOOM



SPIRITUAL
DISCERNMENT

*The process of
Paying prayerful attention
To one's own life
In order to be clearer about
And more cooperative with
God's activity.*

Introduction

This booklet is composed of two main parts: (1) an exploration of the experience of prayerful listening and (2) practical information about setting up a group for discernment through prayerful listening. The model described is that of group spiritual direction developed by Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., and others at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland.¹

My hope is that this small booklet will give you enough information to discern whether this kind of group is for you, now or at some other time, and will provide the material needed to begin a group. I also hope it will help to increase prayerful listening in our world.

I first participated in group spiritual direction with Rose Mary in 1998. She has been my mentor. I have worked with her and other members of the Shalem staff in teaching about this rich spiritual practice and have facilitated and participated in several groups.

When Rose Mary was writing her book, *Group Spiritual Direction*, I was a participant in Shalem's Spiritual Guidance Program. At the same time I, a Baptist woman in early retirement, was a student in an MA program in theology in a Roman Catholic college. Drawn to the Quaker practice of deep listening in silence for the voice of God, I wrote a paper on George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). The group process described here embraces their practices of listening in silence and responding to the Light of God within.

With gratitude for the individuals and groups who have been my teachers and companions, I want to add my voice to help make this process accessible to others and to encourage prayerful listening in other settings as well.

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Prayerful Listening – To Others, To Self, To God

*To “listen” another’s soul
into a condition of disclosure and discovery
may be almost the greatest service
that any human being ever performs
for another.²*

A leader at a retreat once asked me and the others in attendance, “What is it like for you to be in the presence of God? What images come to mind?” Almost immediately the answer came from deep within me: “It’s like visiting my grandmother.” Since my grandma was no longer living, the memories were from earlier times—childhood to young adulthood.

In the years that I knew Grandma she was hard of hearing, unable to participate in group conversations or talk on the telephone or listen to the radio. She rarely went anywhere apart from an occasional doctor’s appointment, and so she was always there, at home in the farmhouse just down the road from ours. I was quite young when I was allowed to walk there by myself and later to bicycle. I would enter the house cautiously, not wanting to startle her. When she discovered me, she would offer me a snack. For the rest of our time, we would “visit” with one another, sitting in the quiet of her home. I would speak loudly, telling her about my life and asking about hers. She listened. I listened. There were times of silence. There was no sense of hurry. Even when I got busy with other things and came less often, she didn’t scold me for not coming sooner. She always greeted me as

though I was the best part of her week. I don’t recall her telling me she loved me or that she was praying for me, though there was no doubt that both were true. She gave me an image of God that was accepting and loving and spacious. She helped to listen my soul into being.

Perhaps Grandma guided my vocational life without ever speaking of it or planning to do so—to my becoming a counseling psychologist and a spiritual director. She helped to prepare me for a primary way in which my spiritual life has been nurtured throughout my adult life—through listening and talking in small groups of people seeking to deepen our life in God. These groups have often been formed through the church, for a time in a house church. Whether they are groups for worship, or prayer and sharing, or a Bible or book study, they have provided the hospitality that allows me to listen to myself, to God, and to others. Whenever that occurs it is a precious gift. It is prayerful listening.

Henri Nouwen speaks of the healing that is available there.

Healing means, first of all, the creation of an empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention...Healers are hosts who patiently and carefully listen to the story...

Our most important question as healers is not, ‘What to say or to do?’ but, ‘How to develop enough inner space where the story can be received?’ Healing is the humble but also very demanding task of creating and offering a friendly empty space where strangers can reflect...without fear, and find the confidence that makes them look for new ways right in the center of their confusion.³

My grandmother, in her own limited situation, without knowing the larger impact of her faithfulness, pointed me to God, who is always ready to listen, to heal, to love, to invite us into deeper places.

Prayerful Listening, Continued

*Where two or three of you are
gathered in my name,
I am there.
—Matthew 18:20⁴*

If someone were to ask me today, “What is it like for you to be in the presence of God?” I would say, “God is very near, guiding me from within.”

