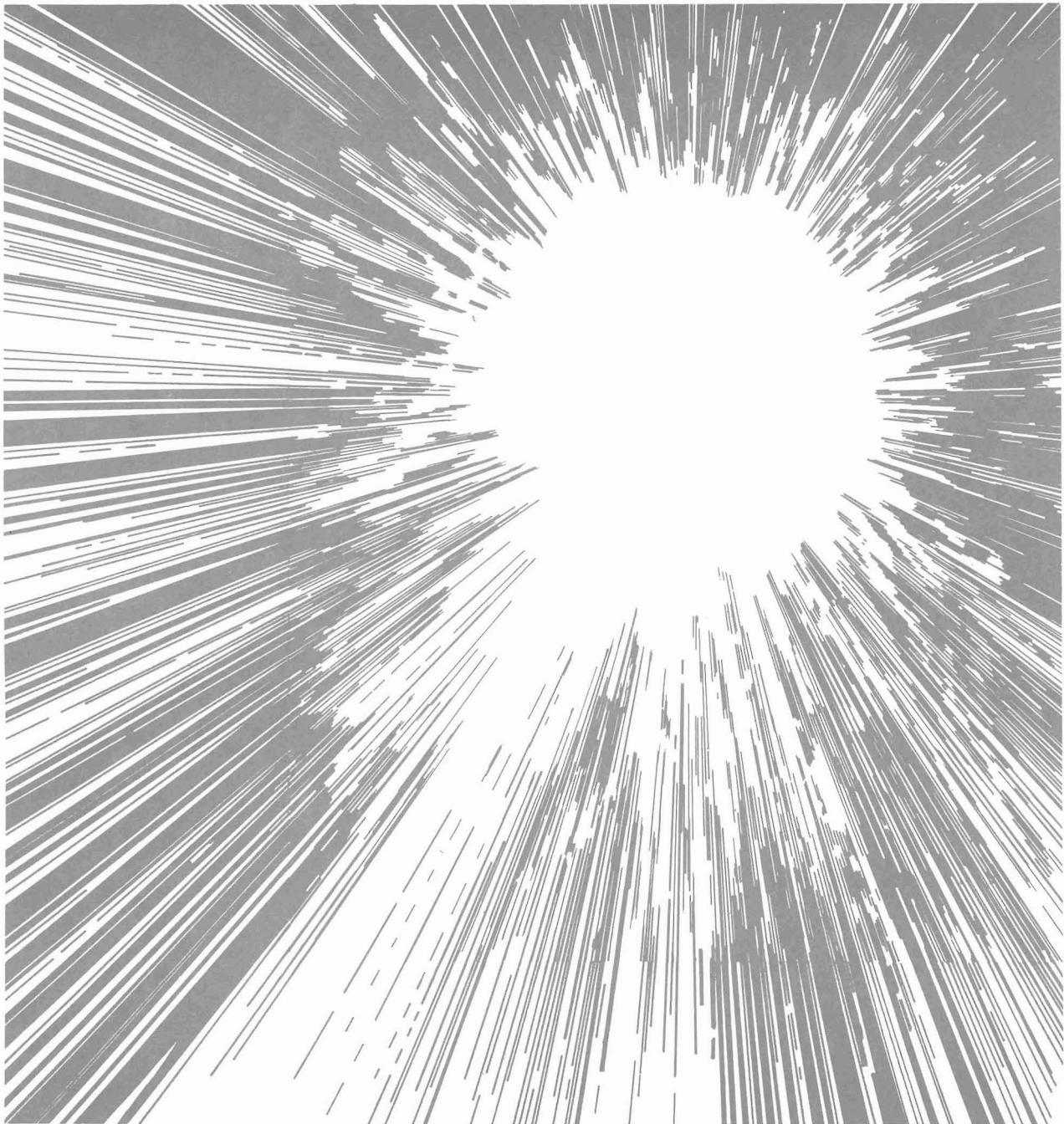


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Encountering Love Mysticism

Issues in Supervision

Janet Ruffing, RSM

Every religious tradition of the world, with perhaps only Buddhism as an exception, fosters some form of love mysticism. At the root of all human and divine intimacy is a mutual desiring regardless of how opaque such desire might be to us. A Sufi aphorism describes it this way: "For thirty years I sought God. But when I looked carefully, I saw that in reality God was the Seeker and I was the sought." (Cragg, LX, 48, *Wisdom of the Sufis*). The Sufis also tell a story of two human lovers which illustrates the attitude cultivated by the human person who desires divine-human intimacy.

