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Spiritual Direction: Journey with God

BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual Direction is the ministry of discerning the creation space within each of us where the Holy Spirit shows that our being is in the image of God. Concretely, spiritual direction is a one-on-one relationship between a director (person experienced in the spiritual life) and a directee (person seeking to grow in their spiritual or religious life) with the aim of assisting the directee to grow more deeply in their relationship with God. The spiritual director is called to help persons in spiritual direction discern how they can live freely in the image and likeness of God by exploring the inner depths of their emotional, physical, and spiritual self. God reveals himself throughout all creation and therefore God is ever present to us. However, the presence of God often times escapes our individual and communal consciousness because we have diverted our gaze

Have you wanted to deepen your prayer life but don't know how?

Would you like to learn how to discern a major decision in your life?

Do you want to grow in your relationship with God or have questions about your faith or lack of faith?

Spiritual Direction Might be for you!

from the image that we were created in. Through the guidance of a director who intentionally keeps his gaze on the presence of God in this world the directee is helped to see how the Spirit is moving in her life. Spiritual direction acts as the doorway into a space set apart for us in God's loving creation where people can freely discover the truth of who they are as human beings. This vision for spiritual direction is at the core of our salvation story. Since Jesus restored for us our image in God, we are called to continue the work of revealing the ways in which our image aligns with the risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. Through the incarnation of Jesus we have been given a model to set our gaze upon when we have forgotten our true humanity, as it says in Colossians.

"He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." Col 1:13-15

It is the task then of the spiritual director to turn the gaze of the directee toward the story of salvation so that they may discover the truth of their nature. In order to do this the spiritual director must be committed to setting their gaze upon Jesus as often as they can.

Bringing Light to the Interior

There is a delicacy about this business of spiritual direction because we are utterly vulnerable before the mystery of God. Doing the work of remembering our image will stir up the inner depths of shadow and light. It is the darkness of the depths that often times keeps us

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from gazing toward Christ. Humans fear shedding light on the darkness because they do not want to admit that the darkness is a part of them.

What are the parts of your life that you've never revealed to another person? What desires or talents have you hidden or kept secret?

As much as we know God's love also resides in us we fear that we are not good enough to be accepted by God so we distract ourselves from encountering Jesus, who reminds us of our true humanity. Refusing to bring the darkness into the light is a denial of who we are and what we are capable of.

Spiritual Direction in Scripture

A great example in scriptures of how spiritual direction can bring the darkness to light is the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan Woman at the well. Jesus knows that the woman is holding something back and it is keeping her from full life. She asks for her thirst to be quenched by the words of eternal life. She, like many of us, is seeking deeper relationship with God. However, also like many of us, there is something holding her back on the inside. It isn't until she allows Jesus to shed light on the darkness of her marital life that she experiences her thirst being quenched. She later proclaims to her fellow countrymen with a great sense of freedom and relief "He told me everything I have done." Quite literally she is transformed from being a stranger of God to friend with God through the journey of self-discovery with Jesus. The spiritual director reminds those he guides that they are indeed "children of the light and children of the day" (Thes 5:5) and the activity of God can be recognized within the depths of their soul.

If we recognize that we each are in the image of God, then God is constantly revealing his presence in all of creation and most especially in humans. God does this out of a desire to be in relationship with us, and spiritual direction can help guide the process of being receptive to relationship with God. The implication for this is that "Spiritual direction is not the privilege of the few, but an invitation for all to nurture this life-giving relationship with God" (Morris, Thomas, "Gifted for the Journey: The Art of Spiritual Direction," *Spirituality Today* 42:2, pg.3: 1990).



Spiritual Direction 101

WHO: Spiritual Directors can be a lay person, clergy, religious sister or brother. They are typically trained and certified in spiritual direction.

WHAT: It is about your journey in life with God and sharing that with a guide who helps point out the presence of God in your life.

WHEN: Typically you meet once a month for an hour with your spiritual director.

WHERE: Mutually agreeable place (like the CSC)

WHY: Union with God vs. Counseling - which is about wholeness and health of a person. Both counseling and Spiritual Direction are important, but have different purposes.

HOW: Free to students at the CSC. Typically, a fee is charged per session in the "real world". The CSC has two spiritual directors on staff, Sr. Linda Straub and Troy Woytek, and can also connect you to others in St. Louis.

Three Gifts of Spiritual Direction

Many things happen in spiritual direction but it seems that there are three primary gifts of spiritual direction: prayer, discernment, and relationship. Each gift is just as reliant on the other as it is distinct from one another.

