

AN AMERICAN CATHOLIC JOURNAL FOR MINISTRY

New Theology Review

IN THIS ISSUE

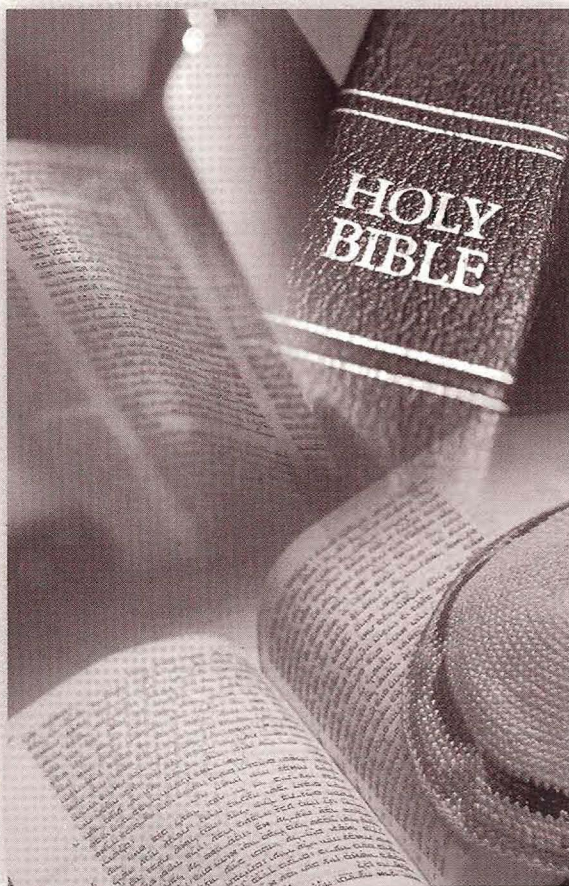
Religions of the Book

Scott C. Alexander

Paul Lachance, O.F.M.

Rabbi Herbert
Bronstein,
Helen Cahill, O.P.,
Syafa'atun
Elmirzana

Rita George Tvrkovič



Volume 16, Number 3 • August 2003

NTR

Contents

Religions of the Book

Introduction	3
<i>Scott C. Alexander</i> Judaism, Christianity, and Islam circa Nineteenth Century C.E.: Three Responses to the Enlightenment Challenge	5
<i>Paul Lachance, O.F.M.</i> Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam	15
<i>Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, Helen Cahill, O.P., and Syafa'atun Elmirezana</i> Prayer in the Abrahamic Faiths	22
<i>Rita George Tvrtković</i> Heart Speaks to Heart: Women of the Book in Conversation	31
<hr/>	
<i>Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.</i> To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative	38
<i>Betty L. Scheetz</i> Reclaiming Unity in the Letter to the Ephesians	53
<i>Daniel P. Grigassy, O.F.M.</i> Is Roman the Only Way to be Catholic?: A Reflection of the Grandson of a Catholic Priest	62

NTR
VOLUME 16, NUMBER 3 • AUGUST 2003

New Theology Review: An American Catholic Journal of Ministry is published quarterly in February, May, August, and November by the Proprietor and Publisher, Liturgical Press, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN 56321.

Co-Editors: Brid Long, S.S.L. and James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.

Book Review Editor: Daniel P. Grigassy, O.F.M.

Editorial Board

Donald Buggert, O.CARM.	Anthony Gittins, C.Ss.Sr.	Dawn Nothwehr, O.S.F.
Ilia Delio, O.S.F.	Francis Horn, O.S.A.	James Okoye, C.Ss.Sr.
Mary Frohlich, R.S.C.J.	Richard McCarron	

The editorial policy is under the aegis of Catholic Theological Union of Chicago and Washington Theological Union, from whose faculties the Editor and Editorial Board are appointed.

© 2003 The Order of Saint Benedict. All rights reserved.

All manuscripts, books for review, and editorial correspondence should be sent to THE EDITORS, *New Theology Review*, Washington Theological Union, 6896 Laurel Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20012. Authors should certify that the article is not being submitted simultaneously to another journal. See February 2002 vol. 15, no. 1 for a Style Sheet and author's instructions.

