

# The Art of Spiritual Direction

MADELINE BIRMINGHAM, r.c., and WILLIAM J. CONNOLLY, S.J.

---

*Human Development is privileged to present in this feature article the first publication of a chapter from the authors' forthcoming book, *The Ministry of Spiritual Direction*. The work describes the way spiritual direction is understood and practiced at the Center for Religious Development, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The center, along with providing direction for laity, religious, and clergy, offers an eight-month developmental program for experienced spiritual directors.*

---

Spiritual direction" is not a self-explanatory term. In the course of Christian history, spiritual direction has had many faces. This variety has been especially evident in the last two decades. In this article we will present a description of the way the Center for Religious Development understands and practices spiritual direction, which is our center's principal occupation. Our description will focus on the experience of what actually happens when direction takes place. First we will show what spiritual direction looks like, then we will describe the process of direction as the director perceives it.

One of us, in connection with the preparation of an article for publication, was asked by an editor, "Do you have any photographs of spiritual direction?" "What would you photograph?" The reply he received was, "You would only see two people talking." That answer could hardly have been helpful to the editor in need of an illustration, but it accentuates a point that deserves attention as we begin to de-

scribe direction. There are no vestments, no rituals, and no formalities in spiritual direction. For the sake of clarity and brevity, we will call one of the two people conversing the directee and the other the director. But the difference between them lies in the different purposes they have in talking, not in the clothes they wear or the furnishings at their disposal. The director does not sit behind a desk, consult an array of books, or deliver homilies to a respectful listener. He or she may not even give advice. As director and directee begin their work together, they may discuss the unusually clear weather or the crowded condition of the parking lot. They look like what they are—just two people talking.

## DIRECTEE TAKES INITIATIVE

Since the primary purpose of direction is the development of the directee's relationship with God, his or her desire to pray during or after an interview is never seen as incidental to the interview. It is the

natural outcome of the two people talking, always to be hoped for, but never to be achieved by stratagem. When directees pray, they do so freely, because they have decided to pray.

Do directors and directees pray together? Probably not. Most directors at our center believe that a routine of praying together at the beginning or end of meetings can interfere with the relaxed atmosphere they hope for in direction. Relatively seldom, as a result, are more than a few minutes given to prayer during direction interviews, and this short period is not a regular practice. It does occur, however, when the directee suggests it. For example, a directee might say at the end of a meeting, "I'm amazed that I've become so clear about this today. I'd like to thank God for that. Would you pray with me?" Clearly, the initiative has been taken by the directee. The director would encourage that initiative, remembering that the purpose of the direction is enhancement of the directee's prayer. The director might say something like, "I'd be glad to pray with you. Why don't we take a moment of quiet and you can begin when you're ready." The director, participating as one who is affirming and encouraging the other, might thank God for what has happened between the directee and God but would not in any way move the focus selfward.

When the director thinks the directee might like to pray, even though the latter has not raised the possibility explicitly, the director might suggest, "The past week seems to have been an important time for you. I'm delighted that you've been able to share so much with me. You may want to spend a few minutes in our prayer room before you leave or thank God sometime during the week for all that has happened. How does that sound to you?" This again leaves the decision to pray with the directee, who remains in charge of when, how, and even whether to speak to God.

#### SILENCE A SOLUTION

The following remarks by Tom, a typical priest-director, point up another possible difficulty about praying with directees that is worth our attention:

After several months of praying often with my directees, I discovered that I had developed a little formula for every occasion. I felt like a greeting card! When I stopped to look at what was going on, I realized that I didn't always feel like praying from my heart. I was motivated by the idea that a good spiritual director should be able to pray anytime and anywhere with his directees.

Tom went on to say that he was now trying to be more true to himself. If one of his directees wanted to pray, he suggested that they pray in silence: "I tell the person that if either of us wants to pray aloud we can go ahead and do so. That seems to work out well. A great deal of the time, I am silent. I feel freer and it seems quite satisfactory to my directees."

---

## People's experience of prayer makes it clear that a relationship with God involves coming to know him rather than simply know about him

---

Related to the question of prayer together is another question that Catholics sometimes ask: Can one, or should one, receive the sacrament of reconciliation from the director when the director is a priest? Sometimes directees request the sacrament at our center, but we do not consider the sacrament an ordinary part of the process of direction. Most directees do not ask that it be administered during direction interviews.

When directees do indicate an interest or a need, we sometimes suggest making arrangements with another person on the staff. We do this because the emotional response to a "confessor" can be quite different from the response to a director and could influence the relationship with the director. Both tasks are true ministerial service. But the confessor is often perceived as a judge. He may be a merciful and compassionate person but can remain, in the eyes of the directee, the one who imposes sanctions and levies fines. He has the awesome power to forgive and the even more awesome power not to forgive. A spiritual director does not exercise this power. In fact, experience seems to have shown many directors that it is easier for directees to talk freely and reveal themselves more readily when the question of sin and forgiveness is not the paramount issue in the dialogue.

#### STARTING UP DIRECTION

The directee and the director usually try to bring the directee's hopes for direction into clear focus during their first meeting. The director will want to know what has prompted the directee to ask for direction. He or she might ask, after the conversation has proceeded for some time, "So the idea of direc-

tion is not new to you; you've thought about it awhile. Then this summer you decided to do something. What got you to make the decision?" Directors have more than information in mind when asking this question. They want to invite their directees to recall the event that brought them to direction and to talk about it.

