

### 3 DEFINING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

*Out of his infinite glory may God give you the power through his spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your heart through faith (Eph. 3:16-17).*

*Spiritual direction: an interpersonal relationship in which one person assists others to reflect on their own experience in the light of who they are called to become in fidelity to the Gospel.*

This definition, this opening out of another's inner spiritual freedom, another's inmost truth, what Paul calls one's "hidden self" that grows strong, provides the subject for this chapter.

Admittedly, the term "spiritual direction" is woefully inadequate, for what we speak of is neither "spiritual" nor "direction." Our concern is not simply with the spiritual but with the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. We are concerned not simply with the life of prayer but with the entire faith-life. Our concern encompasses the whole human being, embracing every deed and attitude, every thought and feeling, every job and relationship constituting the unique person before us.

We do not speak of the spiritual part of a person if that implies what is disengaged from mind and body, what is "otherworldly." Our concern is not solely, though it may at times be primarily, with what goes on in the privacy of our prayer, but with the whole of life as it leads from or leads to that prayer. All of life is or can be theophany, and our concern is with all the instruments and melodies, all the notes and movements of the song. So "spiritual direction" is not simply "spiritual."

Neither is it "direction" in the sense that the director is the one who tells the other what to do or how to do it. To the extent that there is a director in one's life of faith, that

director is always and everywhere the Holy Spirit. Our much more modest role is as helper, enabler, as others discover or establish direction in their own lives. Our relationship is not that of a guru to the uninitiated, or of a parent to a child, or of a teacher to a student, but a relationship that does whatever it can to facilitate God's own direction of us in our lives. We are more accurately described as beggars going together, helping each other search for food.

Perhaps the director does have more experience, certainly a bit more objectivity, and sometimes more knowledge, but, still, both parties of the relationship travel together a road always respected as mysterious to each. We have perhaps been scarred or have seen others scarred by the director who knew what was best for us or for another, who knew God's will, who had the secret road map for another's journey. Our understanding of spiritual direction is more messy, less clear, more human, more searching, more conscious of the earthware nature of our ability to lead another.

Sheldon Kopp's description of the psychotherapeutic relationship in *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* seems apropos:

My only goals as I begin work are to take care of myself and have fun. The patient must provide the motive power of our interaction. It is as if I stand in the doorway of my office, waiting. The patient enters and makes a lunge at me, a desperate attempt to pull me into the fantasy of taking care of him. I step aside. The patient falls to the floor, disappointed and bewildered. Now he has a chance to get up and try something new.

Kopp goes on to ask what value the counselor or director then has, and he answers his own question:

He provides another struggling human being to be encountered by the then self-centered patient, who can see no other problems than his own. He can in-

terpret, advise, provide the emotional acceptance and support that nourishes personal growth, and above all he can listen.<sup>1</sup>

So spiritual direction is not in any narrow sense only about spiritual things, nor is it in any paternal or maternal sense directing. Further, it is similar to, but distinct from, both psychological counseling and the sacrament of reconciliation. What happens in spiritual direction depends on the relationship between two individuals. There is no specific undeviating blueprint. It touches deeply at the heart of what human relationships are and what it means to help another.

A spiritual director is often, but never exclusively, a counselor. In order to descriptively separate the roles of director and counselor, we can spell out two key processes in spiritual direction: one generally common to either counselor or spiritual director, one much more proper to the spiritual director. The first process concerns the objectification and articulation of experience; the second deals with the interpretation of those experiences through the eyes of faith, an interpretation sometimes called discernment.

### OBJECTIFICATION AND ARTICULATION

Nothing a director does is more important than to be a listening ear for another. We would even seriously suggest that if you do not have a spiritual director, you would do well to draw an ear on the wall and talk to it. The director may be an improvement on the wall, but, initially at least, we serve the same purpose. In Taylor Caldwell's *The Listener*, the importance of one who listens quietly, receptively, non-judgmentally is clearly brought out as numerous healings take place without a single word spoken by the mysterious "man who listens" on the other side of a veil.

The chief reason that anyone talks to another about the personal dimensions of life (whether it be a friend over coffee, a trusted teacher in school, or a well-paid psychologist in a formal office) flows from the deep human need to objectify—

to get whatever is inside outside. We need to speak to another in order to put our deepest feelings, fears, hopes, and dreams out in front of ourselves where we can look at them. The very process of articulation can itself be a healing experience. Directors and counselors begin with the awareness that their initial role is simply to be there as a sounding board, a friend. What we say is not nearly as important as what we hear and the opportunity we provide for others to speak out about who they are and what they are experiencing.