I have come to appreciate Nouwen’s brief overview of the Christian understanding of God: In the Hebrew Bible God is often experienced as *God-for-us*. In Jesus, God is *God-with-us*. In the Holy Spirit, God is *God-within-us*.⁵ George Fox, while holding each of these to be true, lived out of the perspective of *God-within-us*, and Friends speak of seeing “that of God” in everyone.

In the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, and John all made it clear that the surest indication of the presence of God is love. Jesus, when asked for the core of the commandments, the greatest one, responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). John wrote simply, “God is love” (I John 4:16), and Paul said love is the greatest gift, the most excellent way (I Corinthians 12:31, 13:13).

I remember asking a woman who was in a very difficult situation where she was aware of God these days. She paused for a long time. In the extended silence I imagined her considering and rejecting a whole array of possibilities, coming each time to the conclusion, “No, not there...” Finally, she said, “I am most aware of God in the love that I have for my children.”

In the quiet, unhurried place of listening, this woman came

to Love—“that of God”—in herself. She reminded me that the Spirit is within, expressing Love in and through us. In the silence I also noticed “that of God” in her—in her being there in the conversation, in her intentional opening of herself to pay prayerful attention to her life in order to be more aware of and responsive to God’s activity. Sometimes it is our desire for God, our hunger and thirst for that connection, that most reveals that the Spirit is stirring within us. When we come together in that desire, God is there—within us, among us, and beyond.

Prayerful Listening – Intercessory Prayer / Interconnected Prayer

*...the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs
too deep for words.*

*And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
according to the will of God.*

—Romans 8:26-27

Intercessory prayer is at the core of groups who meet for prayerful listening. Participants agree to pray for one another during and between meetings. The very purpose of the group is to pay prayerful attention to our lives in God and to be together in the prayer of listening.

In my life praying for others has often meant asking for something—that Jane will get a job, that John will get well. Intercessory prayer still means that to me. I take seriously the invitations of scripture to ask, to express our desires to God.

The writer of Romans points to another, deeper place of prayer—beyond our words, our wants, and the limitations of “our weakness.” There the Spirit of Truth is at work in the depths of our hearts—helping, searching, knowing, and interceding. This is an invitation to bend a prayerful, listening ear toward that Spirit who is with us always.

Some time ago my own journey of prayer hit a wall of “not know(ing) how to pray.” Later I wrote about the experience in a *Shalem News* article in which I also described intercessory prayer as it was introduced to me at Shalem.⁶ The article follows.

Praying Beyond Safety

Just a few years ago, I lived my daily life in our family with my husband and two teenage sons. Our older son left home to begin college—a planned change in our lives. Two weeks later, my husband died suddenly—a totally unexpected and shattering event. As I experienced the early weeks of raw grief, I was very aware of how fragile life is.

Our younger son had just gotten his driver’s license and began taking the car to go to football games and other evening activities. That left me alone with my imagination and fears of what could happen to him. I prayed for his safety. If he did not return exactly on time, I prayed desperately, “Lord, keep him safe,” while I tried to beat back the frightening images of a car accident. Then he would return, and I would sigh in relief and thank God for his safety.

One evening, as I was preparing for a group of parents to gather at my house to pray for our children, I thought of

Mary, the mother of Jesus. She parented a young man the ages of my sons. Perhaps she had some feelings of fear like mine. Perhaps she prayed for Jesus’ safety. But what if her prayer for his safety had been answered? In that moment, this challenge came to me: Could I pray “beyond safety” for my sons, even in this time of grief and fear?

Through the next months, this question brought me to a new way of praying for the people who are closest to me. In prayer, I entered the presence of God, sometimes by sitting with Jesus in nature, sometimes by encountering the unconditional love of God in an imageless setting. I invited my sons, each in turn, to join us there. Then, instead of speaking my desire, I asked what God’s desire for my son was.

As time went on, my older son went to France and Croatia for two years of volunteer service. Some of that time I had no way to reach him; once again I was fearful. Entering the presence of God and inviting my son to join us helped me trust God’s prayer, a prayer that could go beyond my knowledge of my son’s needs. (This way of praying was interspersed with various versions of fearful, clutching, parental prayers for his safety!)