New subscriptions and renewals should be accompanied by a remittance in U.S. funds and sent to *New Theology Review*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321. Phone orders (U.S. and Canada): 1-800-858-5450

Changes of address and business correspondence should be sent to *New Theology Review*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321.

Yearly subscription: U.S. \$28.00 (\$49.00 two years). Canada & Foreign \$32.00 (\$59.00 two years). Single copies and back issues \$8.00. Subscription Manager: Judy Ruprecht.

Design by Greg Becker. Cover photo by Greg Becker.

Typography by Mark Warzecha.

Printed by Edwards Brothers, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

POSTMASTER, please send address changes to *New Theology Review*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321.

Periodicals postage paid at Collegeville, Minnesota, and at other mailing offices.

ISSN 0896-4297

To Tell the Sacred Tale

Spiritual Direction and Narrative

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

At the heart of the process of spiritual direction is the collaboration between the director and the directee in bringing life's sacred stories into speech. The importance of constellating a central metaphor, discerning conflicting plot lines, glimpsing alternative possibilities in one's story, all witness to the multilayered self and the creative forces at work in the process of growing into a relational rather than an autonomous being, attuned to the presence of God and Christ in one's life and in the world.

We can think of spiritual direction as telling a sacred tale. This ministry from my perspective is one of the privileged embodiments of the gracious illumination and fashioner of all things that Sophia, Holy Wisdom, is in our ministerial lives. The art of listening sacred stories into speech is a core activity in the spiritual direction process and in many other pastoral ministries that requires the accompaniment of Sophia for its fruitfulness. This attention to story is a theme to which I have returned twenty years after first becoming preoccupied with this insight into the spiritual direction process as essentially a special form of shared narrative (Ruffing 1989).

When I listen to the accounts of my directees, I discover a continual interplay between "what happened" and "what it means." "What happened" is the story I now understand to be a particular form of narrative, suggestive fragments, and entire episodes of the sacred story God and the directee are telling together in their mutual self-presence and in the directee's experience of life and action. "What it means" are the further interpretations tentatively offered and arrived at

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M., is professor of spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion at Fordham University, Bronx, New York. This lecture will be expanded into a revision of Uncovering Stories of Faith: Spiritual Direction and Narrative (Paulist, 1989).

about the internal coherence and meaningfulness of these experiences. Frequently, the directee recognizes a felt sense of the ongoing implications and subsequent actions suggested in the narrative itself. Telling the sacred tale leads to commitment and action—choosing to live in the atmosphere of this tale and to enact it in daily life. The narrative process of spiritual direction over time fosters the development of a graced sense of the directee's self, personal history, and significance within a community of faith.

My conviction about the centrality of telling the sacred tale in spiritual direction has deepened and expanded through the years. First, the large number of international students whom I have mentored as a supervisor immediately connect with the story focus. Many come from cultures that continue to be primarily oral in style. Familiar proverbs and stories comprise the traditional wisdom of the people. In these cultures, most teaching and learning occurs in the context of shared storytelling; even though narrative remains a universal human activity in every culture, storying is their native home. These spiritual directees grasp the process of spiritual direction more easily through the lens of story than through psychological frames of reference.

Second, for those directees most affected by the cultural shift known as post-modernism, telling one's sacred story in spiritual direction or another pastoral context helps to overcome the fragmentation of identity and the erosion of meaning that often results from the encounter with conflicting viewpoints and the relativization of religious traditions and their meta-narratives. A surprising effect of post-modernism is an intensified need to order experience and discover meaning through personal narrative (Lescher, 252–53). Betty Bergland asserts that, "between 1945 and 1980 more than five thousand autobiographies were published in the United States. Autobiographies and autobiographical studies focused on ethnic groups and women have especially proliferated in the last two decades in the wake of feminist scholarship and the burgeoning field of ethnic studies. Thus, despite pronouncements about the end of autobiography and postmodern challenges to traditional notions of the self, autobiographical narratives proliferate. . . ." (130).

