

## HOLDING IN IMAGINATION

“If you could write this book the way you listen,” a woman I had interviewed suggested gently. Her name is Elizabeth Katona and she is a tall, blonde, wonderfully down-to-earth mystic who lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia. We were meeting in a little German bakery a year into my interviewing. I was, disconsolately, beginning to think about how I might order the fifty interviews I had conducted so far—and the fifty to come. That morning Elizabeth had a cold, so she blew her nose forcefully after she spoke. She obviously didn’t intend to say anything more. I looked at her quizzically because anyone who knows me personally knows how I can go on high velocity, associative, thoughts-uttered-as-fast-as-I-can-think-them jags. How I *listen* isn’t something that is always noticed or remarked on. Even by me. But I’m quick to recognize a gift. “How I listen,” I repeated. I held the idea in my hands like one of those wonderful crystal globes inside which snowflakes lilt to rest on tiny red rooftops whenever you fidget.

How *do* I listen? I began asking myself—and continued to do so through my next fifty interviews and the gestational year that followed. For it was clear to me that there was something both completely natural and surprising in this sustained experience of listening. It wasn’t therapeutic. No one needed fixing. It wasn’t analytic. My categories weren’t holding. Certainly they were far less interesting than the people I was meeting, the lives I was being invited into. It wasn’t journalistic. I made no pretense of objectivity, no claims to newsworthiness. At this point, I had, on good days, an audience of one.

But even unsure of the end result, I was devoted to the process itself. I loved settling onto someone’s couch, or crossing my legs into the lotus position on a plastic chair in, for example, a Panera’s in Greenville, South Carolina and beginning to make our way, yet again uniquely, through the common questionnaire. Loved the sound and feel of my pen scribbling across the yellow legal pad as fast as possible, my body relaxing as I listened, paused, made eye contact, scribbled again.

Let me back up just a little. I began the formal interviewing for the *God Speaks My Language* project in 2005 under the umbrella of Universal Table, a small organization we founded to help foster an appreciation of difference, with a particular focus on what forms of listening and talking and thinking make it safe for us to welcome that which is different, uncustomary, category challenging or shattering. Because of my own background as a creative writer, I have been especially interested in the role of story in opening us safely to unfamiliar worlds and ways of thinking or believing wherever we find them—our faith life, our professional life, across our back fence.

I developed the questionnaire used in this project over a year earlier in San Miguel Allende, Mexico and started interviewing with it there and also with participants in a spiritual direction program at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California as a way of expanding my understanding of faith journeys across different religious traditions. The purpose of this project was to bring my fascination with religious pluralism as a lived reality home to the Southeast where I live.

To this end, over two years I interviewed a hundred people across all major religious traditions currently living in the Southeast, focusing primarily on major cities near me in Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. I used the same questionnaire in all the interviews. The interviews ran between two and six hours, sometimes in two sessions. Most were conducted in person, some over the telephone. I identified people to interview in formal ways, such as interfaith councils, and informal ways, one person suggesting several others. (The research design and questionnaire can be found in the Appendix and my own personal inspirations for the project and experience with it are described in the Afterword.) But let’s return to this question of listening, which became the organizing principle for the book.

*Like oil in the machine*, I thought early on in my interviewing, before the idea of the God Speaks My Language project had even become clear. The phrase came to me as I fell asleep after interviewing a southern minister late at night in my California-based spiritual direction program. What surprised me was that listening intently to a Presbyterian minister from New Bern,