

**“Give Me a Word”:
A Spiritual Director’s Journey with Photography**

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Figure 1. J. Prinz, “Teacup” (2017)

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“GIVE ME A WORD”

“Give me a word.” That was the typical petition to the desert mother or father in antiquity. They were the spiritual guides of the earliest centuries of Christianity; they lived under very ascetical circumstances in remote areas of the desert in small loose group settings or completely alone.¹ One might say even nowadays that spiritual counseling and spiritual direction are oriented by this profound dynamic: “Give me a word.” Authority and power might have shifted, and so have our attitudes towards extreme asceticism and the extended exercise of fasting and disciplines practiced by the desert mothers and fathers as an indication of the holiness of the spiritual director or counselor. However, as with psychotherapy, the foundation of spiritual counseling and direction entails talking—the gift of finding and sharing words. Of course, with due boundaries, all well-trained spiritual directors or counselors would distance themselves from being “the authority” in giving a word. Rather, they enter into a listening dialogue in which they would rather receive a word rather than give it.² There is a good chance that the one who seeks a word needs to hear a word spoken by themselves. Today’s trained desert mothers and fathers are much less directive and more inductive in their presence to the one who comes searching. Yet the center remains: giving words to each other, you who are searching and you who are guiding.³

I always thought these activities—expressing a word, entering a dialogue, listening and reflecting back, detecting linguistic patterns, educing word images, perhaps asking a question or waiting to respond until asked—were the pillars of any human spiritual growth process. They were practiced by spiritual counselors and directors in their own lives, in both offering and receiving direction.

Until I experienced that they were not.

LESSONS FROM MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Several decades ago, a particular grief in my own life that I had kept “underground” for three years because external circumstances didn’t permit me to attend to it finally broke open. I felt as raw as if it had just happened. And nothing was left. Not a word, not even an image that might have caused a word or a memory to bring forth a word, nothing but simple, throbbing, painful emptiness. It was impossible to talk and, even more surprisingly for me, it was impossible to listen. The beautiful singing in the sanctuary, my beloved psalms, the deep wisdom of my spiritual director—everything pearled off me like a water on sheer slate.

The paralyzing grief surfaced just as I was embarking on a multi-week silent retreat in one of the most remote monasteries in the United States. This did not seem to be a good fit. The first day on retreat, I walked. The second day, I walked even more. The third day, I slept. The fourth day, I hiked up a mountain exhausting myself, and then I slept more on the fifth day. Halfway through the retreat, I was about to give up. No word came to me. No word sung or spoken reached me or meant anything to me. There was no air to breathe, hear, or share outside or inside the sessions with my spiritual director at the monastery.

The days were rainy and vacillated between storms and sun breaking through the clouds and fog. It was nearly an act of protest when I picked up the small camera and marched into the rain. (Rather coincidentally, I had found the camera lying around on a table at home and had packed it without a second thought.) I remember taking the camera into my hands. A sense of pressure crept in at first. Would I shoot any beautiful photo? I doubted it. Any photo like those in the glamorous pages of thousands of magazines? Certainly not, since I had been declared a non-artist by at least three of my childhood teachers.

However, in the moment I looked through the viewer, the world opened to a word. Everything else fell away. Completely carefree, words found me in the images: an old stump, a little fog, darkness, light breaking through, and with the light and shadows. The word I found was in shadows, in reflections and the play of light. Always in black and white; it was not about colors. I felt like a kid coming home, brimming with stories, tumbling over so many words spouting from my mouth, going on and on and on. Years of stories, pain, loss, spoken not veiled, suddenly seen in the steamy grounds of the northwest California coast and forest.



Figure 2. J. Prinz, "Ceasing storm" (2005)

What surprised me was that the images did not cause words in me but were the word in themselves. I put captions on them many years later. The looking through the finder and seeing was like listening to a person. Amidst many tears, an inner journey unfolded at that remote site. Figure 2 is an image many could have taken of the dark storm clouds mixing with the lighter rain clouds and the sunshine. For me, however, the image became a word. I still could not talk, but my inner process was flooded with clarity. Looking through that finder of the camera, every time something found me and became another word. Sometimes it made me laugh, like the image in Figure 3.