Relationship

If the vision for spiritual direction is recognition of the image of God in each person and our self, then relationship is at the very least the doorway into our souls. A person cannot truly explore his humanity without being willing to be touched in the most vulnerable and sacred spots of his being. God desires to touch those places in us so that he can show us the love that he created us out of. Spiritual direction models the intimacy required of a relationship that God desires for us. Although intimacy requires facing things we like to avoid the spiritual director is trained to listen to those who choose to reveal their true self. The spiritual director is trained to ask questions that will lead to vulnerable places and that vulnerability in many ways may be necessary for recovering our image in God.

Through compassionate listening and guidance the directee will experience the loving presence of God and become so acquainted with it that they will be able to recognize it on their own without the guidance of their director. Ultimately the director of the spiritual direction relationship is God but the role of the spiritual director is to be the vessel of God's tangible love in the formation of the directee's relationship with God. Although spiritual direction does not take the place of the sacrament of reconciliation, often times the feeling of compassionate love of the priest after you have confessed your sins is similar to the loving compassion one feels in spiritual direction. The freedom that one feels in a compassionate embrace after revealing themselves to another is the embrace that God yearns for us daily.

Discernment

The second gift is discernment. One way to define discernment is the process of coming to a state of awareness of who we really are, free of illusion, and how God interacts with our consciousness. However it is defined, discernment is central to spiritual direction because it is the process of connecting to the interior in light of the exterior phenomenon of our lives.

The role of the director many times is to be a mirror reflecting back the life of the directee. In doing so, they give the directee the opportunity to stand outside themselves while trying to discern the movements of the Spirit within. The process of discernment in spiritual direction is not simply helping someone to make a choice, rather if this work is really about recovering our image in God, then discernment is a process that is more about discovering what is of God and what is not. This includes an awareness of our psychological, emotional, and spiritual self.



Without knowledge of our self, how can we truly decipher the ways in which God is working through us?

Discerning Who We Are

When I was discerning marriage it was tempting to make that choice simply about someone else by making a list of pros and cons about her or highlighting what needs my future wife was going to fulfill or not fulfill. My spiritual director invited me to delve deeper into myself, into my own desires about relationship. He asked me to listen for what God wanted for me in vocation, whether it was marriage, religious life, or staying single. I took a journey into my own interior, to the places that made up the very person I was and the person I'd like to be. I was able to see what was truly of God in me and how God was calling me to more than I was. I was discerning who I truly was by shedding light on the interior rather than simply observing the exterior. And it was the process of discernment that allowed me to hold both the external factors of my relationship with my future wife and the internal factors of what God desired for me—which was simply recognizing what my true desires really were. Discernment didn't simply provide me answers, through the guidance of my spiritual director it helped me ask the right questions.

Prayer

Finally, prayer unites relationship and discernment in the process of spiritual direction. Without prayer, there is no intimate relationship with God and then there is nothing to guide discernment. Prayer allows space for the Holy Spirit to move in our lives and to give us a keen ear for what the Holy Spirit is saying. Just as the spiritual director acts as a mirror often times in spiritual direction, prayer gives us the ability to stand outside ourselves and observe who we are and what we are doing. In the Catholic tradition this experience of standing outside ourselves prayerfully is called contemplation. The contemplative heart is not anxious nor is it apathetic – it is open to the movements of the Spirit, wherever it leads. A contemplative heart allows the Holy Spirit to be the director, while being attentive to the guidance of the spiritual director. If relationship is the doorway into

our soul, then prayer is the key that unlocks that door. In unlocking the door, prayer helps us enter into spiritual direction on holy ground where burning bush meets humbled servant, messenger touches anxious mother, bread nourishes broken follower, and love embraces sinner.

Conversion In Spiritual Direction

The image in scripture that I think best captures spiritual direction is the story of Jacob wrestling with the divine.

"Then some man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the hip socket was wrenched as they wrestled. The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed." Gen 32: 25-29

Jacob was on a journey back to his homeland and was trying to figure out what God was calling him to be as he led his family on this journey. His wrestling match with the Lord led to a conversion. Spiritual direction is an invitation for us to wrestle with the Lord, and because it reveals our true nature and challenges us we are often times left metaphorically bruised and battered like Jacob. However, we are also blessed and changed in the process; we emerge from our match with the Lord as a new person, often times converted and restored in the image and likeness of God.



Question Box

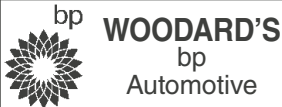
- 1) How can I be more connected to God, myself and others?
- 2) Am I living my faith or just going through the motions?
- 3) What would help me be more intentional in my living?



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