No one begins direction in a vacuum. Often an external event has led the directee to start. It may have been a conversation with a friend, an opportunity to change careers, or perhaps an illness. Whatever it was, the director hopes the directee will recall it, look at it again, and to some extent relive it. If it is significant—and usually it is—he or she is willing to join the directee in the recalling and re-living. Together they may see more of the experience than the directee alone could see. The director is particularly interested in giving the directee an opportunity to put the memory of the event into words, because this objectifying will enable the directee to contemplate the event more thoroughly and realize more keenly how it influenced him or her.

Internal events have also occurred. The external happening has affected the directee's thinking and has aroused feeling-reactions. These in turn have motivated the directee to take action. The more fully directees can contemplate the external event, the more poignantly they will be aware of the thoughts and feelings it awakened. As they contemplate these thoughts and experience these feelings again, directees will be better able to explore the desires that brought them to direction. This is a matter of considerable moment for them. Their desire will be, except for God's action, the most helpful resource available to them in pursuing what they are looking for in direction. The more fully their minds and feelings lay hold of it, and the more tangibly they grasp its strength, the more forcefully it will influence them as they approach the choices that lie before them in the early stages of direction.

## DIRECTOR'S QUESTIONS ASSIST

What can the director do to help the directee explore these events? Let us begin with an example. A male directee and a female director have discussed the directee's reasons for seeking direction. Then the director asks, "Is there something that brought you to look for direction now? You've thought about it for the last year, but a month ago you made up your mind. What happened then that got you to decide?"

*Directee:* I had my fortieth birthday.

*Director:* That's an event all right. Congratulations!

*Directee:* Thanks. Well, birthdays always make me stop and think. This time I thought a lot. "Forty" has a pretty solemn tone to it. My life's half over. There are a lot of things I've wanted to do and haven't done. One of them is to get serious about God.

The directee has mentioned an external event: he has had his fortieth birthday. He has also experienced an interior event: the birthday has affected his thoughts and, it appears, his feelings.

*Director:* It sounds as though the birthday made an impression.

*Directee:* Like a punch in the jaw. I had heard that you give spiritual guidance here, so I looked up your number and I picked up the phone. (He pauses) But I didn't call. You decided not to?

*Director:* I thought: Wait a minute! What am I getting into here? I put down the phone and waited a couple of days.

*Director:* You waited.

*Directee:* And thought. And prayed. Then I called.

The directee has spoken of interior events: his hesitation, thought, and prayer. The director can overlook the possibility of exploring them. If she does, the directee will probably say no more about them. The director can, however, say,

*Director:* Remember what you thought and prayed about?

*Directee:* I thought, well, this is a very big step. This means letting someone else hear thoughts I've never spoken aloud.

*Director:* Letting someone hear what you've never heard yourself. Good reason to hesitate.

*Directee:* I wrestled with that.

*Director:* You wrestled with it. Quite a match?

*Directee:* I didn't want to come. I thought: The director won't understand what I'm talking about, and if that happens, I probably won't know what I'm talking about either. I get tongue-tied sometimes. Especially when I'm talking about things I'm not used to talking about, things that are important to me. I kept thinking: Who needs it? Then I thought: You need it. After awhile I remembered something Frank told me about you people. He's the friend who told me about this place. He said his director never rushed him. He said I could always take my time. Remembering that was reassuring.

*Director:* You went through a lot. It was important that you be able to take your own time. It was. I want to find the God who calls me, and not get bogged down in someone else's thoughts.

*Directee:* To find the God who calls you.

*Director:* Yes. To find him. That's why I wanted to come.

*Directee:* You seem emphatic about that. He calls you, and you want to find him.

*Directee:* I don't want anything to get in the way of that.

# A director will not view a directee's experience of God as he would a sighting of Halley's comet or a first glimpse of the Grand Canyon

*Director:* Would this be a good time to say more about him calling and your desire to find him?

Having experienced the director's willingness and ability to understand his hesitation, fear, and new assurance, the directee has now risked speaking of something still more intimate. He has begun to talk about God and about the desire to find him that underlies his request for direction. The director has shown him that she understands that he has begun to talk about God and has indicated that she is willing to talk further about God and the directee's desire for him. She has also left it to the directee to decide whether to pursue the matter further at this time. The directee may choose not to accept the director's invitation, but the director's attentiveness to the inner events he has already mentioned have given him reason to expect that she will also be attentive when he speaks further about God and himself.

Conversations like this, when we present them as role plays at workshops on spiritual direction, often elicit objections from some observers. The directee is doing all the work, they say; the director isn't doing anything. The director may rejoin that she feels tired after the conversation and believes that she has worked. It is true, however, that it is the directee, not the director, who has tried to recall the events that have provided the substance of the conversation and sought out the words to express them. It is he who will make the decision to speak further about God's relationship with him. This is no accident. It is important that it be so. No matter how telling a part the directors take in the process of direction, it is the directees who make all the major decisions. If

they do not make them, direction comes to a standstill. The efforts the directees expend in the early interviews help them develop a habit of work and a momentum that will serve them well later, both in direction itself and in prayer. Among the most useful favors directors can do for directees in the early interviews is to refuse to do the directees' work for them and to let the directees expend the effort that will enable them to develop this momentum.