When I attended a Shalem workshop on group spiritual direction, the staff described this way of praying as intercessory prayer, openness to God on behalf of another. In intercessory prayer we stay in the presence of God on behalf of another. We begin by listening for God’s desire, rather than by speaking our requests.

Often something in me gets in the way of my hearing or embracing God’s desire for the person for whom I pray. With my sons, my own fear was a barrier. Sometimes other feelings or beliefs are barriers. My own desires get in the way. My belief that it is more important for me to do something or say something than to remain in the presence of God in prayer gets in the way. Part of being open to God on behalf of another is a willingness to admit what the barrier is and then to surrender it to God.

Intercessory prayer also opens us to God's desire for ourselves, not just for the person for whom we are praying. As Douglas Steere writes in *Dimensions of Prayer*, "When I start boldly enough to pray 'O God, may thy kingdom come in Mary and thy will be done in Mary,' something seems to inquire whether I have not left out something. I begin again, adding this time 'be done in Mary *and in me*.'"7 In being open to God on behalf of another, I may be the one who is changed.

I also practice intercessory prayer in the spiritual direction groups I facilitate. In the presence of God and one another, we hold these questions, offering ourselves as part of God's redemptive process:

God, what is your prayer for this person?

What do you want my prayer to be?

Is there anything I need to surrender in order to join your prayer for this person?

Is there anything you want me to do or to say to this person on your behalf?

Then we wait in prayerful silence for a sense of whether or not we are given something to say to another. We may be nudged to say something or we may be called to continue in prayer without speaking.

For me personally and for the groups with whom I meet, intercessory prayer is a continual invitation to pray beyond the safety of our own agendas. It is an invitation to pray, "Thy will be done."

I have come to think of this prayer that begins with listening as a prayer of interconnectedness—self, other, and God. As Steere notes, no one who participates deeply in prayer can remain unchanged. Praying for someone else opens the pray-er's heart to willingness—willingness to hear, to let go, to be involved.

In a group, if our prayer is rooted in listening for the deep sighs of the Spirit of Love, our responses can be formed by and come from that place. When we pray for our loved ones or for the

larger world in this way, our words, actions, and prayers can carry God's love and desires out into the whole world. Little by little this prayer of interconnectedness expands to embrace all of life.

Prayerful Listening – In Silence

*Be still and know that I am God.
—Psalm 46:10*

Silence anchors a group in prayerful listening.

[God] said [to Elijah], "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces...but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence (I Kings 19:11-12).

Group members wait and listen together in a silence of anticipation, listening for the still small voice of the Spirit. This is a silence in which we are each alone with God, and yet we are together, held in the Loving Presence. The Psalmist said, "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Psalm 62:1).

This is a silence made available to receive what is given from God. It is not a silence marked by willfulness or withholding as in "I refuse to reveal something or to connect with you." It is not a planning session, frantically searching for what to say when the opportunity is given. It is a silence marked by listening, waiting, noticing. It is a silence in which to ask, Where is "that of God" here? What comes to me as I listen to self, other, God?

Group Meetings for Prayerful Listening⁸

Honoring the times of silence and adhering to the structure of the meeting create the “container” for prayerful listening in a group. A facilitator takes responsibility for holding the container. This may be an “outside facilitator,” who keeps time, moves the group from one part to the next, makes sure the structure and silence are honored, but does not participate as a presenter. Or, the role of facilitation can be rotated among the group members.

[Approximate times are for a two and one-half hour meeting with four participants.]

Beginning: About 15 minutes of gathering, chatting, (refreshments). Some joyful laughter is also recommended!

Settling into a comfortable circle.

Reading by the facilitator: A brief reading brings the group together in its common focus and provides an entrance to the silence. Two or three verses of scripture can help to anchor our minds in the presence of God. Repeating the reading a couple of times also seems helpful.

Silent gathering (15 min.; may be slightly shorter in the first meeting or two if participants are not accustomed to group silence): This can be a time to slow down, to get here, body, soul, and mind. Breathe deeply. Gently hold a word or two from the reading. Breathe deeply. Be still and know that God is here. Breathe. With open anticipation wait in silence. Breathe. Rest in God’s love. Be still.