Figure 3. J. Prinz, "The Dancing Dervish" (2005)

A tumbling leaf was throwing this shadow on the base of the cut-off limb of the tree. I laughed, for it looked like a dancing dervish. However, it was not the conscious reflection but the spontaneous moment of looking through the finder that made me laugh. The image formed another word that I could not speak but I knew was there. I continued for some days looking through the finder, being found by images. Sometimes I took a picture. Sometimes I did not. Seeing had become listening. Everything that I had learned in my humanistic psychology education and my spiritual direction training about listening was happening in my seeing. Seeing: listening to the seemingly unimportant, a leaf turning in the wind, paying attention to the light, becoming aware of the ambiguities of light and shadows, of possibilities, of horizons.

I still found it impossible to put anything into words. Then, one afternoon, I went to my spiritual director and showed her the images, making excuses because I could not say more. In truth, I felt a bit superficial not to have meaningful words and just these images gathered over the days. The images were all I had to share, gushing forward from my heart. She saw them and listened. She heard them.

I wanted to apologize again. But she said firmly, "They have spoken." I could not believe that she meant that, that these images had become words for her. She reflected my images back to me. The clarity that had formed in me looking through the camera's finder deepened with her understanding.

Back home from the retreat, I continued my work as a spiritual director and counselor and brought into my work the gift from that truly cathartic experience; I shifted from the word to the image, from listening to seeing, from talking to showing. I am not sure I was aware right away of what had shifted, but I noticed I related to others and the world around me in a different way. My

listening was seeing. The smallest, most insignificant thing—often a shadow, even in the office of a friend—became a word.

Probably, one could psychologize my experience and analyze it using the right and left sides of the brain—the camera helped me integrate my artistic child self who had been bound up by the judgments others had put on me—but to what end? Here is what I know: I was forged as a spiritual director and counselor by looking through a finder, found by black-and-white images. In the following, I offer some insights that emerged from this very personal journey and impacted my experience and practice as spiritual director. However, doing so is a contradiction in itself. It is for me completely paradoxical to write about the precise images that were words without talking. It seems I am undoing my own argument by writing an article about the move from word to image, from talking to seeing! Ironic imagination indeed.⁴

HOW SEEING CHANGES THE EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE OF THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

The “Unimportant”

Once the practice of being found by an image takes hold, the one who seeks knows exactly the difference between a photo and a sight.⁵ I was realizing that for my own practice as a spiritual director and counselor I could not ignore my need to see as a listener. I needed to be found by the trivial, the insignificant, the liminal, the unseen—to summarize, the “unimportant.” Taking note of the ridiculously simple and unimportant daily visual journeys as I was moving around the house, walking down the block, or traveling across the world sharpened my listening to directees. Seeing had become listening, the image had become the word; now that kind of seeing became a way to perceive the other. To be able to be in my own skin as a spiritual director and pastoral counselor, I perceived the other as whole, as if I were gazing upon a mountaintop or a blade of grass. I learned to listen as I was seeing.



Figure 4. J. Prinz, “Teewinot” (2010)

Or, as we can see in Figure 5, one stripe alone would make no sense, it would not be an image. One needs to see it as a whole to discover there is actually a path in plain sight, one not seen most of the time.



Figure 5. J. Prinz, "Where to Go" (2015)

Perceiving the whole before analyzing the details became essential, as much to my own spiritual experience as to my practice as a spiritual director. Only the whole includes everything that we judge as unimportant. Helping some friends to clean out their old shed, I stood a moment at the entrance in the sunshine to take in the whole mess we were about to attack with our desire for order. Gazing around between the sun-flooded parts of the shed and the others still in murky darkness, a very small detail jumped out at me. Someone had carved the French word "BEAU" into the wood of one of the side panels. The panel had been partially burned. "Handsome," really? Yet there it was, loud and clear.



Figure 6. J. Prinz, "Burned Beauty" (2016)

Without my gazing at the whole, this image could not have found me. It seemed such an unimportant, tiny writing, but it stayed with me long after we had cleared out the shed. That kind of seeing teaches us to let go of judgments regarding what is important or unimportant in one's own life and in the lives of the people one listens to in the professional setting. It could well be that it is the smallest and most unimportant that becomes the key for understanding, consolation, clarity, or insight. The marginal becomes the word the seeker is searching for. Sometimes it is also the well known that is the most liminal in our lives. One might have never taken the always-seen seriously because it seemed so unimportant, even marginal, in the context of the whole.

