

Companionship for the Journey: The Gift of Spiritual Direction

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You may not realize it but your desire for God is the truest and most essential thing about you. It is truer than your sin, it is truer than your woundedness, truer than what you have gained or lost, truer than the roles & responsibilities that you have left behind. Your desire for God & your capacity to connect with Him is at the core of all desire. But there is an even greater truth...you are here because God has drawn you here. God's desire to be with you and His love for you has initiated this journey and will attend you in every moment of it.¹

Spiritual Crisis: Living Hand-to-Mouth

I couldn't move forward or back. Hemmed in by the desperate begging of hungry children on a dusty Rwandan village road. Stifled by needs that I could not meet. Tiny, dark hands reaching and grasping. Eager eyes looking to me for relief from hunger pangs. I hand them Rwandan francs, worth less than a copper penny, knowing that the relief that I offered was a pitiful and temporary consolation for a lifetime of living hand-to-mouth.

As I have crossed continents and listened to the life stories of soul-hungry third-world children of God and then returned home again to the Promised Land, I have come to a glaring realization: something in our first-world religious culture has taught us to live with a hand-to-mouth spirituality. Our religious affluence has created a culture of moving from religious bread line to religious bread line, taking just enough food to quell the hunger pangs for the moment. The pervasive symptoms of malnourished souls are anxiety, hopelessness, restlessness and the nagging question, "Is this really all there is to life?"

There is a hunger abroad in our time, haunting lives and hearts. Like an empty stomach aching beneath the sleek coat of a seemingly well-fed creature, it reveals that something is missing from the diet of our rational, secular and affluent culture. Both within and beyond traditional faith communities, a hunger for spiritual depth and integrity is gaining momentum.²

The implication of living hand-to-mouth spiritually is serious. Moral failures, lack of discernment, hopelessness, misguided (even harmful) ministry and disintegration of relationships have blurred the lines between Christians and the world, making them almost indistinguishable from one another. Disillusioned and detached soul-hungry masses are leaving church pews cold and empty. Once-passionate men and women who remember the moment of their calling by God carry shame baggage from failed stories of ministry that have left them exhausted, burned out, and questioning the validity of their discernment, call and mission.

Soul hunger is not a new problem. The psalmist penned a song of longing born out of soul hunger, "Oh God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land

1. Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence. Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 51.

2. Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1.

where there is no water” (Ps 63.1). Later prophet and author Isaiah looked around at the Babylonian captives and asked two soul-piercing questions and then answered them with an astonishing answer: “Why do you spend money on what is not bread? Why do you labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and then you will eat what is good and satisfying and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Listen to me and come to me; hear what I am telling you so that your soul might live” (Isa 55.2–3).

Some two hundred years later Jesus asked the very question that Isaiah had asked and gave the same answer: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matt 28.9–11). What was Jesus really offering his disciples, those that bought in to his rabbinical teachings? Jesus was offering a paradigm shift. While other rabbis were wrestling with the law, struggling desperately to get it right for themselves and others, ever tweaking the system of rules and regulations, Jesus offered something vastly different. Jesus offered soul companionship and rest.

Spiritual Direction: Ancient Solution

Spiritual direction is an interpersonal relationship between two individuals wherein one person (traditionally called the director) takes the role of calling attention to the loving presence and leading of God in another’s journey. The director’s primary purpose is to stay attentive to God while listening to the directee. The focus is on the directee’s relationship with God rather than on the directee’s relationship with the director. Eugene Peterson defines spiritual direction as “the act of paying attention to God, calling attention to God, being attentive to God in a person or circumstances of situation. . . . [I]t notices invisibilities in and beneath and around the visibilities. It listens for the silences between the spoken sounds.”³

Spiritual direction typically involves regular monthly meetings over a long-term understanding that the pilgrimage of spiritual transformation is a lifetime journey with stops and starts and often missteps along the way. The director might ask questions like, “How is your soul?” or “Where is God in this?” “How do you sense God prompting you?” or “How will you respond to his promptings?” “In the simplest and most profound terms, the spiritual director is simultaneously a learner and a teacher of discernment. The director reflectively listens for what is happening and asks questions such as, ‘Where is God in this person’s life?’ ‘What is the story?’ ‘Where does this person’s story fit in our common Christian story?’”⁴

Traditionally, the origins of spiritual direction were birthed in the third century when monasteries in the deserts of northern Africa housed many devout men and women. We know of their spiritual practices by reading their journals and autobiographies. These pillars of the contemplative faith are known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers. They moved into wilderness areas to be able to hear God more clearly and discern his will for their lives. The astounding thing is that today, in America, we are seeing a wave of contemplative spirituality taking hold in churches. People want to find a personal narrative similar to the Desert Fathers and Mothers while staying grounded in their marriages, communities, and homes to flee the multitude of distracting and soul-numbing cultural influences. The model of spiritual direction emerges from the Biblical text. You can see it in the directives from the Old Testament prophets and rabbis, and in the life of Jesus in the New Testament. As Jesus gathered disciples to walk with him, he taught and modeled surrendering your life story to God throughout the gospel record.