Invitation: After the silence, the facilitator invites someone to volunteer to share first. Before that person begins, the group may or may not wish to decide who will go second, third, and fourth.

Sharing by one person (up to 10 min.): While each individual speaks, the group listens without interruption. When close to ten minutes have elapsed, the facilitator may signal this to the presenter.

Clarifying questions? (very brief): The purpose is not to extend the sharing or to understand the situation completely. It is to clarify specific information that may be confusing.

Silence (2-4 min.): This is a time for reflecting on what you have heard as well as listening to self and God. Where do you notice “that of God” in this person’s story? The following questions may be helpful for listening beyond your first or usual responses: God, what is your deepest desire for this person? What would you want my prayer to be? Is there anything I need to let go of in order to join your prayer for this person? Is there anything you want me to say to the presenter on your behalf?

Response (up to 10 min.): A guideline that may be helpful here comes from the Quaker tradition—be neither determined to speak nor determined not to speak. Rather, be willing to remain silent and continue prayerfully holding the person’s story in the presence of God or be willing to share something that came in the silence. Refrain from giving advice or telling your own story (“that reminds me of when I...”). Also, if anyone senses that the group is getting off track, that person may suggest that the whole group pause in silence before continuing.

Silence (2 min.): The group prays silently for the person who has just presented. The presenter reflects on what has been offered.

Second presentation ... clarifying questions? ... silence ... response ... silence

Break (5-10 min.): In silence or not, as decided by the group.

Third presentation ... clarifying questions? ... silence ... response ... silence

Fourth presentation ... clarifying questions? ... silence ... response ... silence

[**Prayer for absent member** (10 min.): Recall together whatever the absent member may have communicated to the group including the reason for absence and requests for prayer. Then pray silently.]

Reflection on time together (5 min.): The purpose is not to analyze the time or return to the material shared in the meeting but rather to focus on the experience of prayerful listening. Did anything get in the way of it? Did anything particularly support it?

Reminder of next meeting time (usually about a month later) either here at the end or at the beginning before the reading.

Reminder of confidentiality: What is shared by others in the group is not brought outside the group. Participants can decide together whether or not to be open about who is in the group.

Setting Up a Group

Who might be invited to be in the group? The most important path to answering this question is to pray about it. Who comes to mind? As you read this booklet and reflect on what a group for discernment through prayerful listening is, consider who could stay in the presence of God with you and for you, who could listen without judging or giving advice, who could receive your story with patience and prayer? For whom could you do that?

It is usually helpful to be with people whose lives are not too intertwined in other settings. One's freedom to talk may be limited if the group were to include one's work supervisor, for instance. It may be helpful to be part of the same faith tradition and setting. However, the group can be greatly enriched by variety in faith tradition, gender, and social group.

Be patient, open, creative, and spacious in praying about who may be in the group. When inviting others, encourage each person to listen within, to the information in this booklet, to the Spirit's nudge. The decision needs to be rooted in prayer.

I wonder if a group of people who live in different geographic areas might meet through a conference call. While I have not experienced this, my sense is that this could work, especially if face-to-face relationships have already been developed between the participants in other settings. With this thought I also invite you to prayerfully consider other possibilities beyond the obvious ones.

The number of participants is three to six. With three participants the sense of a "group" can be compromised if one member has to be absent. Four work well within the time frame outlined here; with five, the sharing and response times need to

be shortened slightly. If six are together, meetings may be more frequent with three presenting each time.

The duration of the group should be agreed upon at the outset, e.g., the nine months of a school year. It is important that all participants are available for all meetings. Thus, **the time chosen for group meetings** should be agreeable to all and a **commitment** made to be on time and present at each meeting.

The meeting place needs to be one where there will not be interruptions, a quiet comfortable place. A candle may be placed on a table in the middle of the group to represent the light of the Spirit present within each person, among them, and beyond.

