

Spiritual Direction - A Brief Introduction

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Spiritual direction is a spiritual discipline which has been a source of nurture for Christians for centuries. It is a form of soul care which offers an individual the opportunity to meet with another Christian for the purpose of examining his/her relationship with God. Director and directee meet regularly perhaps weekly, fortnightly, monthly or even bi-annually for conversation and prayer. A director is not an advisor but more of a facilitator helping the directee pay attention to what God (the true Director) is doing in his or her life.

Directees who benefit most are those who desire more of God, who want a deepened relationship with Him, a keener sense of His presence. Yet it is not necessary to have specific questions or problems in order to seek direction – just a desire for God. In the process God will reveal where the gaps are.

The Process

In spiritual direction the focus is on the experience of God in daily life. The session is a contemplative space - a place for honest reflection and for listening to God. It is an unhurried time which may include conversation, silence, readings, prayers. There is no set program or procedure. David Benner, Director of the Institute for Psychospiritual Health in Philadelphia, describes spiritual direction as a prayer process, because director and directee meet together in the presence of God. "I understand prayer as attunement and response to God's presence....Conversation becomes prayer when both the director and the directee are aware that they are in God's presence."¹

Listening is essential to growing in relationship with God and the need to learn to listen is often what brings people to spiritual direction. Directors, therefore, make this a central theme in their work. Listening is how we find out what God is doing and that is where we will find our growing edge. As Eugene Peterson points out,

The assumption of spirituality is that always God is doing something before I know it. So the task is not to get God to do something I think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can respond to it and participate and take delight in it.²

The frequency of spiritual direction sessions will be determined by many factors including the need, stage of the Christian journey, life situations etc. Fortnightly or

¹ David Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction*. (Downers Grove, IVP, 2002), 94

² Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983), 4

monthly sessions are the norm. Christians who have been in direction for many years sometimes find that twice a year is sufficient. Some incorporate spiritual direction into their lives on an ongoing basis while others engage in it only for a season e.g. when facing major life decisions or in times of spiritual 'crisis'. One can never outgrow the need for spiritual direction, though the regularity and intensity are likely to vary over time.

Who should seek spiritual direction?

Spiritual direction is a discipline open to anyone who desires to deepen their relationship with God. However, since it's about reflecting on one's experience with God it is perhaps more beneficial to those who have been on the faith journey for a while than for newcomers to the faith.

Christian leaders have found spiritual direction invaluable in keeping them growing in their God relationship. C. S. Lewis, for example, met almost weekly with his spiritual director for more than eleven years, the relationship ending with the death of his director, Father Walter Adams, a member of the Anglican Society of St. John the Evangelist. To use contemporary examples, pastors and leaders such as Richard Foster, Leighton Ford and Eugene Peterson all speak of the benefits they derive from spiritual direction. Ford says of his times with his director, Father David Valtiera,

We talk about one central issue: What our prayer lives are like, and what is God like in relation to every aspect of our lives. David's approach is that he is not there to direct in any authoritarian sense, but we can talk together about what is it like when we pray. . . Without a lively prayer life . . . it is difficult to pay attention to the movements of God in the heart.³

Leaders are particularly susceptible to the dangers that loneliness in the faith can bring. The opportunity for unmasking and reflection, the partnering and accountability that spiritual direction offers is therefore particularly valuable.

A brief history of Spiritual direction

Spiritual direction has long history going back to the earliest days of the Church. Letters of spiritual guidance were primary means of providing spiritual nurture to the growing communities of Christians in the first century AD. This was continued by the Church fathers in the second century. By the fourth and fifth centuries thousands were seeking out the desert fathers and mothers for counsel. As monasticism grew, spiritual direction remained a central feature and point of contact between vowed communities and the public. Spiritual direction became an important aspect of the soul care provided by the church. The protestant reformers continued this. They were men who both benefited

³ Lauren Winner, "From Mass Evangelist to Soul Friend" *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 11.

from and gave spiritual direction. Martin Luther's letters of spiritual direction⁴ are still available to us and give us a good indication of the place spiritual direction held in the life of the church. As protestantism grew, other forms of spiritual nurture were emphasized (such as preaching) and in some protestant groups spiritual direction was viewed with suspicion. In others it was subsumed in pastoral counselling. Today it is once again becoming a separate ministry as leaders of our era such as Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Eugene Peterson, Richard Foster (to name just a few) have brought it to attention of the evangelical community.

Spiritual direction has varied somewhat over the centuries in emphasis, though not in its essential nature. Among the Desert Fathers/Mothers of the West and Starets of the Eastern Church and in the monastic tradition in general, spiritual directors were very prescriptive in their relationship with directees, teaching them specific spiritual disciplines and exercising some authority over their directees. Ignatius of Loyola continued this though his letters also include the less prescriptive, spiritual advice giving that characterized the direction of persons such as, Francis de Sales, St. Theresa, Martin Luther, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill and Meister Eckhart. In the resurgence of this ministry which is now underway in evangelical circles there is more emphasis on direction as companioning and facilitating and less on advice giving or prescribing, although these are not precluded. Today, listening – both to God and to the directee – is seen as the first task of the director. This is how some current directors describe their role:

"..... A director is a companion in the exploration of God's way of being involved in someone's life."