Every spiritual journey is uncharted territory. The twin ideas of faith being a long journey and the individual on the road being named a pilgrim are not new. Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jacob, the Israelites, Ruth, the prophets, Jesus, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Paul each had literal and metaphorical spiritual journeys that were initiated and guided by God. In each of their pilgrimages God created moments of testing and entered circumstances to reveal his true nature and character and connect with his beloved children. Peter

3. Thompson, 107.

4. Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 1992), 43.

said it this way, “From one man he made all the nations, that we should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out the appointed times in history and where every man would live. God did this so that man would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17.26–27).

Spiritual Direction as Midwifery of the Soul

The best analogy for attending the transformational process is something I learned not in church, but in nursing school. For two decades I practiced obstetrical nursing, attending births in hospital settings, using medical means and following protocols based on Standards of Care in an attempt to facilitate and promote good outcomes in the birthing process. As I attended births and became experienced, trusting my intuition, my involvement shifted from facilitating a hands-on, highly controlled birthing experience to becoming more of an astute observer of the process. With a desire for good outcomes and a positive birth experience, I found the most effective role I could fill was to support the mother and initiate intervention only when necessary for the health and well-being of the mother and infant.

So, too, it is with the art of spiritual direction. A spiritual director is “[o]ne who seeks to diagnose the condition of the soul with its graces and ills and assist it in the way of growth.”⁵ I am reminded that Paul used the same metaphor for his relationship to the young Galatians: “I continue to travail as in childbirth until Christ is formed within you” (Gal 4.9). My personal goal in receiving and offering spiritual direction to fellow sojourners is “to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3.18).

After years of experience and good outcomes, I began to trust the birth process and see myself more as a birth attendant and support person for the one giving birth. This idea and shift in roles has profoundly affected my focus of ministry as well. I now see my own spiritual transformation and the transformative journeys of others as created by God, initiated by God and tended to by God. I am simply one who has been invited to attend the sacred process and my role is to provide support, comfort and intervention only when necessary.

Finding the right spiritual director for the journey is the first step in the process. While there are a number of qualities to look for in a spiritual director there are some fundamental gifts inherent to a good experience. The fundamental action of a spiritual director is listening. Finding someone who listens for the movements of God in a story requires an orientation of transformational hope. A transformational listener is a non-anxious, non-judgmental listener who is able to observe from a vantage point that allows her or him to see the bigger picture of the movements of God. Frederick Buechner describes transformational listening this way: “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”⁶ A good spiritual director trusts the process of transformation to the work of God. Fundamentally spiritual direction is “other-directed” by God, through the Holy Spirit for the purpose of being transformed into the likeness of Christ and the redemption of the world. The spiritual director is simply a keen observer of what God is doing in the directee’s life.

In midwifery there are certainly times when things go wrong. As I have listened to others in their journeys, I have identified four primary causes of arrested progress in the transformational process that are not unlike those that might arise in the human birth experience. As in birth, the pain, fatigue and inexperience of the spiritual birth process can create a discouraging environment and having an experienced spiritual birth attendant who can readily identify potential obstacles in the journey is invaluable. I have identified four primary truths that are often forgotten in the spiritual transformation wilderness of testing, trials, doubts and isolation:

1. I have forgotten who I am: I am created in the image of God (Gen 1.27).
2. I have forgotten that I am a dearly beloved child of God (Eph 2.4–5, I John 4.9–11).
3. I have forgotten that God is my good father and that he gives good gifts to His children (Matt 7.1; Jas 1.17).
4. I have forgotten that nothing can ever separate me from his love (Rom 8.37–39).

5. *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 1st ed., Gordon S. Wakefield, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), s. v. “spiritual direction.”

6. Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 92.

A good spiritual director responds intuitively to the directee while discerning the love and leading of God. While attending the spiritual birth process and transformational journey of another, a good spiritual director is able to respond to the movements of God (rather than react to them) gently while firmly believing that the results are ultimately in divine hands. The director is able to respond in trust rather than react in fear. This is often the most important role of a director.