## LISTENING TO EXPERIENCE

The principal issue in the conversations between the directee and the director is the directee's experience. This is the case at the beginning of direction, as we have indicated, and it remains true through the course of direction. The directee's experience changes, but it remains the principal issue.

Once we have grasped the centrality of the directee's experience, we can readily understand that the director's most fundamental task is listening. It is first of all through listening that directors can help their directees to bring the experience that has persuaded them to consider direction out of the private world of their thoughts, feelings, and desires into the conversation that takes place in direction. Directees acknowledge the fundamental nature of this task when they say, as they often do about directors who are helpful to them, "He listens." They also acknowledge it when they sum up the deficiencies of directors who are not helpful, by saying, "He doesn't listen." Unless the director listens, spiritual direction cannot proceed.

"It seemed an easy job, sitting there listening," one director said as he described his first reactions to the prospect of adopting direction as his principal ministry. It does appear easy, and it is a simple service. Directees often let us know, however, that they have found it hard to come by people, even directors, who are able to provide it.

The listening that takes place when the director is performing this fundamental task is far more than the physical act of attending to words. It is participation in the directee's attempt to describe his or her experience so that directee and director can contemplate it together.

What this participation involves can be shown by an example. Phil, who comes to Jack for direction, is describing a recent experience that he believes has something to do with his relationship with God.

*Phil:* I was hiking alone through a forest. It was toward the end of the summer, and the foliage was very full and luxuriant. The highway and the noise of traffic were far behind me. There was no wind. The woods seemed absolutely still. It occurred to me that the forest seemed as limitless as the sea. It was all around me. Branches arched over my head and roots lay under my feet. I felt immersed in it, as you

might be immersed in the ocean. I noticed something else, too. Little by little I became aware of the profusion of living things around me. A cluster of large ferns sprouted beside the trail; a branch with maple-like leaves brushed against me; a spray of tiny blue flowers nestled against a boulder. I noticed these. But what I became most aware of was the leaves, thousands of them around me and above me, all slightly stirring. Suddenly I was astonished at the abundance of all that life. (He pauses.) I thought, I'm not alone.

Phil pauses again, and Jack says,

All that abundance and you thought, "I'm not alone."

Phil: Yes. I'm not alone. That's what I thought. I stopped and stood for a long time. I wasn't aware of the time, but I realized later it was a long time.

Jack: You stood there.

Phil: Yes. Listening.

Jack: Listening?

Phil: Listening to the silence. That's a strange thing to say, isn't it?

Jack: Say more.

Phil: It was as though the silence was full of life and was telling me something. As though something was being said that I couldn't make out. As though someone responsible for all that life was speaking.

Jack: As though someone was speaking?

Phil: Yes, and telling me . . . well, after awhile it sounded as though there was care for me. As though I were a swimmer immersed in care for me.

At workshops we conduct on spiritual direction we sometimes ask, "Why doesn't Jack ask questions like, 'Do you think you could have been imagining this?' or 'Have you ever had an experience like this before?' What do you think Jack is trying to do?"

When we ask these questions of participants, someone usually answers, "You're using nondirective counseling techniques." To this, when we have

## ESSENTIAL TO SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

THE PRINCIPAL  
ISSUE  
IN  
SPIRITUAL  
DIRECTION  
IS

THE DIRECTOR'S  
FUNDAMENTAL  
TASK  
IS

DIRECTEE'S  
EXPERIENCE

LISTENING TO THE  
DIRECTEE'S EXPERIENCE\*

\*SO THAT BOTH DIRECTOR AND DIRECTEE CAN CONTEMPLATE IT

our wits about us, we reply, "We know what it sounds like. But what is Jack trying to do?"

If Jack asked, "Do you think you were imagining this?" or "Have you ever had an experience like this before?" he would be distracting Phil from the attention he is giving to the experience. The distraction might be only momentary, but it would still be a distraction. All the director's comments and questions are aimed at helping Phil keep his attention on the event he is describing. Phil is absorbed in the experience, and Jack is absorbed in it with him.

Jack may also be curious. He may want to know whether Phil has had experiences like this on other occasions, but he does not let his curiosity interfere with the absorption. It might be helpful to Phil to try to remember similar experiences in another interview, or later in the same conversation, but the attention he is giving to the experience now is too important to be interrupted.

#### CURSORY REACTION AVOIDABLE

Most of us are not accustomed to standing and looking. We are attracted by the majesty of mountain views, the swirling power of blizzards, the gradually deepening color of high clouds as sunrise approaches, and by God. But we tend to glance at them and quickly turn our attention to other objects or other concerns. We give a moment's attention, but we turn away before we can become absorbed enough in what we see to be more than superficially affected by it.

Jack does what he does because he wants to give Phil a chance to be more than superficially affected by his experience in the forest. Whether Phil returns to the memory of the experience and lets it form a basis for reflection and prayer, he has to decide for himself. Jack may ask him whether he would like to do this. But Jack has already done something that is likely to be more conducive to further reflection and prayer than a suggestion will be. By his interest in and engagement with Phil's experience, he has helped him to pay attention to it long enough to become absorbed in it again and be further influenced by it. To let the memory become a basis for prayer will be easier because this conversation took place. In fact, Phil may have begun to pray during the conversation itself.