"...The heart of spiritual direction is helping the other person listen and pay attention to what God is saying. It is being a third person in the relationship between an individual and God."⁵

"Directors help others attend to God's presence and revelation and prepare to respond to him...they help people attune themselves to God."⁶

Though the methods may vary over time, the intent and effect are the same – people are accompanied on their journey, encouraged and emboldened in their walk with God. It seems based on the experience of Christians over the centuries that there is only so far one can go in the Christian journey on one's own. It seems there is implicit in the Christian experience the need to do life together. Could it be that as the triune God has made us in His image we are none of us complete on our own?

⁴ See, for example, Theodore Tappert, trans & editor, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel / Martin Luther*. (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1955)

⁵ Leighton Ford quoted in Winner's article in *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 11

⁶ Benner, 107

The goal of Spiritual Direction

In spiritual direction we move from talking about God to reflecting on our actual experience of Him. This immediately begins to increase our awareness of God and this is a primary goal of Spiritual direction. Generally speaking, the goal is spiritual growth. More specifically the aim as described by David Benner is "increasing awareness of God in the midst of life experiences and facilitating surrender to God." He goes on,

"Aligning ourselves with God to be more aware of his presence and receptive to his will is central to the task of Christian spiritual formation. It is a lifelong process. No one gets past the need – as described by Brother Lawrence – to practice the presence of God. Spiritual direction is a relationship devoted to the practice of this discipline."⁷

Directees often talk of the benefits in terms such as gaining greater freedom in their relationship with God, enjoyment of God, revitalization, greater peacefulness and clarity.

What Spiritual Direction is not

Spiritual direction is one of many forms of soul care so it is helpful to distinguish its particular characteristics by looking at what it is not.

Spiritual direction is not discipling. Although Spiritual direction helps people in their Christ following, it is not a discipleship program. There is no set program or curriculum to cover. Directors typically do not control the content of the conversations that take place in a session, that is determined by what the directee brings to the session and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Also, while spiritual direction may involve a degree of accountability it is primarily a relationship of accompaniment.

Spiritual direction is not authoritarian. It should never involve a replacement of divine authority with human authority. It does not place an intermediary between the individual and God. It is not advice giving. Spiritual directors may offer suggestions or ideas but their job is not to give either advice or direction. That remains the role of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual direction is not counselling. Though they share some similarities there are important differences. Counselling is problem-centred, spiritual direction is Spirit centred. Although personal problems are likely to surface in spiritual direction the focus is not on solving the problem per se but on how the person is experiencing God. In spiritual direction the goal is growth in one's relationship to God, not resolution of particular problems.

⁷ Ibid, 5

Spiritual Direction is not preaching. The spiritual director does not function like a preacher seeking to challenge, exhort, edify or direct another person by expounding God's Word. The focus is on God Himself. Discerning the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit is the central task.⁸

Choosing a Spiritual Director

Take time to find a director who is a good fit. It is not necessary that director and directee be of the same gender, background or church tradition but it is important that the directee feel comfortable with and confident in the director he/she chooses. Ask questions of directors. Find out what qualifications they have for the role. Academic qualifications may not be the most important ones. Does this person model mature Christian faith, listen well and have knowledge of a wide range of Christian experience? Ask about their own spiritual journey, why they offer spiritual direction and their experience in it. Meet for an exploratory session. There is usually a process of discernment for both parties then director and directee continue only by mutual consent. If you want to address a particular spiritual need or life/ministry concern, look for a director with appropriate gifting, knowledge and experience.

Be aware that spiritual direction is a specific form of soul care and not a substitute for counselling or mentoring.

Why Spiritual direction is important

Spiritual direction is important because it meets a real and deep need, the need to share the Christian journey. This is not a need that all Christians acknowledge. Many Christians (particularly in the West) consider their spiritual lives a private matter. This view of the Christian journey is a relatively new one influenced by the cultural shifts over the past 200 years or so...and is a shift away from the core values of the faith. Spiritual Direction upholds a basic and important truth about Christianity - that the faith is a shared faith, not a solitary one. We are a body, a people of God. David Fleming, Co-director of the Institute of Religious Formation in Colorado Springs writes:

Spiritual direction is one of the ways we most immediately touch the Incarnation in our own lifetime. For us to ever approach it lightly or to reject it as of no value is to find ourselves undermining the deepest roots of our Christian faith.⁹

⁸ This list is adapted from Benner's *Sacred Companions*, 89-92

⁹ J. M. Neufelder and March Coelho (eds) *Writings on Spiritual Direction by Great Christian Masters*. (New York, Seabury Press, 1982). 56

In addition to its benefits to the individual, Spiritual direction is helpful to the body of Christ because it takes us back to our Biblical roots in the way of being the church. It gives expression of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – that God speaks to and through all of us and that we are called to be ministers to one another. It is a reminder that spiritual gifts are dispersed throughout the body and are to be called forth and exercised. It helps bring balance to our view of ministry (not clergy focused) and of what it means to belong to the body of Christ and so it pushes both individuals and the body of believers toward maturity.

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