

Listening Hearts

Discerning Call in Community

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Introduction

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves*,” wrote the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.¹ The questions of our time—myriad, persistent, and often vexing—are not new. Human beings have always struggled to understand the meaning of who they are and how to find their true path and follow it. In 1835, Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what am I to know. . . . The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do.²

This book is about discerning God’s call in community, a call that comes in various ways, to people of faith and to seekers of truth who may be spiritual, but not religious. Though written from a Judeo-Christian

background, the principles that underlie this book—informed and enriched by other traditions—are universal in nature.

First published in 1991, the nine chapters of *Listening Hearts* draw from classical literature to present the complexities of spiritual discernment in clear, concise language that is easy to understand. The 30th Anniversary Edition updates these chapters to refine the wording to reflect the passage of time and expand the language for a wider audience. It adds a section of “Stories of Call” that come from individual real-life experiences and revises the Appendices of Practical Suggestions that help people cultivate a life of discernment. This edition also updates the annotated bibliography to include some books that have expanded our understanding of call over the intervening years. Among these are works about how science and history inform religion and spirituality—including the concept that the universe both influences and responds to our interactions with it.³

Before the authors began their work thirty years ago, a group of forty people studied writers who, over the centuries, had explored questions of call, discernment, and community. Using a color-coded system, the readers underlined and highlighted passages in the books to indicate information relating to these topics. The authors met weekly for two years, reviewing the material and writing the book, using the model of the Quakers: beginning and ending in silence, listening to one another prayerfully, and

waiting for consensus to emerge. Every sentence in the book reflects this approach.

This book can be used for meditation. If a sentence or phrase gives pause, it can be fruitful to stop, hold it in silence, then reflect on it. It may point to a place where God touches your life. Additionally, this book can be a springboard for group sharing. By reading a designated chapter in advance and marking portions that particularly speak to them—or that they do not fully grasp—participants pave the way for conversation that arises from their own experience.

Appendices provide guidelines for a small group to gather in prayer and reflectively pose questions to help an individual find clarity around an issue of personal concern. Notes that credit sources and delve beneath the surface of concepts put forth in the book appear at the end so as not to interfere with the flow of the text.

*The heart is the hub of all sacred spaces.
Go there and roam.⁴*

ONE



What Is “Call”?

... let each of you lead the life ... to which God called you.
—1 Cor. 7:17

People call us to get our attention, to make contact with us, to draw us closer to them. So it is with God. A call may come as a gradual dawning of purpose for our lives. It can involve an accelerating sense of inner direction. It can emerge through a gnawing feeling that we need to do a specific thing. On occasion, it can burst forth as a sudden awareness of a path that God would have us take. Call may be emphatic and unmistakable, or it may be obscure and subtle.¹ In whatever way call is experienced, through the centuries God has chosen to speak to us and bids us to listen. “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you” (Ps. 32:8).

God calls us on many levels: God calls creation, calls the Church, calls my congregation, and calls me,

today, to reach me where I am now. God calls the entirety of my life. And at specific times and places, God calls me to particular actions.

God calls each of us. There are a variety of calls, and no one call is inherently better or higher than any other. The call of a priest, monk, or nun, however sacred, is not superior in and of itself to the call of an architect, a mechanic, or a nurse.² It is our faithfulness to God and not our station in life that honors a call.³

We need to look beneath external facts to determine a call. For example, two men might be wrestling with what seems to be the same question: whether or not to volunteer at a breakfast program for homeless people. For one, the call might turn out to be to stay home and spend some much-needed time with his children. For the other, the call might be to work at the breakfast program and help his family develop a sense of supporting him in service to others.

God speaks to us through the language of everyday events.⁴ Each new moment of life, each new situation, the present condition of a person or community, of events, time, place, people, and circumstances—all hold clues to God's call.⁵ Thus, we often find our calls in the facts, circumstances, and concrete experiences of daily life.⁶

Sometimes call comes through what is imposed on us. Teresa of Avila, for instance, wrote several books

because her confessors told her to. Today, with hindsight, we can recognize that through her obedience she was honoring God's call. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer found in prison a call to minister to others who were imprisoned.

Any matter, large or small, may relate to our call. A call could encompass a decision about whether to take a new job, go back to school, volunteer at a shelter. A call could draw us to a personal relationship in a new or different way. A call could focus on whether to resist paying taxes as a form of protest or whether to sell all our belongings and move to another country. A call may not be so much a call to "do" as to "be." An active man may become sick and unable to do what he has done before; yet while he may not be called to be sick, he may be called in sickness to reflect God's presence and love in a new way. So call should be understood in the widest, most inclusive sense, to encompass what we do and who we are.