#### CONTEMPLATION OF GOD

In his conversation with Phil, Jack did not try to focus Phil's attention on God. He did not focus on Phil's remark "I'm not alone," for example. Instead, he continued to let Phil describe what had happened in his own way, at his own pace, and to decide for himself what course the account would take. He also wanted Phil to choose his own emphasis and to recognize for himself what he was emphasizing. Thus, when Phil remarked a moment later that it was as

---

The more frankly people disclose their feelings to God, the more he seems to communicate himself to them

---

though someone responsible for the life around him was speaking, Jack did not ask him to be more specific. He said simply, "As though someone was speaking?" Phil then mentioned that he was aware, there in the forest, that there was care for him.

Phil might pause to reflect. Realizing that someone cares for one has a different effect on a person than recognizing that there is someone within speaking distance. Phil has reason to pause.

What should Jack do now? We have come to a point in the conversation that proves to be a crux for directors. Both Jack and Phil are contemplating Phil's experience. Jack may think he knows that someone was speaking to Phil, and that the someone cared for him. Jack may not be sure, however, that Phil knows this, or if he does know it, that he is willing to admit it. Many directors would say that Jack should now "lead" Phil to the knowledge Jack already has or the admission he has already made. Jack, however, chooses not to lead Phil, but to let him come to his own knowledge and his own admission. How can Jack do this? By encouraging Phil to keep looking at this experience and what it was making known to him.

It is, after all, Phil's experience, not Jack's. Jack will do well to let Phil keep looking until he finds out for himself what the silence is telling him. For there is more than an intellectual answer at issue. If God is speaking through the silence, the issue has to do with his relationship with Phil, and that will have to be lived out, not merely thought out.

How a relationship is to be lived out has to be determined by the persons who are relating to one another. People's experience of prayer, however, makes it clear that a relationship with God involves coming to know him rather than simply know about

him. When Jack encourages Phil to pay further attention to the silence, he expects that in God's time and in Phil's, this will mean that Phil will pay attention to God as God wants to disclose himself. Jack hopes, too, that it will become a giving of attention without a practical agenda but engaged in for its own sake: to come to know God as God is intent on revealing himself in his relationship with Phil.

## ATTENDING TO FEELING-REACTIONS

A director will not, therefore, view a directee's experience of God as he would a sighting of Halley's comet or a first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. What the directee perceives is important. Also important, however, is the directee's feeling-reaction to what he or she has perceived.

In the conversation between Jack and Phil the director would ask, after he and Phil had explored Phil's perception of his experience,

How did it make you feel?

Phil might reply,

Feel? What do you mean?

Jack: Were your feelings affected? Did your body tense? Did your skin get prickly?

Phil laughs: No, no. I felt good.

Jack: Good?

Phil: I felt very good.

Jack: Do you have another word for it?

Phil: Well, wait a minute. (Long pause) I felt warm. It was a kind of tender feeling, I suppose. I had forgotten that.

The purpose of these questions is not to undertake an extensive exploration of Phil's feelings and so depart from the contemplative thrust of the conversation. Jack wants Phil to pay attention now to the way he participated in the experience, to Phil's side of the relationship. He begins, not with his deliberate participation, but with his involuntary, spontaneous participation, which will show itself in his feeling-reactions.

Phil has now begun a new phase of his description. When I begin to describe my feelings I begin to describe myself, and the more specifically and concretely I describe my feelings, the more explicitly I reveal myself. I disclose myself not only to the person to whom I am talking but to myself as well. A person describing his feelings about a religious experience will often explain, "I had no idea I felt like that! It was only as I described my feelings to you that I realized what they were."

This moment of self-revelation is a delicate juncture in the conversation. The person describing his feelings may want to stop doing so now. He may disengage, for example, by resorting to general descriptives like "good," "not too bad," or "all right,"

which reveal little about his personal reactions. If this happens, the director has to decide whether to ask for a further description of his feelings or let the matter rest. His primary purpose at this point in the conversation is not to learn more about the directee's feelings, but to offer the directee the opportunity to express himself more completely to God. If he believes that the directee now knows his feelings well enough to tell God concretely what he feels, he may not pursue the subject further. He may say simply, "You don't have to say any more about your feelings to me. How do you feel, though, about saying them as completely and concretely as you can to God?" If he is in doubt about the directee's awareness, he may ask the directee whether he thinks he knows his feelings well enough to say them to God.

The decision is significant because of the consequences it is likely to have. If the directee does not express his feelings concretely to God, he is likely to find that further attempts at prayer will prove flat and lifeless. If he does express himself concretely and immediately, he may find that God will reveal himself further. The more frankly people disclose their feelings to God, the more he seems to communicate himself to them.

The first attempts to express feeling to God are a beginning. Directees' deeper feelings may come only gradually into their consciousness, so it may be weeks or months before they express them fully. In the meantime, the attention they give to letting the feelings of which they are aware come before God furthers almost imperceptibly their communication with him. The director does what he or she can by encouraging the directee to persist in quiet but sustained attention to this communication.

