



Conversations

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Spiritual Direction

CONTRIBUTORS:

TOM ASHBROOK

DAVID G. BENNER

JULIET BENNER

ADELE AHLBERG CALHOUN

CURT CLONINGER

LARRY CRABB

EARL CREPS

KIM ENGELMANN

RICHARD J. FOSTER

MICHAEL GLERUP

ANNE GRIZZLE

JAN JOHNSON

DELCY KUHLMAN

MARIE LOEWEN

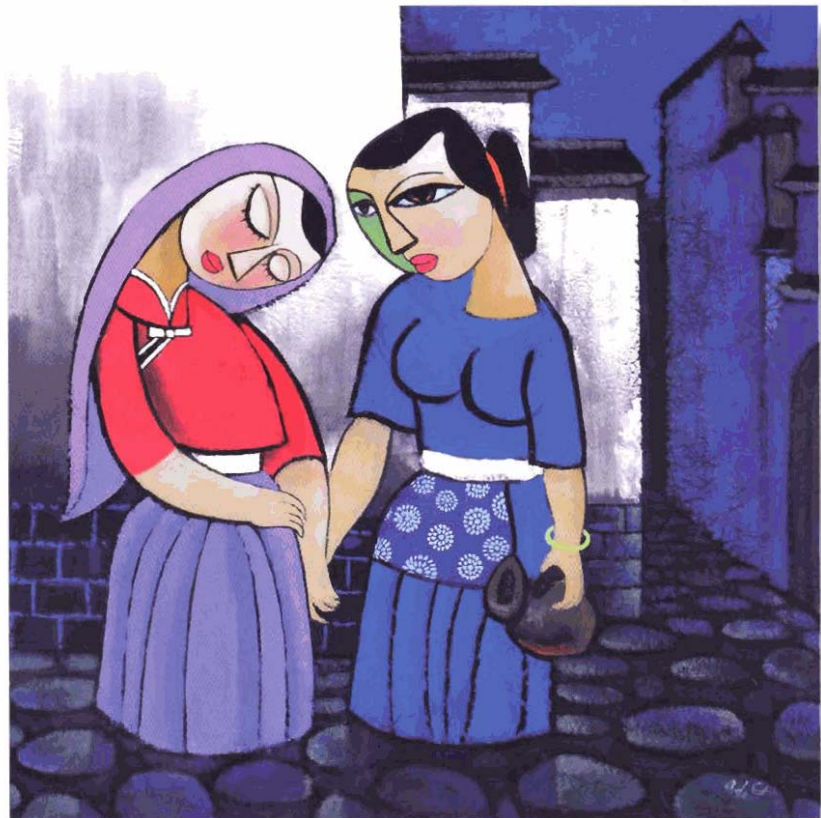
STEPHEN A. MACCHIA

GARY W. MOON

KEITH MEYER

KEVIN REIMER

JANET K. RUFFING



He Qi: **The Visitation**



Opening One's Heart to Another: The Rediscovery of Spiritual Direction

Janet Ruffing

The Sufi poet Hafiz offers this tiny, remarkable poem, "It Felt Love," about spiritual opening to God and unfolding in that love.

*It felt the encouragement of light
Against its
Being.
Otherwise,
We all remain
Too
Frightened.¹*

In both Islam and Christianity, the rose is a symbol of both romantic and mystical love. When evoked in relationship to spirituality, the rose often stands for one's soul, one's full opening to God, and one's full blossoming into spiritual maturity under the warmth of God's unconditional and very personal love. Although each of us longs for this fullness of love's embrace from God, who is Love itself, the

human condition is such that we pull away from it and often remain too frightened to allow God sufficient access to transform us utterly. Indeed, "How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its beauty?" Hafiz compresses into these few lines an intuition about both our mission in the world, the result of our discipleship, and the necessary opening to intimacy with God that infuses us with the warmth of God's love. Unless we experience the light of God's loving touch, we remain too frightened to enter into the fullness of life God offers us. We remain closed buds, stuck in our growth

process, closed in upon ourselves and defended against the coaxing rays of the sun's inviting us into full bloom. Not only do we remain closed in on ourselves, but we also deprive the world of our beauty. Authentic spiritual life has consequences for the world. Once we have received this enlivening light, God's love moves through us in concrete loving actions, social justice, and prophetic witness in the world. In this circle of Divine-human intimacy, every rose that "opens its heart and gives to this world all its beauty" is a cause for amazement and gratitude.