Complications: When Intervention is Life and Death

We have all heard of *Code Blue*. When you hear the term you think of a potentially life-threatening situation that requires intervention. It is no different when growing in the image and likeness of Christ, our Savior. There are times when we need another person to redirect us towards health and growth. I have identified three primary issues in the spiritual journey that tend to derail progress in the transformative birth process. Borrowing from obstetrical terms, let us define some of the more common complications in the spiritual birth process:

1. **CPD (cephalic pelvic disproportion).** CPD is one of the more common complications in childbirth. Technically the mother's pelvis is inadequately sized for the large dimensions of the fetal head. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the tendency to trust head knowledge over heart connection is woven throughout our history. In spiritual rebirth, knowing *God*, not knowing more *facts about God*, is the ultimate goal. "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hos 6.6). Jesus warned the Pharisees (experts in the Law) with this stern admonition: "You anxiously search the scriptures because you think by knowing them you will be able to figure out the way to eternal life. These scriptures reveal me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5.39–40). The primary difference between a disciple of Christ and a Pharisee is that a disciple followed Christ in order to learn his way of life and emulate it, while a Pharisee would enter the scene in order to listen to, evaluate, debate and compare Jesus' teachings to other rabbinical teachings to see if his had merit. Paul addressed the spiritual issue of head and heart disproportion when he wrote to the church at Ephesus, "It is my prayer that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...and that you will know his love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3.17–19).
2. **FTP (Failure to Progress).** Failure to progress in labor and delivery can occur for a number of reasons. The most common cause is weak contractions. Simple measures like encouraging fluid intake, changing positions and increasing activity during the process are some of the most beneficial support measures. In the same way a good spiritual director will encourage the directee to care well for their bodies during the process by seeking good spiritual food and regular spiritual exercise. She or he will often encourage the directee to take another position in order to better perceive what God might be doing in circumstances and situations.
3. **Fighting against the pain.** The pain of childbirth ignites fear and creates an environment that is not conducive for the process of birth. The stimulus of discomfort and pain can cause the mother's muscles to grow rigid and to tense, and as time passes she becomes closed to owning the uphill battle that is ahead for her in the birth process. In the same way, one of the essential roles of the spiritual director is to remind the one giving birth that pain is normal and that the work of labor is difficult. These messages have a palliative effect by decreasing fear and normalizing an otherwise overwhelming process. Some of the greatest progress in childbirth occurs when the mother feels well supported and can relax into the natural process. Often in the last stages of the labor, just before delivery, the birth attendant will gently but firmly remind the mother to push past the pain. In the same way a good spiritual director will normalize the pain and labor of the transformational birth process in order to encourage an environment that is more conducive to spiritual growth and development, reminding the directee that birth is eminent.

No two birth stories are alike and no two spiritual journey are identical. The life of faith is uncharted territory and for each person the road is designed so that one can connect intimately with God. A beloved, good soul friend is a man or woman willing to join the journey. The Celts use the term *anam cara* or *soul friend* to describe the role of a spiritual director. This mature listener can offer comfort, companionship and encouragement. The

benefits of spiritual direction are numerous. Spiritual direction improves abilities of discernment and reliance on the Holy Spirit for direction and spiritual growth. The psalmist knew who his spiritual director was when he wrote of God, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you” (Ps 32.8). Spiritual direction can aid in reminding us of our origins in God. It can help us make sense of our lives and circumstances and to better discern our role in God’s redemptive story. Spiritual direction aids in developing habits of asking better questions like “Where is God in this?” Spiritual direction creates space to search for the hints of the divine in our lives. Spiritual direction can create an environment for deeper peace. One of the surest paths to deeper peace and a greater measure of faith is the intentional creation of space in the busyness of life to search for hints of the divine with a good soul friend.

The Invitation: A Real Spiritual Direction Experience

Recently at a conference for worship arts leaders, Ian Morgan Cron, the author of *Chasing Francis*, shared a story of a bimonthly Skype meeting with his spiritual director, a Franciscan monk. Ian started the session giving his director a litany of complaints: relational, financial and ministerial stressors were wreaking havoc on his hopes for the peace and abundance that Jesus offered. Interrupting him, his spiritual director leaned into the computer screen and said, “Ian! These are the terms of your life. Accept them. What is God’s invitation in them?” This direct and insightful question from an intuitive spiritual director reframed Ian’s perception of the pain and difficult circumstances of his life. This simple question had a profound effect on how he responded to them. He credits this exchange with opening his eyes and enabling him to see God’s presence and guidance within the challenges facing him. Ian was then able to let go of the stress and focus on holding on more strongly to God.

To learn more about finding a spiritual director or becoming a spiritual director, contact:

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