

Listening to the Beloveds: A Spiritual Director's Testimony

Mary Taylor¹

“I listen as my vocation, my livelihood, my honor, my joy. And the more I listen, the more I feel like a cartoon zoom circle that gets smaller, focusing on the details of the Roadrunner, the little bits, the essence of what is being said. Or not said. It's a hushed moment of intimacy.”

“I pause at the sacred threshold of this moment, suspending all my knowing and my skills and wait to be shown my place of entry. I bow in reverent awe before the Mystery. I am drawn into the prayer of spiritual direction and am transformed.”

—R. Dougherty SSND, Seminar at Shalem Center for Spiritual Formation, 2013

“Spiritual direction, or guidance, is a tradition of religious mentorship with roots in ancient Christianity. For centuries, monasteries and seminaries offered direction to clergy and members of religious orders. But the practice is increasingly going mainstream, as more people, Christian and otherwise, seek help exploring their relationship with the divine.”

—“Growing Demand for Spiritual Directors,” *The Boston Globe*, 2012

Spiritual direction has been a touchstone in my life since my thirties. That is, I had a spiritual director. Never did I imagine I would be one. I've never had five-year plans. Moving many times and needing to bob and weave, adjust, I became used to blooming where I was planted. In fact, most of the wonderful things God has called me to do were the result of stumbling into them, and even then the knock on my heart had to be repeated for God to get through. Only when a wise woman helped me wander through my life to see the connecting threads and then wondered with me, holding up a mirror, recognizing I had been a healing listener for a long, long time, did I get it. For lay people, this way of discernment is often the case. Whenever I present to a group of people on the joys of spiritual direction, I find myself answering the question “What is it?” many times.

WHAT IS IT?

What is spiritual direction? It is a relationship where together we listen to your story with an ear to the holy. It is the whole of your life: breadth and depth. If you have a desire to notice the divine in your everyday life or to deepen your prayer life, this is enough. Other than desire and a commitment to prayer, there are no special requirements. Simply paying attention is a spiritual discipline. Like prayer, spiritual direction is an intentional availability to God. As Jean La Place puts it, “Spiritual guidance is the help one person gives to another to enable them to become themselves in their faith.”¹

What is it? Spiritual direction, or spiritual guidance, as some prefer, is an ancient charism, a calling recognized and practiced by the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the early church, lay people sought out for their silence and humility, both equally powerful. It's in the contemplative tradition of the church, which faded away during the Reformation for Protestants

¹ Mary Zabawa Taylor is a spiritual guide in private practice and a recovering attorney. She sits with those who explore their lives through a spiritual lens and listens in jail and with hospice patients. She is the mother of three and foster parent of eighteen very special children.

Mzt3522@gmail.com

but was continued by those in holy orders in the Roman Catholic Church. Anglicans also continued the tradition. Episcopal seminaries and most dioceses require spiritual direction for those in discernment for holy orders. But discernment for the laity has lagged behind, as has support for the charism and ministry of spiritual directors. Protestant denominations vary. Some are unfamiliar with it, others suspicious. But there is a growing ecumenical movement in training and certificate offerings in Protestant seminaries.

What is it? It's primarily the practice of discernment. Not the figuring-things-out-in-our-heads kind of discernment but an uncovering of what is there in the heart and soul. This discernment that I speak of is a gift that has been given all of us. We don't create it; we don't receive it from someone. We uncover the gift and then we nourish it through the skillful means of noticing, through our prayer and through our growing openness to God in all of life. It requires a radical openness to the mystery of not knowing what the Spirit will reveal; the director is trained to hold the space for what may not yet be formed and is seeking to emerge. Rose Mary Dougherty writes, "The habit of discernment fine-tunes the ear of the heart so that we rehear more clearly the invitations to love intrinsic to every moment of life."ⁱⁱ

My assumption is that God and the directee have been together for a long time, before time. I'm trying not to interfere with that sacred relationship, not to insert myself, but to listen deeply and help the directee recognize what is already there. The usual image is of three chairs gathered round, a reminder that the Holy Spirit is always present and available with the director and directee. Discernment is noticing, presence, awareness and, in the contemplative tradition, hearing with the ear of the heart as the beloved one. This is perhaps the most difficult bridge to travel, an understanding that we are the beloved. We hear it in the head, but the journey to the heart is the work of this practice. It's a gift I hope all can know in the deepest sense. As to where you go for answers, it is not for the director to drop pearls of wisdom, although we hope we may occasionally be wise, nor is *our* discernment or teaching that is needed. My dear teacher, Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND, often invoked Kabir, the fourteenth-century Hindu mystic and saint:

My friend, don't go outside yourself to gather flowers.
They are inside a deeper place in yourself that already is.

We help our dear ones to recognize something that is already there without robbing them of their discernment, hence our use of questions, noticing movements, not rushing in with our answers. That process is much bigger than I can ever grasp, but I am there to support with new ways to see and understand. Importantly, it's already going on and not dependent on our getting together. My two requirements for directees are (1) some practice of prayer and (2) paying attention to the whole of your life between sessions so you drive the next meeting, the subject of which is your whole life.