For either counselor or director no fixed boundary delineates what is proper for discussion. We concern ourselves not solely with prayer any more than the good counselor's concern is only with aberrant behavior. The subject matter is the whole person, and all of life is raw material for the dialogue. Whatever is significant to another person is significant to the listener. In the past, spiritual direction too often limited itself to the hour of prayer, the movement of specifically religious reflection in a person's life. But prayer cannot be separated from all of life. Nor are feelings, moods, impressions, and fantasies irrelevant. We need to express and own all our feelings, emotions, and movements of life. The listening role also enables another to objectify these.

Body language, the unspoken word, and the tone of voice also help to constitute the data of objectification, and the skilled listener "hears" these. Sometimes the use of a journal, a song, a poem, or a picture may help to externalize the deepest feelings and become apt subject matter for direction. We can invite people to draw how they feel about God, about their other relationships, about themselves, sketching the picture even in rough stick figures. We do whatever we can to creatively help another see. At this stage of the relationship the listener speaks little, asks supportive questions, clarifies what is obscure, and allows silence so that what has been spoken may sink in.

As the listening process (the objectification stage) continues, the counselor or director may assume a more active role and engage in some response, still helping the objective person to emerge.

The director or counselor enables others to become more

accountable to themselves. Even within the listening stance, we may at times *affirm, confront or teach*. We listen in order to affirm whatever is alive and growing in the other. Most people have very poor self-images and find their stories discouraging and depressing or, worse, boring. The sensitive listener hears the bright spots and underlines them. If people do not know their gifts, how important it is to have another point them out!

An honest listener also knows when to confront. Active, compassionate listening helps to unmask illusions, indicate inconsistencies, and recall spoken aspirations and admitted performance. There is a deep service rendered by a listener who lets some air out of an overinflated balloon before the whole thing bursts.

The spiritual director or counselor, still within this objectification role, may also at times be a type of teacher called upon to clarify theological or other human realities. Part of the objectification entails getting the facts correct, and, sometimes at least, simple instruction is called for.

### INTERPRETING THE EXPERIENCE

In the initial stages then, direction and counseling are quite similar. Both aim at helping people to externalize whatever is in them and to look at it more clearly. Just as various schools of counseling will do quite different things with the material once it has emerged, so the task of spiritual direction deals with this revealed person in a unique fashion. The second role of a director seems to us to differ significantly from the role of psychiatric counselor or psychologist. The spiritual director specifically desires to help people to see their experience in the light of faith, to see the journey as a *faith* journey, to envision and trust God's guiding hand in the process. Both director and directee desire to take the raw material of this objectification and discern where God is calling, speaking, challenging, leading.

The definition of spiritual direction with which we began this chapter spoke of "fidelity to the Gospel." This fidelity

is an agreed upon goal of the spiritual direction relationship. By Gospel we do not mean, primarily, the written word, but rather him about whom the word is written and who is, in fact, the Word. We luxuriate in a spiritual direction relationship, in a mutual effort to comprehend, to love, and to follow Jesus, the Christ. This agreed upon aim affects the whole relationship and gives us as directors permission to help others to organize their lives around the life of Jesus.

So, there resides in the midst of any crisis (divorce of parents, death of loved ones, problems in a relationship, vocational decision, etc.) a call to grow, to stretch, to risk. Put in Christian terms, each challenge offers an invitation to incarnate in a new way the death-resurrection mystery at the heart of our lives.

*1/25  
JCS good news*

Outside of crisis times, over the long haul of life, the director enables a person to see rhythms and patterns, to discern what past decisions led to deeper union with the Lord or to more freedom with others. In the midst of a deepening interpersonal relationship the director becomes progressively more able to indicate the moods and moves that make the directee feel and be more authentic.

The ideal director does not judge, does not react to the person, but *for* the person and loves that person no matter what.

*old text*

This role of interpreting experience fits into the archetype of Judaeo-Christian truth, the exodus event. Everyone, like our Jewish forebears, is called gradually from slavery to freedom, from some kind of Egypt to a new promised land. We all grow weary on the journey; all of us have moments of great closeness with the God who guides us by a pillar of light or feeds us with mysterious manna. We all have passed dry-shod through some threatening seas. We are all tempted to forget the guidance on the journey and feel abandoned, alone, confused and wandering. The Jews struggled to remember who they were and where they came from. They retold the story over and over to each other so that they would never forget God's goodness to them. They remembered, celebrated and built their corporate future on God's mighty deeds in their

Good news!

behalf. Each believing individual mirrors this archetype. We need a community, even of one, to help us interpret our story, to see it too as exodus, to view our private history as sacred history, to be conscious of the covenant God has made and kept with us.