One day, Majnun, whose love for Laila inspired many a Persian Poet, was playing in a little heap of sand, when a friend came to him and said: 'Why are you wasting your time in an occupation so childish?' 'I am seeking Laila in these sands,' replied Majnun.

His friend in amazement cried: 'Why? Laila is an angel, so what is the use of seeking her in the common earth?' 'I seek her everywhere,' said Majnun, bowing his head, 'that I may find her somewhere' (Cragg, CXXXVIII, 86).

This story exemplifies passionate loving as a way to God precisely through ransacking creation for traces of the beloved, as Laila represents the divine beloved. By looking everywhere, God emerges in the lover's experience somewhere. In and through a created manifestation, the divine beloved makes his or her presence felt, and the lover finds God somewhere. This encounter with the divine may be characterized by feelings of desire, arousal, passion, and union.

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We often categorize these experiences as mystical, and throughout this article I will refer to these human/divine encounters as experiences of love mysticism.

Love Mysticism and Issues in Supervision

In my experience of supervising spiritual directors both individually and in groups, I have encountered a number of issues related to their reactions and competence in companioning directees whose religious experience is characterized by such love mysticism.

- 1) Spiritual directors frequently become anxious and uncomfortable when directees report intense experiences of mystical love, especially if erotic features are reported. As a result they often fail to explore the experience. This reluctance to stay with the experience renders them incapable of noticing where the directee's anxiety may "block" the experience and close it off before union with God has been reached.
- 2) Spiritual directors who have not experienced much felt intimacy with God or who are currently experiencing a painful absence of intimacy may become envious of the directee's experience of God. In order to avoid this uncomfortable feeling, the director may dismiss the directee's experience and neglect helping the directee deepen it.
- 3) Spiritual directors who do not appreciate the role of desire neglect to explore whatever desires the directee does have for prayer, intimacy with God, or intimacy with and love for anyone deeply enough to help him or her become present to deepest personal desires.
- 4) Spiritual directors who have been trained in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises may assume that directees already know how to "pray for the grace they want." In fact, they may not know what they actually want or may not be prepared to receive the grace they think they want with all of its ramifications. The grace named in the Exercises may not match the directees' desires, thus causing confusion. Directors can assist directees by helping them distinguish illusory from authentic desires.
- 5) Many intern spiritual directors are either unfamiliar with the rich traditions of love mysticism or presume such experiences no longer happen. Directees, too, may become quite frightened and misinterpret their experience of God as displaced eroticism if they are unfamiliar with the tradition.
- 6) The progressive deepening encounter into the mystery of God as the divine beloved until lover and beloved are experienced as one body and soul often feels like absence. In actuality, the invitation is to move beyond a subject/object duality. Both directors and directees can misinterpret this subtle unitive movement as an experience of God's

absence because of the change in the way God is newly present to the directee.

- 7) Directors may be unsympathetic toward directees whose experiences of divine/human love are different from their own. Or directors may be unsupportive of their directees' development because they themselves lack sufficient experience with the mystical. Both of these groups need to be reminded of the following so they can better stay with their directees' experiences.

There are two different paths which may intertwine and which require careful discernment in terms of encouraging the directee to respond appropriately. One path feels like romantic love. God arouses the desires of the human beloved, engages in courtship, and makes love with the human beloved. The human process of adapting to this reality in the stages of awakening, recognition, purification, surrender, and transformation tend to take place through the alternation of felt presence and absence. This is a path of passion transformed by ongoing and ever deepening intimacy.

A second path is more apophatic in its feel. It takes place with fewer reported "events." The quality of experience feels more vague. God is often desired, yearned for, and yet feels absent and paradoxically present simultaneously. This is often a path of little feeling, of darkness, and of quiet, silent, loving attention.

