

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ March 2002

## Hearing God's Call Anew

*Suzanne Farnham*

God's call to us is always evolving. Old things pass away as new things spring forth. Through the ever-changing circumstances of our lives, we are beckoned into a more intimate relationship with God and deeper relationships with other people. Retirement holds an invitation to nurture ourselves in areas that we have neglected under the demands of full-time employment.

My husband, Barney, thrived as a parish priest and the parishes he served thrived under his leadership. His identity was closely related to his position as rector. I was afraid that the transition into retirement would be excruciating for both of us. Certainly, he grieved at times during a period of transition. Yet he also began to develop in new ways that, today, bring joy to him and touch the lives of many people in significant ways.

One thing he did was to volunteer in a nearby elementary school that is deprived economically, socially, and culturally. He is like a burst of sunshine to the students and staff alike, radiating warmth and energy into a sometimes-depressing environment. They, in turn, shower him with affection and teach him much about the realities of life in their neighborhood. They enrich his life in ways too numerous to count. Through his association with the people of this school, he grows steadily wiser and more compassionate.

After Barney retired, we selected a new parish home where he helps out with priestly functions as needed, enjoys warm relationships with members of the congregation, and can opt for the early service when he wants to get to a one o'clock football game (he is a rabid Ravens fan) or the late service (when we want to enjoy a late Saturday night and then sleep in on Sunday morning). Beyond all that, I cherish the opportunity of sitting next to him at church services after forty years of being like a widow in the pew. A new lease on life for both of us!

At home in the 1840 townhouse, which we purchased and restored to live in upon Barney's retirement, this man who had barely been able to make a sandwich has tapped into hitherto dormant abilities to become an exquisite cook. He now fully shares in the responsibilities of tending a home that has brought immense pleasure to both of us. We now share life in new and meaningful ways that knit us closer together as a couple.

Other opportunities await us as our bodies grow more fragile and our health becomes more tenuous. We sometimes prefer not to think about it, but perhaps more than anything else, failing health can become a channel through which God puts us in touch with previously ignored resources, and calls us to live and minister in new and important ways. I was raised to be fiercely independent. Whenever I am sick or injured, I am pushed to discover the mutual benefits that

come when I express my needs and allow others to do things for me. Giving to others can be a way of maintaining control of relationships. Allowing other people to give to me helps release that control, letting other people gain a greater sense of worth.

Moreover, times of sickness and physical disability can be occasions of special grace. God often comes to me through people who reveal their courage and compassion in time of pain and sickness. So very often, a person who is living with a terminal illness transmits God's love to me in a way that stays with me forever. We all can learn from their examples.

With God's help, we can open ourselves to the newness of life that always awaits us. If we hone our attitudes of detachment and strengthen our practice of prayerful listening, we open the door of our hearts more fully to God.

Detachment demands that we not cling to anything, internal or external: thoughts, feelings, opinions, concepts, position, personal relationships, or material possessions. This does not necessarily mean that we need to get rid of things or cast them away. It does mean that we must hold all things lightly — as in open hands — so that God can easily alter them, refine them, bring us into a new relationship with them, or possibly remove them. This opens the way for the transforming action of the Spirit.

Prayerful listening becomes fuller and freer when we are not constricted by clinging to things. To listen prayerfully, we then need to become quiet, inside even more than out. We need to let our minds descend into the center of our beings where we can be at one with God — body, mind, soul and spirit. We need to listen to God with our whole selves: senses, feelings, instincts, intuition, and rational faculties. As we learn to do that, we find that we also listen to people more attentively. We see with increasing clarity what God is saying to us through the circumstances and events of our lives.

As the years fly by, the pace of change seems to accelerate. If we are grounded in God, every loss can lead to a gain. If we embrace this death-resurrection cycle, we will always be hearing God's call anew. No matter how old we get, we can always be born in surprising new ways. God never stops calling us to newness of life. People of all ages can be young at heart.



Suzanne Farnham is co-author of *Listening Hearts* (which has sold nearly 48,000 copies) and *Grounded in God*, both published by Morehouse. She serves as executive director of Listening Hearts Ministries and leads retreats, workshops, and training sessions on spiritual discernment throughout the country. She and Barney live in a small historic neighborhood near Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Their four married children and nine grandchildren help keep them on their toes. Barney is priest-in-charge of the Church of the Transfiguration, Blue Mountain Lake — a summer chapel in the Adirondack Mountains where they spend their summers.