My practice is wide and diverse in demographics, geography, and faith. I have a full-time practice with laity and clergy, from Roman Catholics to Disciples of Christ. COVID-19 and Zoom expanded my boundaries to folks from several countries and across the United States. My inherent suspicion of hierarchy and clericalism is well known to my church and friends. God has a special sense of humor in sending me all kinds of clergy to soften my heart, reveal vulnerabilities (mine and theirs), and appreciate the real dangers of going off the rails. Those who have care of the soul are especially to beware, be cared for and supported. Me included.

BECOMING A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

My spiritual director helped me choose a training program, which is essential to the ministry. This is not pastoral care. This is not therapy. It's a very specific charism and calling that needs nourishing and training. We learn history, psychology, and theology but also how to listen deeply, to give and receive, to avoid conflicts of interest, to honor confidentiality, to abide by a code of ethics, and to honor boundaries. Wise directors have a director themselves and also a monthly peer supervision group to process what our sessions raise in us. The practice is transformative, and not just for the directee. We learn how to use our unique gifts and to recognize our style—the most authentic presence we can bring that honors the image of three chairs in the room. For the true director is the Holy Spirit. If we can be fully open, the Spirit has room to flourish. When resistance, pain, or blocks arise, we resist saying, “You might want to think about this more,” the easy way out for a director. Instead, let it emerge then and there, in safety with a loving companion.

During the 1970s in the United States there was a resurgence of training for lay people called to the ministry and ecumenical training, most notably at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, DC, led by psychiatrist Gerald May and Episcopal priest Tilden Edwards. Edwards notes,

“It is for us to provide hospitable and inspiring opportunities for people to listen and respond more boldly to the Spirit at work in them and to encourage people to connect what is happening with them to God's larger movements in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ”

My own concerns when entering training concerned access to this gift of presence for those who otherwise wouldn't know about it or have access to it. As a former foster parent, attorney for abused children, and sponsor in addiction programs, I knew many people who could benefit from having a director, as I had. Finding ways to recognize the gifts and financially support the training and practice for lay practitioners helps provide access to discernment for all God's people. I was always disturbed at how old and White directors were as a group (being old and White myself), as well as their directees. We were a privileged group. Even kind and gifted people can live narrow lives.

I began to imagine how I could shape a practice that would allow me to offer what I had received to all comers. As Thomas Merton asks,

“who needs someone to penetrate beneath the surface of a person's life, to get behind the façade of conventional gestures and attitudes which one presents to the world, and to bring out one's inner spiritual freedom, one's inmost truth, which is what [Christians] call the likeness of Christ in one's soul?^{iv}”

Having the desire is all that is necessary.

You may want to explore spiritual direction if

- you are looking for a place of calm in a busy world and searching for your place in it,
- you seek a companion on your journey to listen to the movements of your life and to help guide you to hear where God might be leading you,
- you want a quiet hour devoted to your relationship with God or you are struggling with your faith or want to dig deeper, or
- you desire a sacred hour where the goal is quiet and deep listening to the sacred movements of the Spirit.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION WITH NONTRADITIONAL DIRECTEES

Once I realized I could listen to anyone anywhere, the Spirit opened up so many possibilities: a corner in a local coffee shop, hospice in a memory unit, the county jail, a table at a local food pantry. I would invite others to speak by saying, “Come tell me about something important to you.” Or, “Do you have a story to tell? I’m itching to hear it.” Or, “This is your time to talk. I’ll listen.”

Spiritual direction on the margins happens outside any familiar boundary rules learned in training. Discernment and formation is happening, but not in a comfortable room with three seats, a candle, and a bell. Sometimes you are locked into a room with bars on the windows or are sitting beside a hospital bed. There is a need to be nimble, and it’s certainly not about you giving. It is mutual, much like my listening to abused children years ago. I listened. They trusted. We both were changed by what they said and didn’t say.

Just as in private practice, this is about spirituality, going within, and if the other person has a religion, fine, bring it on, and if they don’t, that’s fine, too. This is about hospitality. Let nothing obstruct coming around the table. As a spiritual director, unguard your heart, but understand the realities. Go beyond ministry *to*. This has to be ministry *with*. Many people, especially those in jail, are guarded with people who are condescending to help them. Also, if trust and truth aren’t at the center of the relationship, some will use you to get what they want. After all, many have had generations of experience in gaming a system essentially created to cast them aside.

We who listen in this way will face people who have worked the system for years, or are addicts, or in other ways have learned not to trust themselves or others. For some, it is a long process to learn to trust you. Will you come back? Would you if you knew what they did? Those from generational poverty may find it hard to find common ground with middle-class listeners, no matter how deep their desire to receive ministry. Most middle-class directors who have not had poor and incarcerated neighbors are shocked at what they hear and confront and can be repulsed or easily compromised.