For both of these paths, and their variations, the dynamics of human/divine intimacy take place on various levels of the existential self.

The mystical process is about all levels of the self coming into harmony.

Experiences can affect the superficial, highly conditioned ego awareness, layers of the psyche, and the core of one's soul (the heart or the true self). This core may ultimately be experienced in its true condition, that of being already in union with the divine. The mystical process is about all levels of the self coming into harmony. As Paul said, "In God, we live, and move, and have our being." We are already in God. Or as John of the Cross teaches: "God is the center of the soul." We become God not by nature but by participation. This is a statement that can only be understood from within the mystical experience itself, beyond the distortions of ego.

Knowledge of these two paths will help directors who have not yet experienced mystical awakening. Directors, in conversation with their supervisors, may also need to explore the possibility of referring directees to other directors if they find themselves unable to support a mystical path.

- 8) The vagaries of romantic attachments of all kinds are frequently opaque manifestations of divine human intimacy wanting to happen.

In so far as spiritual directors are uncomfortable with or judgmental about their directees' reports of sexual expression, sexual orientation, or romantic attachment, they will not be able to explore the depth of these experiences that could reveal the soul's searching for its divine beloved and thus facilitate, often with therapeutic help, the harmonizing of these energies in the person.

- 9) Spiritual directors almost always need to explore the relational histories of their directees. This need is even more important with directees who have experienced mystical love/union with the divine. Spiritual direction with celibates requires particular attention to their histories of emotional intimacy, friendship, passion, and sexual expression. Spiritual direction with those who are or have been actively involved in sexual relationships also requires an exploration of their relational histories in order to understand both the gifts for intimacy and the barriers to it they bring to the divine/human relationship.

These are some of the issues which supervisors will also discover when their supervisees are meeting the mysterious ways God enters into intimacy with directees. The experience of the supervisor and his or her willingness to be with these mysteries is important here; with experience and willingness, a supervisor can help directors give themselves over to experiences of intimacy more completely. Until this happens, directors really cannot be of much help to others on a quickening spiritual journey.

Love Mysticism within the Christian Tradition

I do not feel that spiritual directors and their supervisors can adequately address the issues I have raised without some knowledge of the Western Christian tradition of love mysticism and an adequate phenomenology of desire which relates all forms of human love to its fundamental goal, union with God. As Augustine recognized, human eros-desire-is unfulfilled until it rests in God. The Christian tradition of love mysticism is rooted in the biblical tradition of a personal God and revealed by the self-donating love of Jesus. The tradition draws on personal relationship with Jesus, the love mysticism of the Johanne Gospel and Epistles, and the Song of Songs, which was first appropriated by Origen as an allegory of the reciprocal relationship between the Word and the Christian soul.

Countless mystical texts were simply commentaries or homilies on the Song of Songs. Origen set the pattern. Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, and countless others including John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila wrote such texts. Augustine, in his *Confessions* and his *Homilies on John* made desire central to the spiritual quest.

In the medieval period, a feminine form of love mysticism developed which came to be known as bridal mysticism where women mystics describe their

experiences with Jesus in highly erotic language. These texts, such as Hadewijch's visions and poems and Gertrude the Great's *Spiritual Exercises* or Mechtilde of Magdeburg's *Flowing Light of the Godhead* describe this path of love in great detail: both the suffering of absence or separation from the beloved and the intensity of their mystical experiences. These texts were written so that others might have similar experiences. The theme of desire is central to Catherine of Siena's *Dialogues* as well as to Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* in the more sober English tradition of the fourteenth century.

However, Christian tradition has also been deeply suspicious of sexual love and, especially in the post-Tridentine era, was also hostile to mystical experience. Most of the mystical literature was written by celibate mystics. Celibates were to sublimate their sexuality into disinterested love, not passionate love. Married or single people were often left with the impression that their loves did not lead to mystical love. Much of

When contemporary people have such experiences, they are often frightened, reluctant to discuss them, and may even confuse the mystical with the crazy.

the rather large body of mystical writings related to love mysticism were read by very select groups of people. The women's tradition was not well understood or appreciated by male, celibate clergy who were the primary spiritual directors until these last three decades. Many of these texts were also not available in good English translations until the last two decades. Because these texts also reflect the religious cultures which produced them, some of them are less accessible than others. Intense visionary and sensory mystical experiences were extremely common and highly valued in the Middle Ages. When contemporary people have such experiences, they are

often frightened, reluctant to discuss them, and may even confuse the mystical with the crazy.