Third, a focus on the way a directee's story unfolds helps spiritual directors connect one session to another, to grasp patterns and directions, and to employ

Telling the sacred tale leads to commitment and action—choosing to live in the atmosphere of this tale and to enact it in daily life.

their pastoral skills of exploration and reflection of feelings in a larger story of life and meanings. Attentiveness to the shape and direction of the sacred tale sharpens potential discernments and leads to discerning among stories themselves (Dunne, 19–21).

Spiritual Autobiography

What is the primary genre of these sacred stories? I propose that they are an oral form of spiritual autobiography. As spiritual autobiography, how are they like or unlike published versions of the sacred journey? People who come

for spiritual direction already have a relationship with God if only in the embryonic form of a desire for spirituality or for a felt connection with the Holy One. The story of the self, all its adventures, longings, failures, relationships, disappointments, committed action, and epiphanies of meaning and of presence are already implicitly a story of the soul. Spiritual autobiographies characteristically create meaning and coherence in a person's life story through the narration of their spiritual adventure. Characteristically, they include a person's life before conversion or spiritual awakening, the gradual process of learning to recognize and follow the leadings of God, a recognition of a pattern of invitation and response that crystallizes into a sense of calling or vocation and the living out of this inter-relational dynamic with God over a lifetime.

In a written narrative such as Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul*, the vantage point of the telling, long after her entrance into Carmel, shapes how she remembers and stories her pre-convent life. So, too, Augustine's *Confessions*, the beginning of this genre in Western litera-

ture, occurs ten years after his conversion. His writing traces his journey through the various philosophical and theological understandings that gradually lead him to convert to Christianity under the guidance of Ambrose. His style of narration is itself an act of prayer since his implied audience is God to whom he addresses his *confessio*. Yet this most literary of men clearly imagines male readers of this narrative as well as God. This "God-soaked" atmosphere of the *Confessions* is characteristic of spiritual autobiography.

Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) has been extremely popular in this century. Although the more mature Merton regretted many of his opinions and assumptions in this early work, the reader clearly glimpses the mysterious way God led him through his studies at Columbia into the Trappists. The young monk recounts his early Trappist life from entrance through ordination. Merton continued to write journals, now published in seven volumes, in which he tried to be ruthlessly honest about his life, his profound religious experiences, his intense struggles to follow the continual pull toward greater solitude and solidarity with humanity, and his foolish mistakes. The sacred tale he tells is the story of a self that God gradually transformed over time through empowering grace. The differences between *Seven Storey Mountain* and the later journals clearly show the first story was told within Merton's own limited perspective as a newly ordained monastic priest as well as the censoring limits of particular audiences.

Merton's autobiographical work was heavily edited by the community's official censors until the required time after Merton's death when his papers were opened to scholars. Thérèse wrote her sacred tale at the request of her religious superiors, one of them her own sister, and she addressed each section to the one who requested it. These audiences for both writers dictated choices about what to include or exclude in the process of writing. A written autobiography is always, regardless of its imagined audience, an exercise of selection and patterned arrangement, usually organized around a central metaphor of the self that lends coherence to story. For Merton, it was the journey up the seven storey mountain, a tribute to Dante's influence; for Thérèse, a little white flower transplanted into Carmel. Written narratives often omit what cannot be subsumed within the central tale and its central images.

Constellating a Central Metaphor

These metaphors of the self constellate a sense of the self as well as imply a plot line. Thérèse returns several times to this image of the "little white flower" as a metaphor of the way she understands herself. Like these literary autobiographies, directees rely on key metaphors to convey a sense of the self/God relationship. For example, Krista, during a sabbatical year of healing from "burnout," received in prayer and from nature two key images that foreshadowed her healing and suggested progressive stages of her intimacy with Jesus. Krista says:

[Spiritual direction] early [in the year] was centered on self and on my woundedness. Sometimes I was "thrown" from recent wounds to those of my childhood. This was heightened because I began the program on my father's anniversary and because a tree just outside the door had a "wound" that oozed sap. This tree

*Spiritual
autobiographies
characteristically
create meaning
and coherence in a
person's life story
through the
narration of their
spiritual adventure.*

could not be avoided, no matter how hard I tried to turn away. Still it “caught” me. Somehow this connected very deeply with a wound in the core of my being.