This is not to say that in every decision there is a call from God or that God is always giving us guidance regarding every question we face. Sometimes we need to act based upon our assessment of what is good—we need to make a decision. In such a situation, elevating the decision to a call from God will not make it one.⁷

On the other hand, because a matter seems unimportant does not foreclose a call from God. As with God's call to Moses, the desire to minister at a soup kitchen

or as a school volunteer can burn brightly with the fire of God's call.

A call might lead us to pursue a certain occupation or career, as a person who feels called to help others in turmoil might become a pastoral counselor. Quite often a call becomes visible in a specific job, task, or endeavor. But a call can never be reduced to such activities. The same counselor may also be called to care for family, friends, and community as well as clients and thus must balance all of these in order to be faithful to the call. In a world that puts much emphasis on success, a too-narrow concern with occupation or career can make us deaf to our calls.⁸

We may be called beyond ordinary occupations—to be prophets. A prophet does not have to be a Moses or a Jeremiah. Amos, for example, was a shepherd who left his flock to become a prophet in Israel, returning home when his years of prophesying came to an end. So, too, any one of us may be called to a prophetic role at a specific time and place for a specific issue.

Not only is every call unique, but the hearing of every call is unique also. One sign that God may be calling is a certain restlessness, a certain dissatisfaction with things as they are. Other signs of call may be a sense of longing, yearning, or wondering; a feeling of being at a crossroads; a sense that something is happening in one's life, that one is wrestling with an issue or decision; a sense of being in a time of transition; or a series of circumstances that draw one into a specific issue.

While role models are helpful, we are not called to copy other people.⁹ Rather, we are to become fully the people God created us to be, living our own lives in response to our own calls—as Jesus lived out his life faithful to God’s call for him.¹⁰ So it is that hearing one’s call is akin to discovering one’s own self.¹¹

Even when a need exists and we are well qualified to meet it, we are not necessarily called to respond to it. Something may seem logical for us to do, but that does not mean that God calls us to do it. In ordinary circumstances, people analyze facts in order to come to a conclusion. While this is a useful exercise, it is not the same thing as discerning God’s call.

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There’d have been no room for the child.¹²

Ultimately, it is not what the evidence suggests but the source of the call that gives it authority.

Similarly, simply because a task or undertaking is good to do does not mean that we are called to do it or that we should continue doing it. To be doing what is good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.¹³ We may understand only with hindsight why we were called to do something different.

Call usually involves service or benefit to others. In fact, a sense of call may be suspect if it does not involve service.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the fruits of call are sometimes a long time in coming;¹⁵ indeed, we may never perceive them. Things we say or do can have a profound impact we may never know about. Sometimes the fruits of our life manifest themselves at a much later time, perhaps even after our death.¹⁶ The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of this in its account of Abraham and Sarah:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the Land he had been promised. . . . By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. (Heb. 11:8, 9, 11, 13)

Every true call is a call to obey God; indeed, the word *obedience* derives from the Latin *audire*, which means “to listen.”¹⁷ Jesus came to include us in his divine obedience,¹⁸ saying, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15), and “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me . . .” (John 14:21). If we love God, we want to live in harmony with God—we want to hear what God has

to say, and we want to act on what we hear. St. Paul refers to this as “obedient from the heart” (Rom. 6:17).

While call requires response and obedience, we will not be given a road map. Our response to a call is not mechanical application. Rather, call requires that we take responsibility. We will not necessarily be called to come up with a correct answer, as in a crossword puzzle, but something freer and more creative. We are given building blocks to see what can be done with them, using for the task all of our intelligence, creativity, sensitivity, and love. Our critical faculties are required; we must use them the best way we can, constructively and with love.¹⁹

Awareness of a call may give rise to a feeling of inadequacy, as illustrated in the classical biblical calls of Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. Moses said no five times to God (Exod. 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). Moses’ excuses included not knowing God’s name, not being a person of consequence, not having credibility, and not being a good speaker. Jeremiah responded to God, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (Jer. 1:6). Before Isaiah could say, “Here I am,” in response to God’s call, he expressed his profound sense of unworthiness with the cry, “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

Yet God not only calls but empowers—although the power may come only as we respond. Conversely, if we don’t respond to a call, we may become increasingly blind and deaf to God’s promptings. To ignore or

resist a call may “fracture us further, widening the split between what we subscribe to inwardly and what we do outwardly.”²⁰

Our calls are always evolving. If we are to respond, we need to listen, not only today but as today evolves into tomorrow. In times of transition, we need to listen with extra care. “If we go on listening, we feel God pulling us, drawing us into another current, a larger, deeper, stronger one than our usual little force.”²¹

*Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear. . . .
-Isa. 50:4-5*