The Need for Spiritual Direction

Precisely because spiritual growth both frightens and attracts us, we often feel the need of a spiritual director, soul friend, or companion to encourage us and urge us to respond to the unique way God communicates with each of us. As Augustine comments in his "Homily on Psalm 121," "In this life we shall sometimes meet companions who have seen the holy city and who urge us to hasten there."² Those who have experienced spiritual awakening and who desire to cultivate their personal relationship with God beyond the ordinary communal forms of worship, service, and discipleship frequently experience some form of spiritual isolation or loneliness. We look for others or simply another who has greater experience in contemplative prayer and wisdom about the life choices that follow this opening to the Divine Presence in more pervasive and consistent ways than ourselves. We may seek the support of another to whom we can confidently open our hearts in order to remain faithful to our own inner and outer disciplines of the spirit and to discern with another where God is leading or what is unfolding in the present moment. Spiritual direction thus offers us company and encouragement on our journey toward God and keeps us honest about this journey as we candidly open our hearts to another.

Within Christian tradition, such a person who has grown wise in the ways of God and

who offers guidance to another when asked has been called a spiritual director. Although this language of spiritual director and directee (the one seeking direction) was largely identified with the Roman Catholic tradition, it is rapidly becoming more acceptable within Protestant and Evangelical communities, as well as within other religious traditions.

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Every major religious tradition has embodied the function of spiritual guidance, often in a variety of places. Frequently, it was attached to ordained leadership but also to spiritual teachers recognized for their wisdom and discernment. The written word of God in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures constitutes a form of spiritual guidance in the wisdom teachings. God continues to speak to us and guide us when we prayerfully contemplate these

sacred writings. For Christians, Jesus was clearly a man led by the Spirit who taught from his God-inspired inner authority. His followers called him Rabbi, Teacher, and themselves disciples, learners of this way. Within Christian tradition, those whom others recognize for their God-inspired wisdom and who make themselves available to offer counsel have received a charism of spiritual direction for building up the community through their companioning of individuals or small groups. The great mothers and fathers in the fourth-century desert exemplified this calling in these very particular conditions.

A Look Back at the History

Without retracing the entire recent history of the rediscovery and renewal of the practice of spiritual direction today within the Christian churches, we are witnessing a democratization of this ministry. Within the sacramental churches, spiritual direction has become distinct from the sacrament of reconciliation and of confession. Its charismatic nature has been reaffirmed, and laymen and -women, as well as clergy and vowed religious, now serve as spiritual directors for others within and beyond their own denominations. As a ministry within the Christian churches since the late 1970s, spiritual formation and spiritual direction programs developed to serve denominations³ that were expanding the vocabulary and theological context of this ministry beyond the Roman Catholic experiments that retrieved this historical charismatic ministry after Vatican II.⁴

For many Protestants, the terminology of spiritual direction remains problematic. During the Reformation period, the prevailing model of spiritual direction was a priest-confessor who served as spiritual director for his penitents-directees. This link between spiritual direction and penitential practice was uncongenial to Protestant reformers and their communities, who historically insisted on an individual's total freedom of relationship with God without clerical intermediaries.

Metaphors and Images for Spiritual Direction

A variety of metaphors and images abound that either soften this overly controlling image for spiritual direction or evoke other aspects of the relationship.⁵ Midwifery is a popular metaphor with women directors, who see themselves more like coaches during the birthing process. Other images are scripturally based, such as the friend of the bridegroom, physician, and nurse. Others relate more directly to the process of spiritual direction, such as "holy listening,"⁶ "contemplative listening"⁷ or "tending the holy."⁸ Other images include "God's usher," gardener, guide, pilot, parent, and, of course, friend. Today we favor images of the process and terminology that emphasizes a mutuality of relationship, such as "companion" or "friend." However, while some few spiritual direction relationships are also spiritual friendships with a high

level of mutuality and transparency between the two persons, the majority maintain a distinction of roles and responsibilities within this sacred relationship. "Director" and "directee" offer the least awkward terms for distinguishing these roles, although some may prefer "companion" and "seeker."