It will be important during this time that directees not divert their effort to communicate feeling into a self-absorbed exploration of their feelings. We easily become fascinated by such explorations and, lacking a director's help, can be drawn into them without realizing that they are distracting us from our main purpose.

The principal purpose of letting ourselves become aware of our feelings in prayer is the communication of ourselves to God. This requires, however, not only self-awareness but trust in the other person. We do not disclose our feelings, especially our deeper feelings, to those whom we do not trust to receive and accept them.

## INTERACTION WITH GOD

Looking at God, and listening to him, indispensable as they are for spiritual growth, can still leave a person passive before him. To begin to interact with God, directees must lay hold of their experience of God. They do this by making up their mind to trust God as they have experienced him.

We cannot, however, force ourselves to trust. Tightening jaw muscles and gritting teeth will not

---

**If directors are preoccupied with the moral, psychological, or social growth of their directees, they may not give the religious experience the attention it deserves**

---

achieve trust. Before we trust another person in delicate matters we have to recognize him or her to be trustworthy. But knowing persons to be trustworthy is not the same as trusting them. Directees say "I trust God," and we sometimes know they are expressing a vague belief that he is trustworthy, not a conviction based on experience that they can count on him. Before we come to trust him in a matter that is important to us, we have to take a chance on him. Many who say "I trust God" have not yet trusted him enough, for example, to express to him their most intimate feelings—their deepest fears, their fiercest resentments, their most tremulous attachments. As a result, their relationship with him lacks spontaneity, and their prayer tends to be guarded.

A religious experience is of inestimable value in itself, apart from the moral, psychological, or social development that may follow from it. The fact that it has occurred is itself precious. It is worth remarking that if directors are preoccupied with the moral, psychological, or social growth of their directees, they may not give the religious experience the attention it deserves. If they do, what can happen?

In the conversation between Jack and Phil, after they have talked about Phil's feeling-reactions to his experience—and they would do so at greater length than we have described—Jack might ask,

Now that you've thought and talked about the incident in the forest, does anything about it stand out prominently in your mind?

*Phil:* It seems to me that God was doing something for me.

*Jack:* Doing something for you?

*Phil:* Going out of his way for me. Doing something special.

*Jack:* That's saying a lot.

*Phil:* I know. I feel strange saying it. I'm not used to thinking that God could go out of his way for me.

*Jack:* I don't know whether you want to say more about it or be quiet and ponder it. Or change the subject.

*Phil:* It means a lot to me. Could I be quiet with it for a minute?

*Jack:* Sure, take your time.

*Phil, after a long pause:*

I can't get over the care he seemed to be showing me. All I want to do just now is be aware of it and let it sink in.

Phil and Jack end the conversation here. They resume it the next time they meet, a week later.

*Phil:* I didn't have much time to pray this week. Life gets hectic at this time of the year. This week was the worst yet.

*Jack:* Pretty wild, eh?

*Phil:* It sure was.

*Jack:* Did you have a chance to think about what we were discussing last week?

*Phil:* That's what was so disappointing. I had hardly any opportunity to do that.

*Jack:* Did you think about it at all?

*Phil:* Not much.

Readers with little experience of direction may be puzzled by the contrast between Phil's diffidence at this meeting and the enthusiasm he showed at the end of the last interview. Those with more experience will find the reversal familiar. Both enthusiasm and diffidence are genuine. Both are reactions to the experience in the forest and the conversation about it. Jack, by his careful attention to Phil's freedom, has provided opportunity for both reactions to develop. He could now be daunted by Phil's hesitation and change the subject. He does not do so.

*Jack:* Remember what you thought when it passed through your mind?

*Phil:* I was glad it happened. It was a wonderful experience. But I don't know what to do with it.

*Jack:* Did you trust it?

*Phil:* Trust it? What do you mean?

*Jack:* Sometimes a person can doubt that he really had the experience, or wonder whether God had anything to do with it.

"Do you trust it?" With this question Jack has raised a key issue. Phil has been attracted by his experience in the forest. He has talked about it and reflected on it with enthusiasm. He may not, however, have asked himself whether he trusts it. He has

been accustomed to hearing about God and reading about him. But he experiences many perceptions every day, and many of them are moving, some of them deeply so. Most of them, however, give place quickly to newer, fresher perceptions, leaving little impression on his thought and his life. Jack knows that Phil may want to grasp his memory of the experience in the forest and not let it slip away. He may be willing to build on it by letting it be a focus for his prayer and reflection and, perhaps, in time, a basis for action. His question offers Phil the possibility of deliberately acknowledging the reality of his experience. This acknowledgement, if he is willing to make it, will provide Phil with a foundation on which he can build. "Do you trust it?" affords him an opportunity to establish that foundation.

People who are beginning to be aware of their experience of God are not usually consistent in their willingness to trust the experience enough to build on it. They are often satisfied to have had the experience. It does not occur to them that their habitual way of perceiving their relationship with God can now change and that their expectations of him can change too. They vacillate for a time between the new perception and their older, habitual perceptions of him. They may be convinced today that God has now shown himself caring for them, yet may not give themselves a chance to pray again for weeks.

This vacillation frequently occurs in another type of situation: A directee has had an experience of God showing his care for her. She is delighted by the experience. A few weeks later someone dear to the directee becomes grievously ill. The directee thinks, believes, and prays now as though the experience of God's care had never taken place. Indeed, she may forget that it did.