Some years ago, I visited areas of the Rocky Mountains I had never been to before. The scenery was magnificent. However, what really caught my eye were the most random, seemingly withered, flowers. Because every single one of them was telling me a different story and wanted to be found, I made a whole photographic study of them. I photographed them instead of snatching breathtaking photos of the surrounding mountains and valley. I hunched down in the dust, absolutely absorbed by these grass-like flowers. (I was not even sure if they were flowers. They seemed to protest anything ever named flower.) When I showed my images of these ridiculously withered-looking dried flower-grass to a native of the place, the person was surprised; she had walked by them for a half century without seeing them, never considering them flowers. (We finally established that they are.) The person native to the place said: "These photos have shown me something I've never seen before, even though I have looked at them all my life. I not only see something now that I missed in the past, but seeing these marvels changes my present perception, changes this place that I've known since childhood." What we don't know, we don't see.



Figure 7. J. Prinz, "A Field of Little Einsteins" (2017)



Figure 8. J. Prinz, "Little Einstein 1" (2017) Figure 9. J. Prinz, "Little Einstein 2" (2017)

Reflections and Puzzles

Please, allow me to repeat: "Once the practice of being found by an image takes hold, the one who seeks knows exactly the difference between a photo and a sight." This is especially the case for mirror images. Mirror images have no real value in the photographic market because anyone can take them with their googly-android-iPhones. However, if it is not a photo but a sight that takes you over, one experiences something very different. Instead of wanting to take one thousand pictures, you become very still. You wait. You sit. You let go. You see. You sit, wait, and let go more until the reflection is part of who you are. Nothing else is needed but being with that reflection, perhaps sitting with truth within reality (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10. J. Prinz, "The Boulder" (2014)



Figure 11. J. Prinz, "Afternoon Stillness" (2014)

Spiritual directors and counselors know that stillness is much more than “not saying anything.” It is letting the space melt down to the very core of what wants to be touched. Very often it is not words but that very stillness between the words that opens the door (Figures 10 and 11). I wonder why the reflections of nature fail to teach us that stillness. Seeing the monuments, the perfect rock lying in the water, being an image of the very self they are. Being found by a reflection while looking through my finder has provided one of the best schools for finding that stillness, that holding space. It is a space that does not happen automatically and is not like a waiting room in which one simply stops talking. It is the space where clarity forms more in images than in words, where a prayer rises wordlessly, where compassion is felt, where focus begins. It

melts away all the “add-ons” and the “apps” that our minds have downloaded. The reflection is more than curiosity. It is an invitation to rest. There, what is most magnificent is reflected in what is simplest.

One aspect of being caught by reflections is that sometimes they are not clear. They create optical puzzles. It is not clear what we are seeing. Who is who? What is what? We wonder if what we think we see is indeed what we see.



Figure 12. J. Prinz, “Floating” (2005)



Figure 13. J. Prinz, “Opening” (2005)

Figure 12 shows a creek reflecting the surrounding features. There is no clarity, though. What is the waterway? What is reflection and what is non reflection? Figure 13 shows small leaves floating amidst water patterns and sun reflections. When one gazes at it, it is not clear what is what. It is precisely these puzzles that appeared once and remain “schools” for me. By seeing the whole

as described above, not analyzing first but taking in until clarity arises, a spiritual direction or counseling school emerges. Is it not an ongoing exercise of spiritual directors and counselors to sit first, reserving judgment? Many think of helping professionals as primarily doing and solving rather than seeing. But the act of looking through the finder teaches me that seeing is at the core of our profession. Taking in and waiting, seeing and holding, sitting and opening. Optical puzzles are a playful metaphor for the work of spiritual direction: Is what we think we see indeed what we see? Photography has been an ongoing training for me as a spiritual director and counselor. It causes me to be aware of the hermeneutical processes that are involved in our work and to be as transparent with them in supervision as in my own spiritual process.

Interactions with Others and the Image

Images teach us about more than spiritual direction. They can also be a tool for spiritual reflection with directees. When I share a photograph with someone (a friend, a directee, or a colleague) and we notice it together, I am reminded of how unfinished and preliminary any perspective is. What I perceive at the camera finder may be different from how the photo speaks to me on the page or how someone I share it with sees the photo. Both aspects are of course typical for any art form.⁶ However, these aspects hold another insight for the spiritual direction or counseling practice. Figures 14 and 15 provide an example of such collaboration.