During the first part of her sabbatical, she could only pray in nature. The tree with its oozing wound became a metaphor for her wounded self. Although the tree is obviously wounded, the wound can heal. The healing plot begins to unfold. Just being in the woodlands nurtured her. As she began to add a nightly examen of gratitude, but still hesitant about re-establishing a duty-bound routine of prayer, she turned inside “seeking the truth within, the God of my heart.” At that time, she says:

I had an image of Jesus standing at the door knocking. He was left standing for quite some time, then I opened the door but left him outside. This continued for months, and it was very healthy as we could chatter at each other, one on either side of the door, without having to look each other in the eye. I was very comfortable with this safe relationship.

In Krista’s ongoing spiritual direction, this image of Jesus outside her door emerged in her prayer. An image, such as this one, changes and evolves sometimes in predictable and at other times in surprising ways. Such images as these suggest possible plot lines. These plot-bearing images emerge from either external reality, as did the tree with the oozing wound right outside the door suggesting eventual healing, or internally in imaginative prayer. Both images suggest Krista requires time for both healing and deepening intimacy with Jesus. Will Krista ever invite Jesus inside? Only time will tell. In the autobiographical narrative, these images may be far more varied than in the more controlled literary form.

Episodic and Spontaneous Narrative

The narrative created episodically in spiritual direction unfolds in a more haphazard way, and with greater spontaneity than written autobiography. As in Krista’s case, God or Jesus may be so active in the directee’s consciousness, the directee begins to tell the story of a relational self rather than an autonomous, individualistic self. Although Krista never consciously opened the door to Jesus, sometime later as she put it, “he crept up on me, snuck in. By the end of the year Jesus was somehow inside and very at home. I don’t know how this happened, I didn’t open the door fully or formally invite him in.” This story is being co-created by Jesus and the directee—we can sense the cracks in ego-control and defense. Krista is happy Jesus is now inside, but he did not wait until

she “formally invited him in.” He takes the initiative and “sneaks in.” This is a self shaped by her relationship with God.

Directees note such surprises when they keep private journals. They use them as memory points for their unfolding spiritual journeys and life’s challenges. When they convert these memory points into sacred tales in spiritual direction, they are trying to capture the main themes and movements, the paradigmatic events rather than a detailed report. Often implicitly influenced by inherited plots, part the creation of culture, part of family, part of the faith community, and part the internalization of broader social norms, the directee launches into the life/story that has unfolded since the last session. This story is continually being recreated in the light of present experience. The vantage point of remembrance is always the present moment of the telling. The narrative patterns are loosely organized; there is both redundancy and fragmentation. A story line that was formerly prominent is replaced by another incident capturing the directee’s attention and affections. The narrative line from the previous session may not return again until many sessions later or not at all. The directee tells the sacred tale in a less edited way than a writer, but shaped, nonetheless, by the directee’s sense of what the director wants to hear and what the directee assumes belongs in this narrative situation. The directee is not necessarily certain about where God was acting or communicating God’s self in the interval between sessions. Frequently, the director’s responses to the directee’s story elicit deeper awareness of these movements. Directees may sense that the two or three events they choose to share in their narratives have some deeper significance or have a depth dimension not yet plumbed and tell the story to probe these possibilities. Directees tell and retell key stories until they yield their significance.

Creating a narrative of an event, in this case an event of “grace” or an experience of “mystery,” already begins to shape its meaning and significance. The director, an interactive listener, participates in shaping the story. The directee tells the sacred tale to this particular director, alert to facial expressions, and responsive to the director’s wonderings about details omitted on the first telling. Over time, the director in a role of attentive “reader” or “audience” imaginatively fills in the narrative gaps, tentatively creating a coherent story in the director’s own mind from the directee’s style of narration, tone, voice, point-of-view, character, action, and central images. Even so, much remains fragmentary because these are not finished, polished narratives. They retain an episodic, spontaneous,

*This story is
continually being
recreated in the
light of present
experience.*

and provisional character. By eliciting feelings, images, and subtle experiences of grace, the director helps the directee notice aspects of experience that were not yet articulated but which the directee can recapture in memory.