Any disappointment that cuts us to the quick can bring surging back into our consciousness childhood fears of a God who was then perceived as arbitrary or vindictive. We may say, and mean it, that God cares for us and that his love is unconditional. But our older, more compelling perception tells us otherwise, so we withdraw from God as we would from any arbitrary or vindictive being who has power over us. We avoid affective contact with him. We may not pray at all, except to ask perfunctorily for his help, or if we do try to pray more extensively we may recognize no feeling at all and find ourselves so harried by distractions that we can pay no attention to God. When this happens, directors will spend a significant part of their time asking, "Do you remember?"

## PAST CAN ASSIST

This will not be their only task. They will listen to their directees' experience of disappointment and will explore with them their conscious feelings. They may also ask whether the disappointment and fear remind the directees of other occasions when those feelings were aroused. If they are wise, they will

avoid the extensive probing of feelings that is the proper province of psychotherapy. Their major task will be that of asking the directees whether they recall any experience that has shown God to be other than fearsome, to be instead loving and caring and inviting the directees to freedom.

When directors ask about such an experience they are not implying that the directees should view God as loving and caring now. The directees may not be able to do this, and guilt at being unable to do it would only be another useless burden. Directors are suggesting, however, that the directees, once they recall an experience that shows God as other than harsh and unfeeling, might decide whether they are willing to let that experience affect them too.

A person unsettled by mishaps or torn by tragedy can find it supremely difficult to let himself be absorbed again in the memory of an experience that revealed God loving him and caring for him. Grief, chagrin, and resentment are powerful emotions that can absorb our attention like quicksand, and they are especially potent when people try to quiet their minds for prayer. "When I try to quiet down, those feelings come in on me," directees will say. Often, a person who wants to engage in prayer of more than a few minutes' duration can do so only if she addresses the feelings themselves to God. This frequently permits her to become aware of God and pay attention to him. If her awareness of God is dominated by a lurking suspicion that God is harsh and arbitrary, she will find this difficult to do. The violence of her emotions will make it hard for her to listen to any suggestion that God might not be as harsh as her perceptions make him seem. If the director is patient and discreet, however, he or she can usually find opportunities to invite the directee to recall an experience of God that showed him to be other than harsh and arbitrary.

When a directee has experienced God as caring and trustworthy but is now oppressed by a more deeply entrenched impression of God as harsh and vengeful, the directee's freedom to allow God to be himself with him or her is at stake. The older impression overwhelms the memory of any newer experience that shows God to be different.

## DIRECTOR A FACILITATOR

It is easy for a director to neglect his facilitative task at a time like this and take on the role of teacher. "You have to remember the experience you described to me a few weeks ago, and what it taught you" can come readily to his lips when the directee is strongly and intransigently expressing her discouragement. Only if he is doggedly convinced that he can best serve the directee by encouraging her to pay attention to God as God himself chooses to show himself can the director provide lasting help.

It may take weeks or months of weekly meetings before his patience and concern take effect. During

## GENERAL RULES BASED ON EXPERIENCE

IF THE DIRECTEE EXPRESSES HIS/HER FEELINGS CONCRETELY AND IMMEDIATELY TO GOD

GOD IS LIKELY TO REVEAL HIMSELF FURTHER

FURTHER ATTEMPTS AT PRAYER MAY PROVE FLAT AND LIFELESS

IF THE DIRECTEE DOES NOT EXPRESS HIS/HER FEELINGS DIRECTLY TO GOD

this time he will be better able to maintain his facilitative posture if he relies more on the directee's memory than on his own and keeps inviting the directee to relive her experience of God caring as the directee herself recalls it. "I seem to remember something that happened a few months ago when you were watching a sunset," he can say. "You'll remember it better than I. Can you recall it for me?"

Another example will help make clearer the struggle a directee may have to undergo in choosing between older attitudes toward God and newer attitudes suggested by recent experience. It can also illustrate the facilitative position a director can take in assisting the directee.

Maria is a friendly, engaging woman in her middle fifties, a member of a religious congregation. She has been a schoolteacher for more than thirty years. She is a capable teacher and has a degree of enthusiasm for her work that younger teachers envy.

Until six months ago, she perceived God as basically a guardian of law and of the regulations that govern her religious congregation. Prayer had always been something of an ordeal for her. It often centered on what was expected of her, and she frequently asked God's help to accomplish what she

was "supposed to do." Sometimes, especially when she felt more than usually oppressed, she asked God what he wanted of her, but since she always thought she knew, she never waited for a reply.

At that time she had an experience in prayer that made her aware that God cared for her exactly as she is, with all the quirks that embarrass her and the pettiness she tries to hide even from herself. "But I'm as petulant and inconsistent as a six-year-old," she cried out to him. "Doesn't that matter to you?" At that moment she had a very strong sense that somehow God was letting her know that what mattered so bitterly to her did not diminish his care and affection for her.

After that incident she became increasingly able to express her deeper feelings spontaneously to him. "When I talk to him," she said to Roger, her director, "I start sentences without knowing how I'm going to finish them. It's such a delight to be that carefree with someone who loves you." She also began to find herself markedly less guarded with two of the women with whom she lived. One memorable day she overheard a student say of her, "It is such fun to hear her talk about God now!" She experienced weeks of calm and uninterrupted joy. "I never thought," she

told Roger, "that I could be this happy again."