Other possibilities for prayerful listening in community are available if a group does not seem to be the way that opens at this time. One would be to meet individually with a spiritual director, a person who is prepared to listen with others for the Spirit's direction in their lives. The web site of Spiritual Directors International provides a directory of spiritual directors by geographic location.⁹ A spiritual director may also be willing to facilitate a group. Another choice would be to meet with a spiritual friend, a mutual relationship in which each can speak and each can listen. The group format described here could be used with modifications.

The First Meeting

When a group meets for the first time, each participant is asked to respond to a few of these questions based on this booklet:

- What would your answer be to the question, what is it like for you to be in the presence of God? What images/experiences come to mind?

- How might your response be different today from an earlier time in your life?
- Who has helped to “listen your soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery”?
- What are your words for God? Where do you notice “that of God” in your life?
- What honors and supports your listening for and responding to “that of God” in day to day life? What are the distractions?
- How do you pray for yourself and for others? How has your prayer changed?
- What is your experience of silence—alone and with others?
- What draws you to a group for prayerful listening at this time? Any hesitations?

Beyond the First Meeting

Between meetings attend to the practices that nourish your spiritual life. Cultivate the practice of prayerful listening—to God, to others, to self. Journaling may help you notice your desire for God, what you sense about your openness or resistance to God, what you are concerned about these days, what your prayer is, where you are noticing “that of God” in yourself, in others, in the world. Be prayerful about what you may share with the group at the next meeting.

Pray for one another. **Trust** that God continues to be present and at work in each participant.

Keep all information shared in the group confidential.

In other settings, do not “invite yourself” back into the material presented during group. (It can be a temptation to say, “I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I have another idea...”)

If you must be absent from any meeting, let the group know ahead of time.

As the group continues to meet, you may wish to take a few minutes at the end of some meetings to notice together how this prayerful listening in community may be affecting other parts of your life and how it is contributing to your spiritual discernment, individually and as a group.

Something More

*They said to each other,
“Were not our hearts burning within us
while he was talking to us on the road,
while he was opening the scriptures to us?”
—Luke 24:32*

These words come from the experience of the disciples of Jesus. They were grieving over the death of their teacher and friend. As they walked along, a “stranger” joined them, walked with them, and listened to them. He asked open questions that encouraged them to tell more of their story—“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” In the safe atmosphere of caring, patient listening, their story was received. Their grief was heard.

But there was more. For the disciples of Jesus it was later, while reflecting together, that they noticed something more. They remembered their own “burning hearts,” and they realized who the “stranger” was. Not only had they been heard, but they had encountered the living Christ—within their own hearts and with them on the road. They responded by going to tell the others what they had experienced.

Recently, in my own group, the four of us came together to listen to one another, to ourselves, and to God. In the time and space structured to provide a safe place for seeking discernment, I ventured to tell them about a part of my life that I had not verbalized before. They listened. That was a gift. They did not judge me or seek to fix me. That was a gift. They stayed in the presence of God on my behalf, listening for what they may offer

to me. That was a gift. One by one they gave me what had come to them. That was a gift. They prayed for me. That was a gift.

But there was more. In all of that and in the rest of the meeting, we seemed to find an inner communion with one another, as though our roots were drawn down deep into the common Source of Love from which we all are nourished. We seemed to touch an interconnectedness with one another and with God, something no easier to describe than “were not our hearts burning within us?” That, too, was a gift.

And there was more. I speak of it gently but firmly. It seems my response has been an increased courage and resolve to continue listening and to act on what was given to me.

Prayerful listening is a rare and powerful activity in any age and place. It draws us into God’s loving, transforming presence—for our sake and for the sake of the world.

Endnotes

1. Web site: www.shalem.org
2. Douglas V. Steere, *Gleanings: A Random Harvest* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1986), 83.
3. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 67, 68.
4. All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
5. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), March 2.
6. *Shalem News*, Winter, 2000. Reprinted with permission.
7. Douglas V. Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer* (New York: Harper, 1962), 86.
8. This process is described in the following resources:

Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., “Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment” (a video) (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., ed., *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003). (Includes essays about how this process has been offered and adapted in many different settings)
9. Web site: www.sdiworld.org

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