Love Mysticism in the Contemporary Era

Because the past tradition has been ambivalent about sexual love and mystical love, the role of desire and the relationship of human love to mystical love has been a major theme in theology and spirituality in the contemporary period, especially in the English speaking world. Sebastian Moore and John Dunne have both written a number of books on various aspects of these questions. Systematic theologians Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner have also addressed various aspects of the unity of love of God and love of neighbor, showing that our loving ultimately leads to God.

Rahner emphasizes over and over again that the fundamental experience of the believer is that we are not abandoned to our own devices, set loose in the world, longing for a transcendent experience of love we can never have, but that the very Mystery itself solicits us, moves toward us in love and in mercy. This movement of the Mystery toward us is what the Christian revelation is all about;

it is also what Islam and Judaism are about. All three traditions hold that God is personal and God is love. In Christianity that love became totally human and accessible in Jesus.

Further, the mystical part of these three traditions assert that we are to enter fully into intimacy with the Divine Beloved. We are to become love, too. The search for the Beloved by the believer is not initiated from the human side. It is the result of the reality that we have already been awakened to this divine love affair from God's side. No matter how confusedly we interpret this experience, no matter how many mistakes we make along the way, no matter how often this desire for the Divine Beloved gets displaced onto other loves or other objects of desire, God continues to solicit and elicit our love. Moore says, "All desire [is] solicitation by the mystery we are in" (*Jesus, Liberator of Desire*, p. 11). The mystical process itself is the path toward illumination—toward recognizing what these desires are about, correctly interpreting them, and directing them toward the Divine. All our loves can be encompassed in this divine love—all human loves contribute to our capacity for this divine-human intimacy. Our human loves, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, all become ordered in relation to the divine love. Whenever we fall in love, our beloved is God for us for a while. If our beloved is not the divine beloved, we will eventually be called to forgive them for not being able to be God for us.

It is no wonder that contemporary people often become both ambivalent and confused when their prayer experience deepens to the mystical level. The Second Vatican Council finally ended the long debate about whether mystical experience was extraordinary or the normal development of a life of prayer. The Council opted for the latter. This resulted in an increased awareness of and desire for more mature spiritual development among the laity. Many directors and directees are unfamiliar with the variety of experience and teachings because they have been buried in a very large body of mystical texts (many only recently available in English) and within the more technical conversations going on in theological circles. The experience, teachings, and conversation need to be expanded so that they are available to a wider audience of directors and directees.

The Mystical Process

There are both theological and psychological elements to this understanding of desire in our relationship with God that leads us into mystical levels of prayer. Because western culture leads us into feeling isolated and longing for connection, our first step toward becoming adult lovers is to overcome our separateness, to develop our capacity to participate in intimate relationship, and to learn how to be with another without losing ourselves. This psychological process is also the first stage in our development of affective prayer. The second step in spiritual development is to discover an entirely new and different sense of "I" that is more my "I" than this relational ego self—it is to become one willing and

one desiring with the Love that moves the universe. This unitive oneness in love requires loosening up our sense of self so that, in this divine/human intimacy, I no longer face my beloved, but become one with the beloved.



Illustration by Linda E. Price

Rather than facing Jesus in imaginative contemplation, we enter into God and begin to love from within Christ, perceive from within Christ's vision. To do so requires that we shift from contemplating Jesus as other to contemplating from his perspective. After we have overcome the emotional, physical, and psychological barriers to a shared mutuality with God, we find our true selves as being centered in God's reality rather than in a reality constructed around our egos. That is why eventually, despite all the mystical love poetry of lover and beloved, one experiences the Beloved directly as the source of one's loving, the cause of one's desirability, and the Mystery which encompasses oneself and the entire creation. This experience is often transformative.