When God communicates God's self through the events of life, frequently directees only truly appropriate them through this dialogical, narrative process (Ruffing 1995, 240). Few other narrative venues elicit the stories of these depth experiences, especially if they are overtly religious in tone. Few of us ordinarily tell the sacred tale casually in chance encounters or even in friendship circles. It is not the only story of themselves directees tell. They choose the episodes that fit a particular narrative occasion. The audience for all of our autobiographical creations either elicits or inhibits our story.

The Multiple Storied Self

The stories that we and our directees tell ourselves matter. It matters how well we tell our particular stories. Jill Ker Conway, writing on autobiography, emphasizes that it "matters how we remember things." The way we remember determines the plot that guides our future. For instance:

If we remember the past as a series of chaotic events governed by an impersonal and non-moral fate or luck, we create a similar kind of future in our mind's eyes, and that prophecy is usually self-fulfilling. If we see the past as fully determined—by economic forces, by genetic codes, even by birth order and relationships to parents—we see ourselves as victims of those forces, with our best hope a kind of stoic resignation. If we see our past as a moral spiritual journey in time, our imagined future will continue that quest (Conway, 176).

Conway summarizes some of the recent technical, critical, literary, and neurological studies of memory and narrative when she asserts that memory results from the brain's melding together word and images. "It is in the sequencing and interpretation of the information we recall that the forms and tropes of culture take effect" (178). Memory is reconstructed at every moment. Conway suggests that this sequencing and interpretation is an inveterate human habit. She says:

We all practice the craft of autobiography in our inner conversations with ourselves about the meaning of our experience, and those conversations, no matter what language we use, are fundamentally theological or philosophical. Though only a handful of us set about writing down the results and publishing them for others to read, we are all autobiographers. But few of us give close attention to the forms and tropes of the culture through which we report ourselves to ourselves. Though they capture universals in human existence, these forms are not

necessarily the perfect expressions of our experience in our unique passages through time (178).

The Discernment of Stories

Spiritual direction as a narrative process actively invites both the telling of the sacred tale and paying close attention to the potentially incompatible stories directees may be trying to live. In ongoing spiritual direction, during every session directees express their inner autobiographical activity, modified by the assumptions made about both the director's receptivity to this story and its relevance to the story of self and God together, a relational form of autobiography recently receiving more literary critical attention (Eakin, 43–98). The narrative spiritual direction process welcomes the unique particularity of each directee. Every directee has already been encoded with a plethora of possible mythic patterns. In the postmodern context the admission of multiple points of view and horizons of experience has radically expanded these narrative possibilities. When directees hear themselves telling their unique and particular stories that include gender, ethnicity, family history, subculture, sexual orientation, faith tradition, particular communities, and natural environment, they become conscious of the story they are living. These stories may contain hidden conflicts and significant value differences among the various subplots and storylines. Tad Dunne coined the phrase "discernment of stories" to describe an important element of spiritual direction by examining the many storylines of directees' lives in relationship to one another.

Directees absorb stories from films, from celebrities, from confessional talk shows on every imaginable subject, from the plots of sit-coms, soap operas, other television shows, many written forms of personal narratives, and from cultural templates. These often define success in terms of financial status, self-worth in terms of sexual attraction or display, the use of force as the only way to resolve conflict, the violation of human rights and civil liberties as necessary to calm our fears. These stories live inside us right along with the stories of our faith, with the story of Jesus, and with the parabolic stories Jesus told to draw us toward God's desires for us. Discernment of stories suggests that a major function of spiritual direction narratives is to recognize when two or more plots a directee is trying to live simultaneously are in conflict with one another in fundamental ways. Dunne is convinced that these myths or tropes of our culture restrict our

*Memory is
reconstructed at
every moment.*

imaginings, our desires, and consequently our actions. The discernment of stories demands “a readiness to ask whether our desires may be overly restricted by a kind of myth—for instance, the myth that the Bible contains the only truths necessary; or that life is ultimately tragic, or paradoxical, or threatening, or fertile, or complex, or simple, and so on. Each such myth, or story, limits the field of possible desires” (21).