The central thing that distinguishes the director from the counselor is, then, the agreed upon project of "fidelity to the Gospel." Consequently, they differ significantly in the way that conclusions are reached. It would be too generalized to insist upon, but, as a pattern, most counseling works through a process of interaction between two people, counselor and counselee. In spiritual direction the director is constantly aware that the real director is the Holy Spirit, and that the interpretation of the experiences may more properly and ultimately come from God out of prayer, rather than simply in dialogue between the two parties.

*300 S.*

Concretely, as a counselor, we may continue to talk with a person until clarity comes, some pattern emerges, some action presents itself or, at least, some line of continued personal reflection emerges. We may do this over several sessions, but ultimately we are the primary other voice helping others reach conclusions for themselves. As a spiritual director we will more precipitously stop our conversation and invite another to pray, suggest a pertinent Scripture passage, or invite a period of prayerful reflection on whatever we are discussing, believing with that person that the Lord will help sort out the questions, provide the links, and indicate the next direction. We would, in other words, turn the person to the source of faith and not rely only on our conversation or the other's isolated reflection for whatever streams of interpretation will arise.

Scripture does not provide magic answers. We do not believe so much that "Jesus is the answer" as that "Jesus is the one who helps us live with the questions." Prayer is not an escape from grappling with those questions. But the relationship in spiritual direction begins and ends with the belief that God is calling each of us to become a unique person in light of the Gospel, that is, in relationship to Jesus Christ.

The one we work with discovers what that call is—not primarily in relationship with us, but rather with Jesus.

Again, it is too universal to be totally valid, but in general counselors need to step aside from their own presumptions, values, systems, and let the other be, with guidance toward that person's own chosen goals, goals that may differ significantly from the goals or visions of the counselor. This is partially true of the spiritual direction relationship, but with one enormous exception: spiritual direction involves a previously agreed upon, generally shared vision and desired goal (however that may be described: doing God's will, building the kingdom of the Father, forming one's life according to the Gospel). So where we, as director, would not normally judge or correct others in their vision, we do have, in the deepest sense, the mandate to challenge them to the Gospel who is Jesus. As a director we are not just enabling people to reflect on and integrate life, as any good counselor would do, but to do so in the light of "who they are called to become in fidelity to the Gospel." This meeting with Jesus in faith is the decided and distinct difference between counseling and spiritual direction.

A second and related difference is that the end of the two relationships seems different, at least in nuance. Spiritual direction does not aim only to enable others to feel good about themselves, their God, and their world. Within a Christian context the mission of the Church is always central. The aim of spiritual direction is charity and mission. We are a people engaged in a project of fashioning the world in Jesus. We have had enough people burn out in their efforts to light the world on fire. We see ourselves very deliberately as part of the bellows that fans the fire and helps it to stay alive and burning. But the fire is to warm the world, the kingdom, not just the one we are directing. Though we may deal with the personal, private parts of one's life, we hope to be conscious, and assist another to be conscious, of the call outward as well as inward. The director is a filter helping others to experience God's love, supporting, trusting, and encouraging their knowl-

edge so that "as God has first loved us, we can also love one another" (1 Jn. 4:11). The spiritual director sees success in terms of the engagement in apostolic mission and not merely of the mental health of the directee.

These remarks on the definition of spiritual direction, and its two central processes might best be brought to a close by a glance at a simple but clarifying schema.

(On part of director)

Known  
Unknown

(On part of the directee)	
Known	Unknown
arena of free activity	blind side
secret self	subconscious unconscious

*John W. Hood*

1. *Arena of free activity:* known to both director and directee. This is what is available to the individual and to others for themselves and for service. This comfort zone needs constantly to expand, increased by a greater comfort with the known but secret self, and by the unknown blind side and secret self. As directors, we hope to help others to become more and more who they uniquely are, more comfortable with that unique person, and more able to freely give that person to others, to all.

2. *The secret self:* generally known to the individual but not always trusted or loved. One of the most common parts of the secret self is one's relationship to God, the whole gamut of religious experience. We do not easily share this with others, and gradually we do not trust the experiences we have and are unable to build our lives on them.

There are other parts of our secret self that often do not show even to God because we are ashamed (e.g., our sexuality, our fears, our anger).

Part of the director's role is to enable others to let this secret self become more acceptable both to themselves and to others. Both the good and the bad can become available to God. These hidden aspects of the self can be made available to others when it is appropriate. We are trying to know God's love in all of our being. Who we are must be shown to be loved.

3. *The blind side:* that part of a person that others can see easily or with care, but of which the individual is personally ignorant. Often this blind side entails our very best traits and most obvious virtues. Someone needs to help us see our goodness, which we seem to deny. And even the less good parts of ourselves (perhaps a trait that hurts others by cutting them or a way of speaking that is often misunderstood, etc.) needs to be known so that it can be redeemed. The director is often primarily able to help others to see the previously unacknowledged good and bad.