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All these metaphors and images for the spiritual director capture aspects of the process and relationship that are subtle and delicate. They are all grounded in the theological assumption that God is already moving in the directee's life and experience, inviting, acting, nudging, disturbing, and calling.

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the true spiritual director. The person seeking spiritual direction brings these intuitions, movements, and experiences of the holy—or their absence—to a spiritual director, who listens contemplatively and prayerfully to these desires, intimations of the sacred, and graced stories for the movements of the Holy Spirit in all areas of the directee's life. In this "holy listening," the human director has one ear attuned to the Holy Spirit within the session itself and the other ear attuned to the Spirit within the directee's reported experience and present exploration of it. In this process of "contemplative listening," the director helps the directee "to pay attention to God's personal communication, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God, self, and neighbor, and to live out the consequences of the relationship."⁹ Both the director and the directee together engage in paying attention, noticing, naming, and discovering where God is in all that is happening in the directee's life.

Meaning Making and Personal Religious Experience

Spirituality is commonly understood to refer to two areas of experience: meaning making and personal religious experience. Within specific religious traditions, we are provided with a content of faith (doctrines, theologies) and a religious story that tutors us in this activity of meaning making. The story of

salvation history in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures supports us with a wide variety of personal and communal stories that help us place our own experiences within this larger story, especially the story of Jesus for Christians.

As Christians, each of us becomes another “Christ” through the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit in the unique circumstances of our lives. It is not always self-evident to ourselves or to others that we are such a Christic [Christlike] presence in our families, communities, and work places. It is not always entirely clear what faith requires from us in the particular, complex, and contradictory situations in which we find ourselves. We may or may not have fully appropriated our tradition’s story when we begin a spiritual direction relationship. We may be more influenced by cultural, psychological, economic, or political values and stories than by our received faith stories. We may not have become creatively proficient at making the connections and interpreting the experiences that most create meaning in our lives. By the very experience of listening to ourselves tell these stories of our inspired lives in spiritual direction, we may hear the whispers of God’s Spirit in new and surprising ways.

The spiritual director cannot do this work for us. She or he may inquire, suggest possibilities, or invite us to entertain new perspectives by bringing fresh ears to our story—ears, importantly, alert to echoes from the faith tradition and its long history of men and women of prayer. A spiritual director cannot give us the meaning of our lives. Some people emphasize this meaning-making aspect of spirituality more than the religious

experience aspect. They are by nature more philosophical, wondering what it all means, and think deeply about the human condition and their own lives. Often if a director stays with the thoughts, the meanings arrived at by a directee, the experience

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of a personally communicating God may emerge from the exploration of the experiences that led to these meanings.

This second aspect of spirituality, experiences of God, of the mystery of human existence for

which there may be no words, is of even greater importance to some than the meanings we subsequently articulate. For many spiritually attuned people, their rich experience of God’s presence and love is the meaning of their lives. While most directees would never claim to be mystics, many in fact are. By mystics, I mean those who experience the presence of God in their lives personally and who organize their lives around this relationship. They engage in spiritual practices or disciplines which cultivate a contemplative openness to these approaches of God, seek to deepen and stabilize in their ability to grow in their capacity to be filled with God, and they are often desirous, like Hafiz, to communicate this experiential understanding to others. These experiences may be quite far apart and transient or, in the more mature, more pervasive and constant. While all traditions do not equally value the witness of their mystics, and many assume these are very rare, this is not necessarily the case. Spiritual directors need to be able to support a directee’s growth in prayer and have at least some understanding of the ways of the mystics from having studied these texts and learned from their own personal experience or from their directees.

We are living in times of unprecedented spiritual hunger. The very complexity and challenges of our particular moment in history seem to be catalysts for many more people pursuing an explicitly spiritual path and seeking transformation on the basis of personal experience of the Divine. On the other hand, we also witness an opposing polarization of individuals retreating within inadequate and narrow forms of orthodoxy

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out of fear of growth or fear of otherness. The interconnected reality of our world today implies a cross-fertilization of religious thought and mystical experience across religious traditions worldwide. For some, this contact is threatening and causes them to contract into ever narrower worldviews. For others, this same contact opens new doors of understanding. The most fruitful interreligious dialogue has taken place among contemplative practitioners who pray or meditate together and who can recognize similarities in the outcomes of their religious practice although their paths and theologies may differ remarkably from one another.