This discernment of stories is not limited to the exploration of conflicts between secular and sacred stories. It often involves conflicts among different, competing forms of the Christian story itself, to say nothing of all the other ways of being religious we may encounter in spiritual direction today. Some versions of the Catholic Christian tradition continue to severely limit the possible faith stories women, gays, lesbians, and non-Western members of the Church might enact. The ideological conflicts over the interpretation of Vatican II play out in multiple ways in the faith stories of laity and clergy alike. They determine how we construe our “roles” within the ecclesial community.

Part of Dunne’s remedy for directees caught in a limiting story is the ability to glimpse an alternative possibility. Dunne suggests that “the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable stories depends on how educated we are in alternative stories” (21). When directees can imagine an alternative pattern or possibility, they can often create a new story that is more adequate than the original, unreflective one. We are very familiar with this critical approach to the manifest narrative in psychoanalysis or other forms of therapy. Directors can assist their directees by inviting them to imagine an alternative story or by suggesting more than one alternative to stimulate directees’ creative resolutions of these storylines in partnership with God.

Psychotherapy and Sacramental Confession Elicit Different Narratives

Many directees come to spiritual direction from experiences in therapy. Psychological theories and models form the narrative templates of the elicited story that differs from the one told in spiritual direction. These psychological theories encoded the biases and stereotypes about gender, race, and other aspects of persons present in the cultures of the theorists. Many of them were not entirely compatible with Christianity either.

Directees who have therapeutic experience often have some difficulty in changing their narrative practices when they begin spiritual direction. They may only know how to tell a story of the distressed or troubled self—the ongoing drama of the ego and the surprising evidence that arises from the unconscious. They may come week after week with their burdens and difficulties and be quite unpracticed in an ability to tell the sacred tale of their existential selves compan-

ioned by God in all of the stuff of life, including their particular forms of suffering. Spiritual directors evoke stories of grace and of religious experience. They listen for the light, the movement, the healing potential, the Breath of Sophia rustling the leaves in directees’ lives.

Likewise, directees and sometimes their ordained directors fail to recognize how profoundly the practice of spiritual direction within the sacrament of reconciliation may limit the directee’s narrative. As is well known, the practice of spiritual direction from the Council of Trent and even earlier until the renewal of this ministry in the post-Vatican II era, was largely although not exclusively confined to the confessional. This mode of spiritual direction had explicit aims of fostering holiness of life as well as of controlling the visionary mystical experience of women and limiting the influence and power these women derived from their privileged contact with God.

In this model it was the confessor’s role to forgive sin and determine the authenticity and orthodoxy of visionary experience and to pass judgment on the penitent’s sanctity. Visionary mystical experience was so common by the fourteenth century that almost every convent counted at least one such visionary within its community. The relationship between confessor and penitent was ritually orchestrated and remains so today. The only required narrative in confession is that of the sinful self. Nuns were required to confess on a regular basis, and they were required to police themselves by presenting themselves as sinners and to document that sinfulness specifically. Contemplative nuns who sought spiritual direction in confession were also required to disclose to the discernment of the confessor their mystical experiences, especially when they involved any kind of locutions or revelatory meanings. The confessor was obliged to engage in a theological conversation with them in order to “correct” any doctrinal errors. In his combined roles as arbiter of orthodoxy and channel of grace, the confessor sought to determine if the origin of these visions was illusionary or delusional (mental illness today), diabolic, or divine.

The consequences of these judgments were serious. If the confessor authenticated the visions, the mystic could claim the authority to speak for God and

*Some versions of
the Catholic
Christian tradition
continue to severely
limit the possible
faith stories women,
gays, lesbians, and
non-Western
members of the
Church might enact.*

address rulers, ecclesiastics, as well as ordinary laity (Gilmore, 60–62). They could carry out actions, such as Teresa of Avila's foundations, write or dictate texts, and offer spiritual counsel or teaching to a circle of followers. Penalties levied in the case of demonic origins of visions varied and could include anything from exorcism to penalties determined by the inquisition during some historical periods. The instructions given to confessors were generously punctuated with misogynist assessments of women and of their potential for authentic spiritual experience (see Tanqueray, 257–69, 700–26). Women were considered susceptible to sexual excess, unnecessarily lengthy speech, vanity, curiosity, lack of rationality, and superficiality. Not only did a woman's salvation depend on her confessor's judgment, but her very life as well. Forgiveness of sin and absolution

were rarely a question if the sin story were properly told. The assessment of her religious experience could cost her life and reputation.

