

The Practice of Discernment and Spiritual Direction during a Crisis

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Discernment, the ability to identify and separate out God's voice from all the other voices inside of us and around us, is an important capacity for any Christian. Indeed, it is a key practice for our transformation. "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, *so that* by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 NRSV, italics added).

For the ministries of spiritual directors and retreat leaders, discernment is the critical capacity. Spiritual direction at its most basic level is when one person, who is familiar with the ways of God, comes alongside another person and simply helps them to listen, to discern, to be able to identify the voice of God in their life at a given time. It is a ministry of presence. A spiritual director listens to God while listening to another in order to help that person be able to identify God's voice for themselves.

What happens then when a pandemic strikes, a lockdown is ordered, and meeting together in the same room all of a sudden becomes impossible? Spiritual direction is best offered when two people are actually in each

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other's presence. What happens when the ability to sit with a person, to physically be with them, to look deeply into their eyes and read their body language, is all of a sudden gone?

DISCERNMENT DURING COVID 19

Such a situation calls for discernment. In fact, this COVID-19 season has been one opportunity for discernment after another. It has required a constant attentiveness to God and listening for God's voice, and thus it has created the opportunity to be led by God all the more often.

Coracle is a ministry of "spiritual formation for kingdom action." We seek to inspire and enable people to be the redemptive presence of God in the brokenness of the world. This takes many forms, including offering spiritual direction, leading pilgrimages, working for racial healing and peacemaking, hosting seminars, writing and speaking, and running a longer-term spiritual formation program. Much of this has happened in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and at Corhaven, our seventeen-acre retreat space in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, where we host individuals and groups on spiritual retreat. Corhaven means "shelter for the heart"; many come here seeking God, and quite a few come here seeking spiritual direction. COVID-19 changed that overnight.

Over the past ten years, right up until our governor locked down the state on March 16, 2020, almost 100 percent of what we offered was in person. And then none of it could be, and along with everyone else we switched to being 100 percent virtual within a couple of days. In many ways, for all the challenges this season has presented, it has also created opportunities. This was in large part because of discernment, listening for the voice of God, and then following what we'd heard and being willing to do things we'd never been willing to do before or even considered. Because we could not see the future clearly, we needed guidance; we needed to listen, to discern.

ADAPTING

One of the first things to change was how we offered the ministry of spiritual direction. Coracle has a network of over thirty trained spiritual directors, of which I am one. While some of our spiritual directors were already well accustomed to and comfortable meeting with people over the

phone or with FaceTime or Zoom, I was not. For a long time, I have been personally somewhat viscerally opposed to what felt like a disembodied offering of what is essentially a ministry of presence. I appreciated the space for reflection that the hour or two-hour drive time created for a person coming to Corhaven for spiritual direction and that tangible expression of the value that person saw in this special ministry. Our space is set up to facilitate people's encounter with God, be it on the trails in the woods for walking, the benches along the creek for praying, the icons on the wall, the comfortable chairs arranged across from each other to sit in, or the woodstove to sit by.

Then none of that was available, and yet still I had my directees. To abandon accompanying them in this particularly trying season surely did not feel right, so I began doing what I had sworn I'd never do—meet for spiritual direction on a computer screen. Discernment said, "Don't let your principles get in the way of needful ministry. Care for people, even if the form is not ideal or what you'd choose."

Given that suddenly I would be spending entire days on a screen, I had to do several specific things during a virtual spiritual direction session that would set it apart as the sacred space that it is. I learned these as I went along.

I soon realized that I could not do this from my normal office setting with my computer on my work desk. Something about being at my work desk made it feel like a session of spiritual direction was just another work meeting, which it is surely not.

I set up a stool next to the chair where I typically do spiritual direction so that the computer would be right at eye level. I pin my directee's video and put their face on full screen so that I can see no other windows open on the computer. I leave my phone in another room. I turn off all notifications from my computer so that I'm not distracted by texts and emails coming in. I use noise-cancelling headphones for spiritual direction. Just as I would for an in-person session, I light a candle to remind me of God's presence, and I put it in my field of vision so that I can be reminded that God is with us even if we are apart and that the Holy Spirit is actually the spiritual director.

All these things in a sense are more for me than for the directee. I'm doing everything I know to do to keep me focused on what we are doing and to remind myself that the pixelated face I'm looking at is in fact that person as truly as if we were physically sitting across from each other. I'm doing everything I know to do to say to myself "This is not another Zoom!"

and to be aware that the space and time we're creating is as sacred as if we were able to be physically together.

As I would do in a normal spiritual direction session, I try not to have a hard stop to our session. I do not schedule another Zoom immediately after a session in order to give the Spirit room to guide and move. I came to find that for me it is most effective to schedule these sessions for the end of the day so that I could get out of the head space of being in the office.

And it's been good. Although virtual spiritual direction is not ideal, it is surely better than not having it at all. I've picked up a couple of new directees who are not within driving distance of Corhaven because we discerned that God was guiding us to meet, even if in a form I had formerly been opposed to. I've been able to see some of my longstanding directees somewhat more regularly simply because it is quite a bit easier for a person to schedule a Zoom for the end of the day than try to find a half or full day to physically come out to Corhaven.