The Role of Desire in Love Mysticism

According to Sebastian Moore, this transformation of the self happens through a kind of grammar of desire, a series of experiences that leads to the source of the river of love which runs through the mystic. Moore describes this process in five steps:

- 1) Created by desire, I am desirable.
- 2) Desirable, I desire; my pleasure in myself wants to extend itself to another. Desire, in other words, does not come out of emptiness but out of fullness.
- 3) Since it is out of desirableness that I desire, another who causes desire in me is touching my desirableness. To cause desire is to arouse desirableness.
- 4) It is my desirableness, thus aroused by another, that makes me want to be desired by that other.
- 5) Thus the vital center of human relations is arousal; the awakening of a person's sense of being desirable, not (as commonly supposed) by being desired by another, but by being aroused by another to desire (*Let This Mind Be in You*, p. 44).

I want to highlight three aspects of this schema. First of all, God's love really is the source of our desiring. But we don't initially feel it that way. We feel it as desire for another who may or may not requite my love. We must really understand both cognitively and affectively, from within the mystical experience, that God's is the love that utterly, surprisingly, creeps up on the inside of our sense of ourselves as desirable. Normally our desire is awakened from the outside by a person who excites our longing. However, it is God's loving, God's desire which makes us desirable and causes in us that sense of unique worth that energizes all that people do and want to do.

Secondly, because we usually experience our desirableness indirectly by a human beloved who loves us or whom we solicit from the abundance of our desire, we are simply oblivious to the first step of the process. The mystical experience involves experiencing the first step of the process directly. All that we do in spiritual practice, either through scriptural contemplation of the mysteries of faith and the reality of Jesus or through centering prayer, leads to this experience of God's desiring us. God's love moves us and moves toward us, enabling us to reciprocate that love. Hadewijch described it as "contenting" her beloved (*Poems in Stanzas*, 16.9).

The third concept I want to highlight from Moore is how spiritual desire for God differs from all other desires. He says that "desire that is simply a felt need ceases once the need is satisfied; vital desire increases with satisfaction." C. S. Lewis described something similar in *Surprised by Joy*. Quoting Lewis, Moore describes spiritual desire as "the sweet desire, that the one thing one longs for once the desire has gone is to have it again, to be once again aching with it. This increase of desire with fulfillment is only intelligible once we understand desire as a trustful relationship. One can always be more connected, which means more desirous" (*Jesus, Liberator of Desire*, p. 11).

Without a workable theory of the world of desire that is consonant with the mystical tradition, I think it is impossible for supervisors to address the issues raised in supervision by directors who are uncomfortable with the love mysticism of their directees. This brief presentation of Moore's thought cannot do justice to it; supervisors and directors who want to understand this analysis more thoroughly will want to read both texts cited in the article.

Exploring the Issues Raised by Experiences of Love Mysticism

I will return now to the issues directors typically bring to supervision which I described in the first part of this article.

- 1) Directors inexperienced in the mystical terrain of the search for the Beloved need to be helped in supervision to recognize the limits of their personal experience and to be reassured that many, many historical and contemporary people have experiences related to Divine love. They can be referred to contemporary writing about mysticism or classical mystical texts.

Any blocks in the supervisees' intimacy with God need to be explored sufficiently so that they can pursue both the discussion and the spiritual practices around this issue with their own spiritual directors. I frequently receive requests from people searching for spiritual directors who are competent in helping their directees go further on what is clearly a mystical path. They report that the directors they have tried either become anxious when they describe experiences or simply listen without making any other response that might facilitate the directee's

deeper intimacy with God. For example, when a directee reports an intense exchange of love between herself and Jesus conveyed by a look in a visual contemplation, a director could explore whether the looking ever gives way to touching. In the same example, a director could explore how close or how far away the two are from each other. Would it be comfortable for the directee to move closer to Jesus? Some exploration of what the directee considers "intense" could be helpful, too. In an experience where there are no images as the medium of encounter with God, but such descriptions as "I felt an inflow of love in my being," a director could ask for further elaboration, especially about what it felt like to receive this love. In both examples, directors could helpfully explore how the experience came to an end. Frequently, they will discover that the directee moved away from the experience before it came to a natural end. Directors need to understand that there is always a further place to go, even if it is only helping the directee stay with an experience of God five minutes longer before moving away from it.