When spiritual direction historically or currently is limited to the confessional context, frequently only part of the story of grace gets told. Both confessor and penitent focus on the story of the sinful self. Time constraints confine the conversation to rather brief explorations of other aspects of the penitent's religious experience and spiritual development. Both directee and confessor may have unconsciously assimilated a hermeneutics of suspicion about mystical experiences. These suspicions may result in the directee's self-censoring important episodes in the spiritual journey. When directees do risk trying to tell a sacred tale of heightened mystical experience, the confessor may respond as

one did, "Try not to let it happen again." The directee, inhibited in her attempts to explore and probe the meaning of her quickening religious experience continued to tell a story of sin in confession and to doubt her own experience.

Today the spiritual direction story focuses on the religious experience of the directee. The story of sin and failure may arise when that is the current struggle, but it is not the required narrative for the spiritual direction conversation to occur. Rather, spiritual direction fosters telling the story of interactive grace which is the main plot of the story. The director coaches this narrative into speech. Each directee's experience is unique and particular. Yet most directees initially create their narratives out of available templates that do not necessarily fit their particular circumstances. Each religious tradition privileges one or another narrative over another. Charismatics favor stories of "being slain in the Spirit" and become anxious if they cannot experience this particular gift. Others

privilege testimonial witnesses to the saving power of Jesus, public narratives offered in response to an altar call. Others favor radical conversion experiences. Spiritual direction in its more intimate narrative setting encourages directees to discover their unique story of grace with all of its particularities and individual significance.

The Postmodern Subject and Autobiographical Theory

In this last part, I want to look at autobiographical theory and the postmodern subject in an attempt to relate it to narrative in spiritual direction. The postmodern subject is typically understood to be, "a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (Bergland, 134). It sounds like a chameleon form of self that makes itself at home in very different environments—a self that changes from moment to moment and context to context. A more helpful way of describing this phenomenon in adults comes from psychologist Frederic Hudson, who talks about self-renewing adulthood. He says we are either structuring our lives in a life chapter, giving our lives coherence and shape, or we are in a transition, a time of deconstruction allowing more of ourselves to become available to ourselves. Some of my descriptions of the direction narrative suggest that this "more of ourselves" is constantly making its appearance in the discontinuities of episodic narration. Hudson says that our meaning and mission take different forms over our life cycles. He suggests this meaning and mission bestows internal continuity in our sense of self even though adults typically go through cycles of life-chapters and transitions.

Contemporary autobiographical theory takes into account some of the new understandings of the self emerging from postmodernism as well as from developmental psychology and neuroscience. Paul Eakin takes up these questions under the title of "registers of the self." He wants to answer the question, "which self is speaking in the 'I' of autobiographical discourse?" A second and related question is how to integrate our bodies, brains, and our sense of self. The autobiographical "I" is a linguistic self. This notion can lead to the assumption that our identities are only linguistic creations. Eakin draws on cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser's "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge" to point to "the variety of self-knowledge" (35) that constitutes our experience of ourselves. Neisser's five "selves" are:

1. The *ecological self*: "The self as perceived with respect to the physical environment; 'I am the person here in this place, engaged in this particular activity' (36). Present in infancy.

*[S]piritual direction
fosters telling the
story of interactive
grace which is
the main plot of
the story.*

2. The *interpersonal self*: “the self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person” (41); “I am the person who is engaged, here, in this particular human interchange” (36). Present in infancy.
3. The *extended self*: the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment; “I am the person who had certain specific experiences, who regularly engages in certain specific and familiar routines” (36). By the age of three, children are aware of themselves “as existing outside the present moment, and hence of the extended self” (47).
4. The *private self*: the self of “conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else” (50); “I am, in principle, the only person who can feel this unique and particular pain” (36). Although experts differ as to the emergence of this sense of privacy in developmental chronology, many studies show children as “aware of the privacy of mental life before the age of 5” (50).
5. The *conceptual self*: the extremely diverse forms of self-information—social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person—that posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly (22–23).