This focus on personal religious experience and the dis-

cernment of spirits is a core function of spiritual direction. While many people report having had maybe one or two key religious experiences in their lifetimes—true “aha” moments, such as a conversion, spiritual awakening, or an unmistakable sense of a particular “calling”—they do not engage in the intentional practices that would cultivate sensitivity to the movements of God in their lives beyond these more dramatic moments. They respond at the time, and life pretty much returns to normal.

Others who have tasted such spiritual experiences long for more. They recognize the potential for an ongoing personal relationship with Jesus or the Holy Spirit, and they engage in the spiritual disciplines that support it. These usually include frequent personal prayer, regular meditation on the Scripture, spiritual reading, simplicity of life, embracing a vocation with a sense of a personal mission, and participation in a faith community of formation and worship. Still others have a taste of God but have not had access to significant spiritual formation that would help them respond. These latter two groups are the ones who most often seek spiritual direction for assistance with individual discernment about what God is calling them to within their unique circumstances. Living out the consequences of this relationship with God becomes paramount in their lives, or gaining access to ways of deepening and growing in this relationship bring them to spiritual direction.

As Tilden Edwards says, “We yearn for a soul friend with whom we can share our desire for the Holy One and with whom we can try to iden-

tify and embrace the hints of divine Presence and invitation in our lives. Neither soul-friends nor anyone else can fully enter our deep soul space. However, they can listen to our articulations of it, silently open these to God as soon as they are heard, and occasionally speak when something is heard in that openness that seems to be meant for the directee.”¹⁰ While the responses of individual spiritual directors will vary, we cannot underestimate the effect of such holy listening, such attentiveness to the deep soul space of a directee, this receptivity to the hints of divine Presence. These transactions always remain mysterious and resist complete understanding. They may be received but not grasped, reflected upon but not explained. The spiritual director may be affected as much by the Divine Presence within a session as the directee. Within this mysterious interchange, two graced persons open themselves to God’s touch and, by so doing, often touch one another in quite unpredictable ways.

A Safe Place for Development

Above all, spiritual direction needs to be a safe place in which to explore whatever is going on in our lives. Developmental psychology has made us aware of the significant psychological development that can take place over our life cycles. Stage theorists, such as Kohlberg and Gilligan, Loewinger, Kegan, and Erickson, have persuasively shown that many adults within U.S. culture reach only the third or fourth stages of development at some

time in their life cycle.¹¹ The third stage is typically one that can be characterized as “conventional” or “conformist.” In this stage of development, identity is derived from a group, and one’s sense of “self” is embedded in the group and relationship to the group.

Development to the next stage involves movement to a more abstract sense of the “rules” of the institution: in Kohlberg, a formal operation of applying the rules, and in Loevinger, the conscientious orientation that begins to take individual consciousness, personal responsibility, and internally motivated achievement into account. Adults who are negotiating these stages of development need a safe place, a holding environment in which to explore their new experiences of self and other and receive both challenge and confirmation. If one’s religious home or important representatives within it are threatened by this development or require their members to remain embedded as persons within the group, adults whose experiences are leading them to a more complex stage of development may feel intense guilt and will not feel safe disclosing these changes within this community until they have grown into the next stage of development. From the vantage point of a more complex stage of development, they may be able to remain within a tradition while not being entirely limited by it.

When the context for such stage change is spiritually initiated, adults undergoing these experiences may feel as if their faith is being threatened when, in fact, it may be growing. This development is both psychological and cognitive. On the cognitive level, meaning making changes, and relationships

change on the psychological level. Some theologians have noted that these times of normal growth and development, crises of growth initiated by internal or external events, are opportunities for spiritual growth as well. They may be experienced either as conversion points in our lives or challenges inviting us to deepen our faith, hope, and love.

The implications for spiritual direction and for spiritual growth are clear. Such times of psychological growth, often precipitated by life events, require attention at the spiritual level as well. If we are engaged in a real relationship with Jesus or with God, then every change in ourselves will necessitate a change in our relationship with God. Our image of God and our relationship with God need to develop and grow alongside the changes in all our other relationships. While it is true that God is always present in the core of ourselves, how we relate to God and how we experience this indwelling change over time.