For example, when a directee reports an intense exchange of love between herself and Jesus conveyed by a look in a visual contemplation, a director could explore whether the looking ever gives way to touching.

- 2) Spiritual directors who feel jealous or envious of their directees need to acknowledge and explore these feelings in supervision. Frequently the director needs to be encouraged to spend time in prayer with his or her frustrated desire for God. Often a directee who evokes these feelings is grace for the director. Envy is a potential spiritual invitation to the director through the experience of giving direction. Such directors will also need to be encouraged to become curious enough to explore the directee's experience in greater detail. In order to be with the other's experience, they will need to be more present to God.
- 3) When directees do not seem to be praying or report religious experiences but do express the desire to pray or have greater intimacy with God, their frustrated directors need to be helped to stay with whatever desires are present in the directee. A careful exploration of any desire will, if properly understood, lead to desire for the ultimate source of desire. Gerald May gives the following description of what such an exploration of desire might look like:

I asked a young woman what she most deeply wanted. She responded immediately, "I'd like a happy home and family, security, a sense of being worthwhile." Then I asked her to sit in silence for a moment and try to be open to what desires she could really feel, right in the moment. After a while she looked up with tears in her eyes. "I don't know what to say. What I actually feel is that things are really okay right now. Better than okay. I don't think I want anything more than what I have at this very moment." I asked her to be still once again, to look

more deeply into her present feeling, to seek any desire that might honestly be there. Softly, she said, "It's very hard to put into words. I feel really blessed, and I feel gratitude; I want to say thank you to someone. Is it God? If it is, I want to give God a hug and say thanks. And I wish people could feel this way more, could have some peace" (The Awakened Heart, p. 50).

- 4) An understanding of the subtlety and confusion about desires in the directee can help directors who too easily assume that the directee knows what grace to pray for. The supervisor can help the director examine the entire conversation for clues to the directee's desires which are not entirely conscious. It is important to encourage directors to ask their directees: "What does God desire for you?" as well as "What do you desire?" Directors need to be encouraged to explore not only what the directee wants but whether or not the directee is willing to embrace the changes or implications which would result from receiving what is desired.

- 5) Both directors and directees may collude in assuming that love mysticism is something that happened sometime in the past and not to contemporary people. Both can become surprised and frightened by

Both directors and directees may collude in assuming that love mysticism is something that happened sometime in the past and not to contemporary people.

the manifestations of passionate love in divine/human intimacy. Directors need to educate themselves in the tradition and deal with their own resistances to these experiences so that they can facilitate for their directees the process of deepening intimacy with God in whatever form the experience takes. At times it is a resistance to the language of passionate love; at times it is simply unknown

terrain; at times it is a manifestation of difficulty with intimacy of any kind. The same resistances may be present in the directee. Directees will often need a great deal of reassurance not to evade these experiences and to surrender to them.

- 6) When a directee's experience begins to become unitive, directors need to probe any experience of God in seeming absence. Is this experience absence or is it more accurately a new way of being in God or Jesus? Is the directee no longer "seeing" Jesus because Jesus is indwelling and transforming the person? A director may help the directee more easily notice ways that God is acting in and through them by using the language of "sensing" rather than "seeing." Finally, the director can encourage the directee to be with God in very simple prayer.

- 7) The two paths require quite different responses. The first path, which resembles romantic love, is often characterized by an alternation of presence and absence and is usually filled with events. Directees need to be encouraged to take all of them and none of them seriously. They need to be led to ever deepening surrender and mutuality. Eventually

this path leads to an experience of self deeper than the superficial ego, to the self that is already beloved of God. The director needs to look for transformation of life as whole, to the fruits of action in virtue, of the divine/human intimacy. It is also important for the director not to discount or trivialize the painful yearning of passion. Recent commentary on Hadewijch's experience discloses that it is the voicing of passionate desire that conquers love. (Giles Milhaven, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters*). Directors need to encourage the voicing of the longing and a direct approach to intimacy. God does make love with quite human beloveds in unmistakable ways. It is not the director's role to decide how God can or cannot allure and love the directee, but to stay with the directee's experience.