4. *The subconscious or unconscious:* involves that whole complex beneath the surface of a person's personality that remains unknown to a director and directee alike, unless it is probed. The probing needs to be done with care and with some expertise. Though this is a spiritually valuable arena where God often speaks to us in dreams and fantasies, or where our roots are born in family and cultural archetypes, one needs a competent guide when entering these depths. Not all directors will be comfortable here, nor may they be helpful. However, it is a domain proper for one who cares to learn.

We began this chapter with the simple prayer about our hidden selves becoming strong as Christ lives in our hearts. What that prayer means may now be a bit clearer in this unique and precious relationship of spiritual direction. In the succeeding chapters we will discuss further the overlap between counseling and directing as we look at the presuppositions of anyone in a helping relationship. We will then deepen our dealing with the spiritual by several chapters focusing specifically on prayer.

NP  
Dad  
Dear

## WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

### Reflections from Different Spiritual Traditions

**S**piritual direction is the contemplative practice of helping another person or group to awaken to the mystery called God in all of life, and to respond to that discovery in a growing relationship of freedom and commitment.

—James Keegan, SJ, Roman Catholic

Spiritual direction can mean different things to different people. Some people understand it to be the art of listening carried out in the context of a trusting relationship. It is when one person is trained to be a competent guide who then *companions* another person, listening to that person's life story with an ear for the movement of the Holy, of the Divine.

—Rev. Jeffrey S. Gaines, Presbyterian

The object of spiritual direction is to cultivate one's ability to discern God's presence in one's life—to notice and appreciate moments of holiness, to maintain an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, to explore ways to be open to the Blessed Holy One in challenging and difficult moments as well as in joyful ones. The spiritual director serves as a companion and witness, someone who helps you (sometimes with questions, sometimes just by listening) to discern the divine where you might have missed it and to integrate that awareness into your daily life, your *tefillah*, your *tikkun olam* work, your study, your ritual practice.

—Rabbi Jacob Staub, Jewish

Islam means to surrender to God in peace. The journey of surrender is the lifelong work of transforming the ego, opening the heart, and becoming conscious of God. We need to bring Divinity into the center of our lives. The guidance, inspiration, and support of a spiritual director, spiritual teacher, or spiritual friend is crucial to this process. The thirteenth century sage Rumi says that whoever travels without a guide needs two hundred years for a two-day journey. A Muslim spiritual director, teacher, or friend has abiding faith in the spiritual guidance abounding in the Qur'an, insights of the Prophet Muhammad, and teachings of Islamic sages.

—Sheikh Jamal Rahman, Muslim

Spiritual direction is encompassed in the Buddhist student-teacher relationship; the connection between spiritual director and directee is most reminiscent of the spiritual friend relationship—known in ancient Pali as *kalyanamitta*. This sacred friendship is one in which there is a depth of connection and commitment—a joining

together through empathy and wisdom. In Buddhist spiritual direction, the director, in mindful presence, shares in a heartfelt way the feelings expressed by the directee—meeting the directee's inherent goodness—the sacred still place within. Through empathy and wisdom, the spiritual director skillfully leads the directee to know his or her inherent goodness, inspiring the directee to envision and meet his or her true potential.

—Karin J. Miles, MA, Interfaith

Spiritual direction is the contemplative practice of accompanying (or joining with) a person or group as they awaken to the spiritual in everyday life, and it is the shared intentions and supports for the directee to have a deeper relationship with spirit through all phases of life.

—Dale Rhodes, Taoist

To live one's life in union with the Divine and to realize the freedom of one's highest Self is the ultimate goal of the Eastern philosophy of Yoga. Spiritual direction, from the perspective of Yoga, is founded on the understanding that God lives within the hearts of each of us and of all creation. The aim of spiritual direction is the formation of a partnership between God, the spiritual directee, and the spiritual director in a holy alchemy, which lovingly upholds the directee during exploration and deepening of one's relationship with God, others, all creation, and the higher Self. Through deep listening, powerful questions, and reflection of the thoughts and feelings conveyed by the directee, spiritual direction provides an opportunity to regularly reflect on life's events and circumstances from a spiritual perspective.

—Donna Woods, Philosophy of Yoga

Spiritual guidance is being present in the moment, seeing and honoring the sacred mystery of the soul of another. It is witnessing this mystery and reflecting it back in word, prayer, thought, presence, and action. Spiritual guidance is modeling a deep relationship with the Divine and standing in faith and love with the other as that relationship unfolds. Spiritual guidance is a journey of deep healing and an affirmation of Holiness (wholeness), the Sacred, and the Mystery of all of life.

—Carol A. Fournier, MS, NCC, Interfaith

To read more descriptions of spiritual direction, or to share your spiritual tradition, go to [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org).