Likewise, people involved in such stage transitions will think new thoughts and interpret their faith tradition differently than before. Sometimes the weight

of the tradition may appear to be a barrier forbidding them to grow and develop. These may be tempted to abandon their traditions because their theological resources are too meager to enable them to fashion a more adequate interpretation of the Jesus story or Christian doctrines in the light of their new experience. If spiritual directors are experienced with these spiritual and psychological dynamics of development, they can provide a safe place for their directees to work through the spiritual dimensions of their development.

These developmental crises may also require psychological assistance from a competent therapist. Spiritual directors need to have sufficient psychological understanding of this reality as well as know therapists to whom they might refer directees who need more psychological help than spiritual direction can offer. Spiritual direction is always focused on what God is doing in the directee’s life rather than on pervasive or transient intrapsychic or interpersonal issues that could best be assisted by therapy. Typically, directees meet monthly with their directors, while a counselee usually meets

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at least weekly with a therapist. Focused attention on relational issues or reopened issues from the past is not the purpose of spiritual direction, and directors are not necessarily competent to work in this area. However, it is increasingly common for therapists and directors to work in tandem with one another, so that the spiritual implications of the therapeutic work can receive adequate attention.

While spiritual direction functions within religious traditions and supports the integration of personal religious experience with corporate worship and participation in a faith community, it can be distinguished from other ministries of accompaniment within those traditions. Spiritual direction remains radically open to whatever God's Spirit might be doing in a directee's life, whether or not it threatens something in the community, the tradition, or relationships in the directee's life. Spiritual direction recognizes that God can do new things (Isaiah 42:9), that spiritual life admits of originality and creativity. Directees often gain the freedom to make breathtaking choices about their lives through paying attention to their religious experience and their responses to God. They may leave some relationships, some jobs, and some communities. But they may also embrace new vocations, become prophetic within their current ministries or workplaces, and grow into deeper intimacy with God through fidelity to committed relationships.

"How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its beauty?" Feeling the love, feeling the encouragement of the light overcame its fear. Essentially, in this image of the rose as a metaphor for the soul, the rose is a

symbol for the core of the self. All it has to do is blossom into its fullness. In Christian terms, this would mean becoming the image of Christ we already are, becoming the beloved of God just as Jesus is God's beloved. In many ways, a spiritual direction relationship becomes part of the love and part of the light that helps directees overcome not only their fears about how their lives might change, but also their fears about letting God in so completely they can become who they are meant to be from the inside out and give this world all their beauty.

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz the Great Sufi Master*, Daniel Ladinsky, trans. New York: Penguin Compass, 1999, 121.
- ² "Homilies on the Psalms" in *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, Mary T. Clark, ed. and trans. *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, 232.
- ³ Shalem Institute began in 1978, and programs in the Reformed and Anglican traditions developed in the '80s and '90s in the United States.
- ⁴ Spiritual Directors International now comprises more than 5,000 members worldwide. It is interfaith as well as ecumenical and lists more than 300 training programs either in academic settings or sponsored by spirituality centers or institutes at an adult education level. See their website <http://www.sdiworld.org> for more information.
- ⁵ See chapter two, "Images and Models of the Spiritual Director," in *Writings on Spiritual Direction by Great Christian Masters*, Jerome M. Neufelder and Mary C. Coelho, eds. New York: Seabury Press, 1982.
- ⁶ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992.
- ⁷ See Maria Tattu Bowen, "Hearing with the Heart/Contemplative Listening in the Spiritual Direction Session," *Sacred Is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programs*, ed. Suzanne M. Buckley. New York: Crossroad, 2005, 33-41.

⁸ This phrase has become part of the mission statement for Spiritual Directors International.

⁹ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. San Francisco: Harper, 1983, 8.

¹⁰ Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Director/Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending the Soul*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2001, 2.

¹¹ See Elisabeth Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1992, for a more complete description of these stages of development and implications for spiritual direction.

About the Author

Dr. Janet K. Ruffing, RSM, is Professor in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at Fordham University, Bronx, NY. She is a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and has been involved in mentoring spiritual directors since 1984. She is the author of several books, two on spiritual direction: *Spiritual Direction Beyond the Beginnings* (2000) and *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Spiritual Direction and Narrative* (1989) both published by Paulist Press. She is a founding member of the coordinating council of Spiritual Directors International and frequently gives workshops for spiritual directors both in the U.S. and internationally.