God does make love with quite human beloveds in unmistakable ways. It is not the director's role to decide how God can or cannot allure and love the directee, but to stay with the directee's experience.

The second path of paradoxical absence/presence requires the director to encourage the directee to fidelity to their intention toward God by regular contemplative prayer despite a lack of "events." Directors can support the directee by gently probing the prayer experience for subtle changes in affectivity, awareness, or consciousness and exploring life events in a holistic manner to notice the "fruits" of the directee's contemplative prayer in action and affectivity. The director will need to explore all "negative" emotions in the directee such as frustration, impatience, unrequited desire, or boredom, so that they remain conscious lest they lead the directee to distance him- or herself from God. Avoidance of these feeling states may result in avoidance of prayer.

- 8) Director anxiety about the directee's erotic and romantic attachments can deprive the directee of self-understanding and response to divine/human intimacy. Often addictive, disordered, or "love crazy" situations are divine/human intimacy wanting to happen. Supervisors will need to explore the director's feelings and judgments about the directee's relationships so that the director can become less anxious and freer to help the directee relate desires expressed in his or her interpersonal relationships to his or her desire for intimacy with God. Directors understandably become anxious when they suspect a directee has fallen in love with him or her. In this case, supervision will support the director in maintaining appropriate boundaries and in not becoming sexually involved with the directee. All loves can lead to God and be harmonized in divine/human intimacy. But this is a process that happens over time, often requires therapy, and can evoke considerable anxiety in the director.

As spiritual directors and supervisors we need to be able to go deeper, recognize, and accept a much wider variety of loves which manifest fresh aspects of the divine beloved.

There is a less well-understood kind of attraction between directors and directees. Directors can become particularly anxious when they discover a directee has fallen in love with the soul of his or her director and have come to love God in and through the director's intimacy with God. Directors can easily confuse this attraction with romantic attraction; they need to learn to recognize this attraction as transference without responding inappropriately. In this instance, a directee may be learning from the director's way of being with God and the directee. The attraction is rooted in the spiritual dimension. If the director has been genuinely helpful to the directee's spiritual

growth, the attraction may be even stronger because the director is so closely associated with God and the directee's experience of God. If the director misinterprets this attraction with romantic love and rejects the directee or creates distance in direction sessions, great harm can be done to the directee's spiritual life. Most of the time, it is enough for the director to recognize the transference for what it is and not disturb the directee. With the help of skilled supervision, the director can manage the counter-transference by recognizing the directee's projection, by refusing to become ego-inflated by the spiritual flattery, and by carefully referring the directee to his or her relationship with God. We live in a sex-obsessed culture which often misses the rich gifts of a wide variety of loves. As spiritual directors and supervisors we need to be able to go deeper, recognize, and accept a much wider variety of loves which manifest fresh aspects of the divine beloved.

- 9) Expectations about relationship and intimacy as well as patterns of behavior in intimate relationships are a result of prior relational history. Directees bring these expectations and patterns into their relationship with God and may need to change some of them. Just as directors will need to explore their directee's relational and sexual histories in relationship to any blocks preventing progressive intimacy with God, so too will supervisors need to explore aspects of a director's relational history if they are avoiding these areas with their directees.

In Conclusion

Supervisors can do much to support their supervisees' growth as spiritual directors. It is very important to pay attention to the spiritual as well as psychological challenges directors encounter when they work with directees who are flourishing in divine/human intimacy. John Dunne, a well-known contemporary theologian who has explored desire in a series of books, offers an autobiographical description of the process of unknowing desiring revealing the desire within all our desires.

There is a desire in all our desires, I believe, an enthusiasm in all our enthusiasms. It is an unknowing love of God. It is what I may call "my ancient soul of a child." To hear that love in all our loves is to hear "ancient voices of children," and I may have to go very far along love's road to know it and to love with a love that is knowing.

As love becomes more knowing, or more knowingly "unknowing," as I learn to discern the love of God in all our loves, I become more peaceful about love not being consummated in possession, about the words I love not being mine, about the music I love not being mine, about the friend I love not being mine alone. It is consummated rather in being "oned with God" who belongs to all, who is "mine own, and not mine own" (Love's Mind, 83).

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