Then, six weeks ago, her younger sister was found to have terminal cancer. Several days later, her sister's youngest son, a boy of whom Maria is especially fond, was seriously injured in an automobile accident. It is still not known whether he will regain the use of his right arm.

Maria has visited her sister and her nephew every day since they entered the hospital. She has been indefatigable in her efforts to encourage them and the other members of their family. She has prayed frequently for her sister and her nephew but has not resumed the intimate prayer in which she was engaged before her sister's illness was diagnosed. A week ago Roger asked her, "Do you think God has any interest in what has happened to you and your family?" She answered, "I don't know. He seems to be employed full-time on the moon."

Maria realizes that she is grieving and that she must expect to experience strong and diverse emotions. She and Roger have spoken of this, and she has gradually become able to express to him much of what she feels. But she remains troubled because God is so distant and seems to show so little concern for her. When Roger asks her whether she could tell God how she feels, she replies that there seems little point in doing that. After a long pause, she replies bitterly, "You say what you really feel only to someone who cares."

**Roger:** Do you ever look back to what God seemed like to you a couple of months ago?

**Maria:** Yes. It seems unreal. It has nothing to do with my life now.

**Roger:** I wonder whether it might be worthwhile to recall it and spend some time with it?

One director has said, of a directee's feelings in situations like this, "It is as though you have been walking together down a long, straight corridor and you turn a corner to find yourself suddenly confronted by a massive stone wall, with no door. You are keenly aware of the directee's frustration, and you yourself feel dispirited, afraid, and a little angry that your way has been so completely blocked."

Roger's feelings make him aware of some of Maria's feelings. He is also aware that despite the intransigence of her feelings, she has a choice that she can make. She can choose to keep recalling God's care for her and her spontaneous openness to God. To recognize that she has a choice does not minimize its difficulty. But she can give attention to her memory of God's care, and she will not unless she decides to do so. If she does not make this choice, the memory will remain, like most memories, unavailable to contemplation.

Making this choice is a major moment in accepting God as he has shown himself to be and allowing the dialogue with him to continue. If he remains faithful to his task of facilitation, Roger will not urge Maria

---

**People beginning to be aware of their experience of God are not usually consistent in their willingness to trust the experience enough to build on it**

---

to make the choice. He will, however, help her to keep the possibility of choice in mind and to remain aware that she has not made it.

#### **REGRESSION IS POSSIBLE**

Maria's indecision is an instance of a phenomenon that appears frequently through the course of spiritual life. We will call it "counter-movement" when we are referring to single occurrences and "counter-current" when we are speaking of a recurrent counter-movement. Counter-movement is an impulse, and counter-current a stream of recurrent impulses, that prompts a person to withdraw from new life. A term used in psychology to describe an analogous situation is "resistance."

In the experience we have just described, Maria has withdrawn from the memory that God has cared for her and from the nascent realization that he may be caring for her still. The experience of knowing God's care and responding to it still attracts her, but the force of the impulse to withdraw makes considering the attraction a difficult, even a herculean, task.

The painful events that have occurred in Maria's family could well give her reason to think that God is arbitrary and callous. It is the inner event, however, that betrays the presence of counter-movement. Although she has recently been convinced by her experience of him that God cares for her, she behaves now as though that event had never occurred. To consider both the painful events in her family and her experience of God caring for her and to decide that God might after all be only an uncaring

guardian of law would be regressive, but it would not be irrational. It is in her return to her old perception of God without seriously considering her recent contrary experience of him that the impulse away from God potently reveals itself.

When directors encounter a prolonged and intense counter-movement in their directees, they can easily make the mistake of thinking the directees obtuse or perversely acquiescing in their own unfreedom. The directors can then find themselves nonplussed or angry. Yet a counter-movement is inexplicable unless it is seen as the harbinger of new life. A counter-movement counters a movement toward freedom and toward God. If directors can ally themselves with the possibility of new life and with the directees' freedom to make their own decisions, they will want to remain in vital contact with their directees as the directees hesitate. Recalling how often they themselves have resisted the approach of new life will be particularly helpful in enabling them to summon up the patience to do so. When a person deeply desires God, the defeats inflicted by counter-movement are likely to be only temporary.

The process of direction takes place on the ground of the directee's life and prayer. It changes ground as the directee's life and relationship with God change. Today the ground on which direction takes place may be the directee's desire for more interior freedom. Next week it may be his or her resentment at a loss he or she has suffered. A month from now it may be an attraction to Jesus as he appears in the Gospel account of his meeting with the widow of Naim. Two months from now it can be an attraction to Jesus' enthusiasm for the poor coupled with the directee's embarrassment when he or she is approached by beggars. Over months and years the ground changes as the directee's awareness and prayer change.

The director's basic task, however, will remain the same. It will always be the facilitation of the directee's encounter and dialogue with God. On whatever ground the dialogue with God takes place, directors will best serve their directees by helping them to become absorbed in what God is like and to candidly express to God what they experience as they stand before him.

