

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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“Turn, Turn, Turn . . .”

Rev. Cynthia Bell
Fairhaven, MA

We came together like six random musicians meeting to play chamber music: a flute, an oboe, a violin, a viola, a double bass, a piano. The score emerged out of Scripture and life stories, songs and services, and in between, precious periods of silence (always the best). We assembled, we engaged, we listened, and we learned when to risk, when to hold back, when to shout, when to be quiet.

Our talented convener, with a fine-tuned ear and gracious manner, kept us moving in an orderly fashion, spiked with hilarity. As with any eager new group, off-notes gave color, contrast, and occasions for laughter. We struggled toward harmony, listening for the silent notes beneath the music of our lives—searching and yearning, wrong turnings and poor decisions, loving and being loved, losing and being found. We sang and danced to Ecclesiastes 3: “To everything (turn, turn, turn) there is a season (turn, turn, turn), and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

On the back porch of our week’s snuggerly in the Maryland hills, I sat listening to lunch being prepared in the kitchen behind me and to the slip and fall of water into the koi pool below. Taking out my journal, I plumbed past and recent losses, under blue skies and gauzy clouds. “It is our destiny, and the destiny of everything in our world, that we must come to an end,” Paul Tillich wrote in *The Eternal Now*. My grandfather’s death when I was eight came to mind. I had loved the warmth of his hand on my head, the way he stood tall, with the fingers of one hand in his vest’s watch pocket, the fizzy soda water he gave me to drink. I wanted to say goodbye to him. How unfair, I felt, to be left at home while the grown-ups attended his funeral. Like many, I came to know the anger of vulnerability at an early age, and to dread exposure. I had nowhere to go with my sadness until I was much older, when the sting faded into acceptance that life was like a spiral staircase: you can see ahead and behind only a short way, and the view changes with each step. Tillich, again: “In order to judge something, one must be partly within it, partly out of it.”

Then, like a mental PowerPoint presentation, in my mind’s eye I saw Andrew Wyeth’s well-loved painting, *Christina’s World*, an image

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Dancing Lessons

**Margaret Bain
Vienna, VA**

I recently signed up for ballroom dancing lessons. Such fun! Mostly I dance with the teachers, but sometimes one of the students will dance with me. One of my partners has a Greek heritage, and his name is Christos. He's a young man, in his early thirties, I'd guess, somewhere perhaps between the ages of 30 and 33. He's at a higher level in his dancing lessons than I am, and so when he dances with me, he has to limit himself to my abilities. I wonder if he minds.

I enjoy dancing with Christos. We move around easily together, most of the time. Usually, we follow a predictable pattern, which is comfortable for me. But every now and then, he leads me in a new direction. And when I am paying attention, I can go that way. I say to him, "It's all about trust, isn't it?" And he smiles at me.

Then, when he thinks I can manage it, he directs me to turn. I stiffen up, and try desperately to do what I think is right. But when I have completed the circle, I find that I am quite out of step with him. He looks disappointed and says, "Don't try to lead." Perhaps what he means is "Follow me".

So I go back to my teacher and ask him what went wrong. He tells me that I haven't learned that step, yet. And then slowly he counts out the steps for me, and I can turn!

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.¹*

Full of pride, I go back to Christos, and tell him that I can turn now, and whenever he wants to include a turn in the dance, I'll be ready. So he turns me, and I get the steps all wrong. How humiliating! But Christos is encouraging, and he says, "You're doing well – you just need to practice."

These, then, seem to be my instructions: Trust, follow, learn, and practice. Christos is talking about dancing skills. But I sense that God is talking to me about my life.

So, I think about this for a while, and a new image comes to mind. I have always thought that God leads by walking ahead; like a shepherd; Jesus went through this life before us, even died before us, to show us the way. But now, I think that God might lead in a different way, and unpredictably.

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How Will We Know?

Meg Kimble
Annapolis, MD

So much was riding on our decision. A well-intentioned group that took its responsibilities seriously, we had put in substantial time and prayer, sharing a *Grounded in God* retreat and learning from the wisdom and experience of consultants, hoping to avoid some of the traps that can befall the unwary. We had also invested a great deal of time getting to know and trust one another.

Still, we were anxious. Had we done enough? What if we had forgotten something? Finally, one of us put into words the question that was on all of our minds and in our hearts: what if we got it wrong? What if we made the wrong choice? Could our church withstand the consequences if we made a mistake?

At a pivotal moment in our discernment, perhaps realizing the futility of depending on ourselves alone, we began to truly listen for God's voice. We moved from using only our intellects and reason to listening with our hearts. We experienced a sense of calm, a release from the anxiety of getting it wrong. We learned to place our trust in God to lead us.

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One of the signs of the Spirit described in the Listening Hearts' book *Grounded in God* is God's peace: "a sense of confidence at a very deep level indicates that we are moving in the right direction" (p.28). Though we had yet to reach a consensus and make our decision, we were feeling more confident and peaceful. Our discernment is never complete, but if we pray, reflect, and listen attentively for God's guidance, we can be confident in God's promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Dancing ... *(continued from page 2)*

The Lord is my lifelong dancing partner! I like to think that God is holding me, showing me how to move by being right there with me, doing what I am doing. And I realize that if He is leading, at times I must be moving backwards. Strangely, I find that comforting – I can't possibly be expected to know what is going to happen. All I know is that I have to pay close attention and keep to the rhythm of the One who is leading me.

Margaret Bain, a native of South Africa, has worked with mothers and babies all her professional life. Dancing lessons offer a real departure from her usual life.

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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.

An attitude of humility allows us to accept dependence on God and one another and be open to God's turning us in a new and unexpected direction.

—Listening Hearts, p.33

“Turn, Turn, Turn . . .” *(continued from page 1)*

of my striving, yearning, never-going-to-get-there inner self. A wide-open hillside. No place to hide. Strength and determination, yes, but fragility and high-strung tension, too. There is a house, a home, at the top of the hill. How can she crawl that far? Christina led me to self-discovery through the compassionate, probing questions within my discernment group. Listening. Surrendering to the abundance of God's grace, the first notes of a new song pushed past my fears and tears, to a self-birthing wholeness, free to recognize God's will for me in my heart.

The music we created together—or rather, Grace created through us, in us, with us—did not fade even after returning home. Instead, it became the soft, melodic background for fresh decisions I felt newly empowered to make with a sense of rightness and joy. It continues to rise, blend, lifting my heart and resounding in my soul. “A time to weep (turn, turn, turn), a time to laugh (turn, turn, turn), . . . a time for every purpose under heaven”. Someone wisely said, “I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, then you grow wings.”

The Rev. Cynthia Bell is a retired Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Massachusetts, where she is active in spiritual direction and healing ministries, as well as working as a chaplain with hospice.