As it's likely I'll still have "virtual directees" well after this season is over, I plan to write a short description for directees about how they too can make a virtual spiritual direction session as sacred a space as possible.

ONGOING DISCERNMENT AND DECISIONS

Throughout the pandemic, and then during the seasons of racial reckoning and the 2020 election season, we at Coracle have sought to do two things. First, we have retained a posture of always looking for God's potential redemption of the challenges of these seasons. We live in a very broken world, and sometimes in a year like this we are reminded of just how broken things really are, and yet God is always about redemption. The ministry of Jesus at its deepest essence is about God confronting brokenness in order to bring new creation. So, the question becomes, "How can we join God in God's work of redeeming in a time like this?" As opposed to merely trying to survive this year, we've tried to amplify our engagement and step up our efforts.

Second, we have remained in a posture of discernment, asking, "God, is there something else we should be doing? What would you have us do?" We've done that individually, as a staff, and as a board. Having asked those questions, we then take time to listen. When something is clear, we move

on it, and having done that we ask those questions again and listen for God again. The following are two examples of this process.

First, for all the fear and disruption that the early days of COVID-19 created, it became clear very quickly that we were being called to engage the challenges and opportunities strongly as opposed to simply trying to manage and survive. One of my mentors, Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC, used to say, "In times of crisis, go deeper." By early April, the Coracle team had launched our initiative called "Go Deeper and Bless." We created ways for people to go deeper into God, go deeper into relationships, and bless others in the time of coronavirus. These opportunities were mostly virtual, something we'd never done before, and they consisted of a series of seminars on topics such as soul-care practices during a pandemic. We also hosted regular conversations on questions that were on people's minds, started releasing short devotional videos, kept our community rhythms and figured out how to do them virtually, encouraged people to seek out spiritual direction because it was all being done virtually, organized fundraising campaigns, and started agricultural projects for COVID-19 relief locally.

As we neared the end of that first initiative, we realized that because we'd been recording all of these digital offerings and writing quite a bit, we actually had a series of resources that we could bundle together and offer as a complete package on our website under the title "Spiritual Formation during a Crisis," a sort of "evergreen" offering (available at any time) for anyone going through a challenging season.

Last year our board undertook a "strategic discernment" approach to the next five years of Coracle's ministry. One of our goals at the time was to develop two resource packages by the end of 2020. Because of COVID-19, we'll have four! In some key ways, even while COVID-19 has shifted some of our longer-range thinking, in other ways it's expedited some of our plans and goals, allowing us to meet them more quickly than we could have were it not for this season.

Second, since its very beginning Coracle has had a deep commitment to racial healing and justice in the United States, in part because of my many years of ministry in America's inner-city contexts, mostly in Washington, DC. Several months after my family moved from Washington to rural Virginia to what would become Corhaven, we were very surprised to learn that the land we purchased held on it a cemetery that contained the graves

of twenty-five African Americans who had lived and died enslaved. It had become so overgrown that it was invisible, and it had been forgotten. Over the years, we've cleared and developed this site and protected it so that those who lie there would be recognized for their dignity even if their dignity was never recognized by the dominant culture while they were alive. It's come to be called the Corhaven Graveyard and five years ago was the birthplace of the Repentance Project, a national ministry helping Christians recognize the horrific past and present of racism in our country, repent, and make repair in the context of relationships through the fifty-day devotional tool "An American Lament."

In 2019 on June 19, Coracle offered a Juneteenth work day in the Corhaven Graveyard, and it was good. About twelve people were there, including some children, and we painted the boards surrounding the graveyard and did a few other small projects and had some reflection and prayer. It was a small group of people, it was not live streamed or recorded in any way, and, as important as the day was, it was limited to only a few and the experience is now lost except for the painted boards. We were planning another Juneteenth workday in 2020 in the graveyard, and then the pandemic hit.

Then George Floyd was killed on May 25 and protests erupted around the country. For a long time prior, we had a staff retreat on the calendar for May 30, which because of COVID-19 was truncated and done virtually. In that meeting, however, God laid it on our hearts to offer virtually a lament for racial injustice from the graveyard on Juneteenth. We can't remember which of our staff had the idea first, which matters because that indicates that it was of God for all of us. By the end of the meeting, we agreed that it was clear that God was giving us this work to do. We had discerned that God was in this and that we should follow that voice.

The following week we got down to work on what would become Coracle's largest event by far in terms of both partnership and participation, hosting it with eighteen other churches and ministries and then being joined by over six hundred people from around the country on Juneteenth. We recorded it, and now that resource is one of the most important offerings on our website.

These examples, and others like it during the pandemic, made it clear to us that God is at work and that we have the privilege of participating in God's work, and we are grateful.

In his January 30 entry in *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers wrote, "Get into the habit of saying, 'Speak, Lord,' and life will become a romance (1 Samuel 3.9). Every time circumstances press in on you, say, "Speak, Lord," and make time to listen. . . . As we listen, our ears will become more sensitive, and like Jesus, we will hear God all the time."¹

This practice of listening and discernment allows God to create something better than we can conceive or plan. Taking the next clear step allows God to place our feet in the steps that God has for us and leads to greater things that are clearly not of our making. While taking time to discern God's voice may mean we move slower, we have found that the fruit of hearing God's voice and following it has been much greater.

NOTES

1 Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*.