#### FEAR CAN IMPEDE

When people have had little or no experience of spiritual direction, they can enter into the process with some degree of fear. One directee stated, "I was afraid that you were going to try to force me into a box, make me conform to particular standards. It took awhile before I could relax and believe that was not going to happen to me. Then I could let the fists in my stomach unclench." Such fear energizes a directee toward self-defense and siphons off the energy that could be focused on relating to God.

Fear may also result from a previous experience of

---

## Grief, chagrin, and resentment are powerful emotions that can absorb our attention like quicksand

---

direction. Another directee spoke of realizing that he was disappointing his director: "Doris let me know that she had expected me to be further into prayer after three months of direction. I felt as though I had robbed her of all her Christmas presents!"

Reactions such as these reinforce the need for the director to emphasize that there is no particular method to be learned and no specific goal to be reached within a given time span. We try to help directees to remain open to God's action and to increase their awareness of what God seems to be doing and saying. We invite directees to continue the struggle to pray and to allow God to keep revealing more to them.

It is up to God to work directly with the praying person—inviting, challenging, consoling, revealing, and even at times demanding reaction and response. Responding to God in this way is a task that also generates fear, but this fear is usually accompanied by attraction. It becomes the director's responsibility to encourage the directee to keep looking at and following God's leading, especially as the directee comes to recognize that there are no clear-cut rules that guarantee relationship with God.

One directee at our center revealed, "I came to the center thinking that I would get some answers, some signposts that would help me to see where God was calling me and what I ought to do. I believed that God would become crystal clear. Instead I kept finding that there were all kinds of surprises. Nothing worked the way I thought it was supposed to. As I look back now, I can see moments of joy and moments of pain. The only thing I am sure of now is that I can never be certain about what God is going to do. But God knows, and I am going to keep letting

myself be surprised, even when I don't particularly like it."

If, then, there is no method, no gauge to measure concretely either the amount or type of growth in relationship that will occur, we are entitled to ask what we can rely on. Is there anything that will indicate what is likely to happen between God and the directee?

## RELATIONSHIP A DANCE

One way to look at the ongoing relationship with God, the struggle between God and the directee to continue meeting each other, is to compare it to a dance. A man reading these pages may easily recall the anxiety he felt the first time he searched a dance floor for the person he most wanted to approach. He may also remember the sweaty palms, the wild beating of his heart, as he searched for the courage to risk the coldness of refusal and to ask the woman to dance. A woman could be reminded of the apprehension she felt about not attracting a partner after hours of preparation and waiting. Her apprehension might have been immeasurably increased when she was approached by someone she did not know or someone she found unattractive. And it is not unknown, although sometimes difficult to understand, for a woman to refuse to dance with the one person for whom she feels the most attraction.

Many of these feelings and reactions are also apparent when God first approaches a directee. God stands before the person waiting for a sign of recognition, hoping for an indication of welcome and acquiescence. The dance can begin or not, depending on the response of the other. This is what we can often forget when we look at the relationship with God. God does take the initiative, but we can and do say "no" as often as we say "yes."

If there is a positive response, then the dance can begin. In our fantasies, of course, we move into a dance exactly as do Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron. There is no faltering, no testing, no mistake. But we all know that this is seldom true in the reality of life. Dancing requires learning and practice. The steps may be simple, but they are also intricate and the tricky dimension is that I not only have to learn the movement and mood of my own body but also the movement and mood of my partner's. There is dependence on the other at all times if we are to have a partnership, a common venture, a task to be shared, as well as joy. The two

people must learn to move together in harmony, with a sense of suppleness and lightness. We have two very individual people who achieve a sense of oneness only through work and practice.

In the dance, there are moments when the two separate and move away from each other. If the dance is to continue, the partners have to be intent on turning again toward each other, a swift looking, a refinding, then achieving grace and harmony again. If the relationship with God is to be continued, he and the directee must remain conscious of each other with all that this implies: seeking, asking again, accepting, and moving together.

This is the way it must be in the deeper relationship with God. There is continuous movement, constant searching out. There are moments of fear and anxiety, and other moments of fluid joy and supple grace. The question of who does the leading becomes purely a technical one. There is a mutuality of relationship, a desire to blend and to meld as one. The true dancer knows through experience that the secret of mutuality lies in trust, suppleness, and sensitivity to the slightest rhythmic motion of the partner. Does this say anything about the relationship we seek with God?

The first moment is one that can never be recaptured. It happens only once. Those of us who have experienced God's invitation recognize this moment for ourselves. It is that time when we finally say our "yes" with a full heart, despite our fear that we will not know the right steps, that we will not know how to follow, or indeed, not even be sure that we want to follow. But we say "yes" and the dance begins.

Until that happens we are like the people in the Samaritan village who came out to see Jesus because the sinful woman claimed to have talked to one who was more than the ordinary traveler. It was only when they made the effort to hike out to the well and experienced him talking directly to each of them that they could say, "We believe now, not because of what you have told us, but because we have seen and heard him ourselves."

In the ongoing relationship, we rely on this first experience of dancing with God, but we cannot remain there. God is constantly calling on us to learn new moods, new rhythms, new steps. If we wish to become proficient, we set ourselves to the task. The struggle, the exercise, the practice may be somewhat daunting at times, but each new dance will find us more flexible, more supple, more filled with grace. Spiritual direction can improve our dancing.