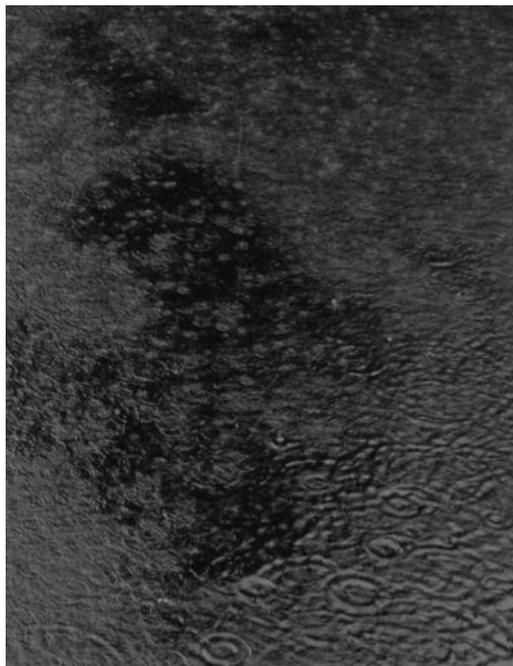


Figure 14. J. Prinz, "Puddles of Tears" (2012)

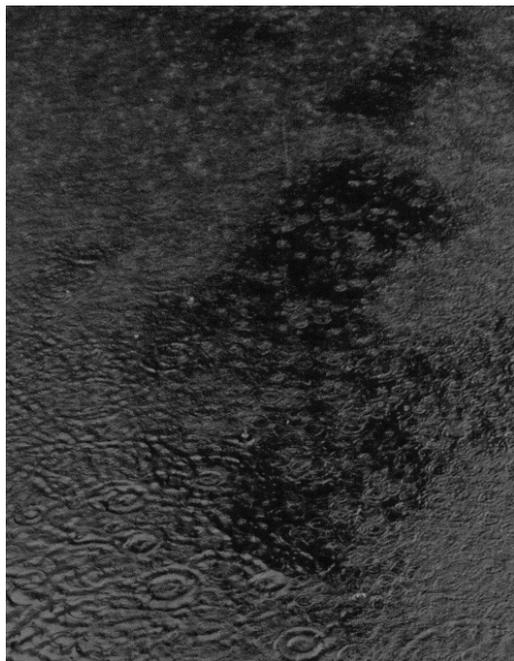


Figure 15. J. Prinz, “Puddle of Tears” (reversed) Figure 16. G. Rouault, “Face of Christ” (2012)

I took the photograph seen here as figure 14 after I had received devastating news. Wanting to be drenched by a natural force, I walked in pouring rain onto a bridge overlooking a river. Once again, the image found me. Rain was falling into a river forming hundreds of rain craters in the water. I could no longer see the normal ripples and currents of the river under the pounding rain. Any routine currents, wind patterns, and shore waves were completely interrupted. The drops fell in a diverse manner onto the water or were received in a diverse manner. However, every single one created its own pattern. The image was a bit confusing to me and incoherent, but it felt very real, very urgent, an image of profound pain.

Months after I had taken it, I showed the image to a friend of mine I told my friend I had no idea why this image found me but that somehow, even as a print, it still called out to me. I wondered if I was missing something or perhaps just making it up. My friend took the photo in and remained with it for some time. Looking at my work and meditating with it, my friend reversed the incoherent dents left to right, seeing them as in a mirror. Then the eyes of my friend reflected something back to me that I never would have seen: the reversed image reflected a Christ image, one we both like. Placing my photo next to a painting by the great French artist Georges Rouault, I saw it: the face of Christ.

Through that encounter, I experienced profound consolation for my spiritual journey. It only was possible because someone else looked at the image I produced and saw something I never anticipated.

I sometimes perceive us as spiritual directors and pastoral counselors as pitched on the brink of this world. We work in the liminal space between pain and joy, loss and birth, elementary life changes and existential experiences. Perhaps, just perhaps, it could be that the only thing that keeps us from falling off that brink is to be found by something or someone else. Perhaps it is the community around us that perceives. Might it be that it is the friend who sees Christ where one sees only tears? Still, like the ancient desert mothers and fathers, the other, even one we didn't

expect, might hold the key to what we need. It could be the directee or a friend that shows us the word we need.