I hope it is immediately clear that the autobiographical “I” who tells a sacred tale in spiritual direction primarily fashions a story from the perspective of the extended self, the private self, and the conceptual self. In these registers of the self, we find the confluence between the temporal dimension of self, its reflection on agency and events, and the capacity to choose to disclose unique personal experience. The extended and private selves produce identity narratives in and through the available conceptual self coded in myth, theories, religion and philosophy.

Neisser’s adding the pre-linguistic, pre-reflexive, ecological, and interpersonal selves points to the sense of self firmly anchored in our bodies. According to Antonio Damasio, “The neural basis” for the self “resides with the continuous reactivation of at least two key sets of representations”: “One set concerns representations of key events in an individual’s autobiography and the other consists of representations of body states” (Eakin, 31). Most of the time for most of us, these representations are in the background although nonetheless continuous. It is this sense of our body-selves that we consult when someone asks what we are feeling in the present moment. Although we could never remain conscious of all that goes on in our bodies all the time, I believe, that our ecological selves and our interpersonal selves register religious experience, most importantly a sense of the presence of God.

When directees begin to tell a sacred tale of experiencing the presence of God, neuro-science would suggest that this is an embodied experience. Both feelings and somatic awareness shift when directees discover “they are not alone,” not

imagining experience within themselves but actually aware of an interpersonal Other. Spiritual directors can assist their directees considerably by drawing out the bodily knowing of the ecological and interpersonal selves in relationship to specific experiences in prayer or in nature that are non-linguistic but nonetheless able to be noticed and appropriated. These registers of the self are clearly part of our ongoing experiencing although they do not specify a content to religious experience.

As mystical life develops in some directees, narratives may shift simply to pointing to an ongoing sense of simple presence of our many selves with God. But since the extended self is also always part of us, when consciousness shifts again we return to the current chapter of our life’s narrative that began with birth and that will end with death. The extended and private selves represent for me the moral self, the character or kind of person we have become through our reflection, choices and actions. We choose to tell a certain kind of story with our lives and we tend to tell ourselves that same story in our inner self-talk. These stories offer us a sense of prediction and control over our lives. If our story is a story of victimization or of “things just happening” without our consent or participation, we have not yet become conscious of ourselves as storytellers, as having the capacity to authorize our lives, change our minds and our behaviors, and create another story or chapter in our lives. Spiritual direction is a privileged narrative situation that invites reflection on and revision of our stories. By hearing our stories consciously, we can choose to change our stories. As we change, our stories change.

Our spiritual life is more than this moral agency requiring reflection, prediction, and control. Frederick Buechner asserts in *Telling Secrets* that

It is important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves—because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing. It is important to tell our secrets too because it makes it easier that way to see where we have been in our lives and where we are going. . . . It is by entering that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept that we come perhaps closer than we do anywhere else to the One who, whether we realize it or not, is of all our secrets the most telling and the most precious we have to tell (3).

The story we learn to tell in spiritual direction eventually requires us to tell such secrets. Spiritual life eventually requires surrender into a mutuality of relating and being with God. This story is uniquely being uncovered in our postmodern context. Spiritual direction may well be the sacred place where directors encourage directees to tell such a sacred tale.

References

- Bergland, Betty. "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject." In *Autobiography and Postmodernism*. Ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, 130–66. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.
- Buechner, Frederick. *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Conway, Jill Ker. *When Memory Speaks*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998.
- Dunne, Tad. *Spiritual Mentoring: Guiding People through Spiritual Exercises to Life Decisions*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Gilmore, Leigh. "Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Antobiographical Authority." In *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, 54–78.
- Hudson, Frederic M. *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1999.
- Lescher, Bruce H. "Catholicism and Postmodernity: Faithing our Practice." *The Way* 41 (July 2001) 246–56.
- Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanich, 1948.
- Ruffing, Janet. *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Spiritual Direction and Narrative*. Mahwah: Paulist, 1989.
- _____. "The World Transfigured: Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored through Qualitative Research Methodology." *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995) 232–59.
- Tanquerey, Adolphe. *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1930.
- Thérèse of Lisieux. *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*. John Clarke, trans. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1972.