I was fortunate that my background as a foster parent and attorney advocate for abused children provided me with years of proximity to those whom society hopes are invisible. They opened my eyes and still reveal the realities of the society we have allowed to flourish, one of inequity, injustice, cruelty, and racism. It is on their shoulders I stand when I sit with a new person who is eager to be heard, slow to trust, longing to be beloved. I don’t fool myself that I’ll ever truly understand or stand in their shoes. My awareness of my unearned advantage is a daily occurrence. On the other hand, there are moments, frequently, when the sharing is so tender, so deep, I know that only God could make it possible. I sit in awe with their tears and my own. I am not there as a religious visitor, nor as a chaplain, but as a listener. Spirit reveals just how much alike we are, and the sense of “the other” fades as mutuality peeks through these sessions.

THE JAIL

I show up. I sit in a bare room with one window and plastic chairs. I whisper the same prayer each Wednesday before they walk in. “Here I am. Use me.” “What do I do?” they always say when they get buzzed into the room. Our chairs are across a narrow table, and there is a red emergency button behind me so I can call for help if I need it. I never have.

“This is your time, and I’m here to be with you. Use it however you want. We can be quiet, or you can talk to me about anything, and whatever you say, it’s just between us and God. We don’t have to talk about God, only if you want to, and if you want to pray with me, just ask.”

Floodgates open; stories are offered, deepest hurts revealed, confessions given:

“I’m on medication, but I haven’t gotten it since I’ve been here. I’m scared.”

“I don’t think in my whole life anyone has loved me.”

“My pastor told me my boys and I are in jail to punish me for doing drugs and not taking care of them.”

“I shot my boyfriend. He was going to kill me and my baby.”

“I’m trying to learn not to listen to people who want to fight with me, but it’s hard, because that’s how we were in my family. If you dis[respect] me, I punch you. My dad did it to my mom, to us, and we all did it to each other. I’ve been in the hole too much.”

“I lost my glasses when I was arrested, and I can’t see.”

“I’ve been in rehab so many times none of my family will have anything to do with me anymore.”

“They say I killed my baby.”

“Can you help me pray for that lady I hurt”?

The most wonderful times are when I hear questions about God and Jesus and what you must do to earn love because I know I can give them the good news about this. They need do *nothing*. They hear so much from people coming to hold worship services about what one must believe in order to be accepted. Rules about how to live your life. Not all have an agenda, but listening is different.

I’m home free on this. I tell them I don’t understand much about how God works. I even warn them to beware of people who know too much about it because mostly we’re just guessing. But one thing I know is that it’s all about love, and grace means you don’t have to do anything to earn it. As a matter of fact, you can’t earn it. But you do need to open up and accept it. Accept that you are beloved, even if you think it’s impossible.

In this jail where there are a million self-help and improvement programs to complete before the judge will let you out, to hear that God doesn’t love the new-and-improved version of you, way down the road, but *loves the you sitting here now, in all your shame and rawness*, is too much for some. “I know that’s hard for you to believe,” I say. “Hard for me, too. But it’s true. So, if you can’t believe you are beloved right now, I’ll believe it for you until you can come to know it.”

Then the tears. A guard once asked me what the heck I was doing to them. “They all come out with Kleenex.” When you can face the truth of things with a loving listener, tears are the balm, not the problem.

There are recurrent themes to the listening:

Shame

Abuse

Betrayal

What is forgiveness?

What does love look like?

Children

How is it possible God loves me?

The church has let many of these folks down with accusations, pat answers, and limited ways to redeem (read: be beloved) themselves. Over the years my answers are fewer, my questions have increased, and silence plays the largest role. I “do” less. Hardly anything. I show up and listen, and at the end I pray, only if they ask me to, and I return their stories, hopes, and fears back to them, return them to God.

They sometimes want more. A core group asked me to do in a group what I offered to them one-on-one—centering prayer meditation for six weeks—to see if it was contagious. A woman named B. actually used that word. Turns out she was right. It was. Centering prayer spreads her arms wide and all are welcome, no matter what. No admission requirements. When we gather, they ask for more poems and prayers and lyrics to hymns. They are courageous and eloquent, vulnerable, messed up, and lovely. They have encountered a life that would crumble most of us, a life perhaps impossible to survive. Some are jittery, just out of detox. At the end of group centering prayer, they put off leaving and go silently and stand side by side at the one window they ever see in the county jail, a place with no windows or exercise yard, no chapel. They look out in silence through the mesh bars over the glass, drinking the outside in, lingering.

And it feels like Communion.

Episcopal priest Martin Smith writes,

“If only people knew . . . “ I murmur to myself as men and women take me round to the back of their lives. It is a humbling work in which every effort to understand others for the sake of helping them know themselves and God must be cleansed of pride and force.^v

What is spiritual direction? “Companionship with admirable people.”^{vi} In my world, the admirable sit in all three chairs.

ⁱ Jean La Place, *Preparing for Spiritual Direction*, reprint ed. (Canterbury: Franciscan Press, 1975).

ⁱⁱ Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 242–43, Kindle.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tilden Edwards, as cited in Shalem, “About Shalem,” <https://shalem.org/about/>. Tilden is Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation’s founder and is also a senior fellow at Shalem.

^{iv} Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Read Books), 16, Kindle.

^v Martin L. Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (New York: Church Publishing), 121.

^{vi} Attributed to the Buddha.