The last image I wish to point out is a photograph I took under the most improbable of circumstances. Because I was very sick, I had to be driven by one of my sisters to our spirituality center between the orchards in the San Joaquin Valley, California. I was so nauseated and in so much pain I put the passenger seat in the lying-down position for the drive from San Francisco to the valley. It nearly felt like being in an ambulance under a thick blanket. I am not sure why, but I was clutching my phone. Perhaps I just needed to hold on to something. We started across the Bay Bridge going east. I always had admired that bridge: two freeways, each going one way, one on top of the other. I had my eyes closed most of the time. However, in one moment just after crossing the Treasure Island tunnel I opened my eyes, and a stark image of deconstruction overtook me. The new bridge to Oakland had been finished, and now the bridge that had served since the 1989 earthquake to connect the two parts of the bay was being deactivated. It would be demolished within a few months so that the new construction would be the sole splendor of the connection between the two parts of the Bay.

I did not know it then, but the dismantling had begun only a few days before. When I looked up out of the car window, just in a moment of wanting to see the sky, I saw an image screaming (not talking) to me. The metal skeleton extending to the sky, the annihilation begun, the break in the bridge being transported to a specialized junkyard jarred me as if it were my body being dismantled. I pulled out my phone from under the comforting warm blanket to look through the finder and take a photo before closing my eyes and pulling my hands back into the comfort of the blanket.

Sometime later, I was able to claim my life back and see again. I looked at the photos I'd taken with my camera. The bridge photo stopped me. All I had remembered was so rough and present, the dismantling and junking of what had served but was not sufficiently beautiful or stable. The photo, however, completely puzzled me, for in the break in the bridge there was a ray of light, and in the ray of light a seagull was soaring. I could not believe that within an image that I identified as an expression of my own destruction, the meaning was turned around. Everything the image meant to me was true, but what I saw in the developed photo—the ray of light and the seagull flying into the light—was also true: a sign of hope utterly hidden but there.



Figure 16. J. Prinz, "Bay Bridge" (2014)

It seems no seeing is finished. Certainly, new viewers will bring their perspective to the work. But we may, too. The work may hold more than what we are aware of in the moment that we were found by a sight. So, too, in spiritual direction, it seems that some of the most significant shifts happen for directees or clients when we let them sit with the image they showed us and they themselves find a different angle for accessing their experience.

CONCLUSION

The photo I chose as the as figure 1 for this article was one I took when I was feeling frantic about a class I was about to teach. At the last minute, the guest I had invited to give a lecture on a specific topic told me he did not think he would be able to do what I had asked of him. I wasn't sure what I would do. I looked around in the room in my frantic state and saw the slowly rising steam coming from a student's teacup (Figure 1). That steam-dance changed my life. I realized the purpose of the class was not about the guest I had invited but about the students who had come together. It was not about my success but about their experience. I was able to let go of my beautiful dream and receive the simple reality.

Perhaps, that is what photography can teach us spiritual directors and counselors the best. It is not about us and what we see; it is about what finds us and what that wants to show us in ways we never have seen before.

NOTES

¹ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: The Quest for Holiness in Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Plymouth, UK: Coweley Publications, 1992); William Barry and William Conolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

³ Bethany Juby, "What to Know about Talk Therapy," *Medical News Today* (Brighton, UK), accessed January 29, 2023, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/talk-therapy>.

⁴ William Lynch, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973).

⁵ There has been much written about contemplative photography recently. However, I still experience Thomas Merton as close to my own understanding, especially in his photography of the northwest California coast, at the same Redwoods Monastery where I discovered the camera initially on a retreat. My spiritual director at the Redwoods Monastery compared my photos with the photos by Thomas Merton in *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe: Thomas Merton Legacy Trust/Museum of New Mexico Press, 1984). I had not known that he was a photographer and was very surprised by her claim. However, I did become very close to his understanding of "Zen" photography over the years after that retreat. See Paul M. Person, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020).

⁶ One might think of *ekphrastic* poetry. A good example is Denise Levertov's poem "The Servant Girl at Emmaus" about the painting by Diego Velazquez titled "The Supper at Emmaus."