

Response to John Mabry

Maria Tattu Bowen

John Mabry's fine article on spiritual direction in the digital age resonated well with my own experience as a spiritual director, offering long-distance direction, supervision, and education with growing frequency over the last fifteen years. Initially I felt skeptical about engaging by telephone in a ministry requiring careful attention to the subtleties of human experience and which, in effect, excised the sense of sight that had so often aided me in listening. I have since passed from mildly resisting this long-distance-listening ministry to thoroughly enjoying and even, at times, preferring it for reasons I will state below.

I first experienced meeting people over the telephone as I began training spiritual directors at San Francisco Theological Seminary in the early 1990s. Then, as now, our program featured intensive training for three weeks each January, followed by a year of long-distance supervision, then *another* intensive three weeks in January, followed by *another* year of long-distance supervision, culminating in a final January intensive. Over the years I have begun to offer Skype as an option to the telephone to both international students in our program and to my directees, mostly to avoid long-distance phone charges.

As people become more digitally adept, and as the digitally-adept have grown more comfortable relating to others via technology, I've heard fewer

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complaints about long-distance direction—barring problems with occasionally unreliable Internet connections. However, I am not quite ready to share Mabry's conviction that "the main objections to online spiritual direction have vanished with the advent of Skype." Some aspects of long-distance spiritual direction still give me pause.

For instance, in spite of the visual advantages of Skype, I find myself eschewing the camera more often than not because video Skype, at least the way it works on my computer, renders it impossible to engage in a mutual gaze. While using Skype, I find myself further distanced from my already-distant conversation partners as I make the difficult choice between looking at my camera—so that they have the virtual experience of me gazing at them—and looking at them, which results in their experience of me looking away (from the camera, and so, in their experience, from them). Either way, I sense that I'm in the unenviable position of eroding mutuality by feigning a gaze rather than offering a true gaze,¹ which leaves me intentionally fostering a connection with a distant other, while using a technology that creates an emotional gap even as it attempts to close a geographical one. In short, in spite of its many advantages, using technology to offer long-distance spiritual direction solves certain problems while creating others.

For example, when considering what it might be like to choose an online spiritual director whom I have not experienced in person, the analogy of computer dating comes to mind. Is it useful to those who do not regularly cross paths with eligible partners? Absolutely. Are enduring matches made that way? Undoubtedly. Are there disadvantages? You bet. For, in computer dating, potential partners do not have the experience of low-risk, in-person involvement over time prior to making a date. For example, they do not go to church together, sit in class together, or attend group social events together. Each of these activities would allow them to observe their potential partners from a distance, gathering data about how they relate to others and to the community.

In a similar way, choosing a director online can leave one with a dearth of in-person information gathered over time and few options for low-risk involvement. I want my spiritual director to be kind and faithful, perceptive, skilled, and sensitive to the Spirit. I might find such qualities in teachers, ministers, and retreat leaders I encounter, or a friend might refer me to someone they've personally experienced. One might be able to learn some things about a spiritual director online, though perhaps not as much as one would hope. Also, while many excellent directors no doubt work remotely, I must admit to feeling disheartened when I encounter a growing number

of slickly self-promoting one-stop spiritual shops online. Such an apparent devolution in the process of locating a spiritual director leads me to wonder whether the increasing popularity of long-distance direction might breed “superstar” directors, floating with little context in a binary sea and impoverishing local communities in the process.

Spiritual directors do not simply listen to those in their practice, but they serve as significant resources for their communities, offering evenings of reflection, retreats, and lectures. In addition, they’re available to listen in the grocery line, on the bus, at church councils, and in every other local context in which they find themselves, offering wise counsel and invitations to discernment. In this way, and not simply in their private practices, spiritual directors listen for the reign of God as it breaks into the world and invite us to respond as we feel called. Should local communities not support such listeners by training them and/or offering them stipends to listen, preferring instead to pay online directors, they will lose a valuable community resource. Like shopping at the farmer’s market and buying shoes from the local cobbler, receiving spiritual direction in one’s community—rather than online—constitutes yet another way of “buying local” to support one’s neighbors.

This sense of the spiritual director’s contributions to the local community counters Mabry statement that “Skype opens up the world of spiritual direction because it makes geography irrelevant.” Though I sense Mabry means by this assertion that people distant from one another can now have direction conversations via Skype that approximate those they might have face-to-face, his provocative statement that Skype makes geography irrelevant troubles me. In addition to sundering directors from the local community, long-distance conversations will never yield awe at seeing together through the office window that hill across that valley glowing in that sunset, or engender shared meaning-making in reference to geographical landmarks, or local politics, that both people in a face-to-face conversation share on a daily basis. Further, one’s geography figures heavily into one’s spiritual identity and development² and shared insight about that geography aids the spiritual direction process.

As one with a sacramental sense of the world, I believe that careful attention to the concrete and particular reveals Divine Mystery, which is, in part, what makes both spiritual direction and poetry so effective in creating a sense of spiritual presence: at their best they each provide a sharp, succinct focus on particular things. It is precisely this loss of the concrete and par-

ticular in the local environment that creates for me the biggest obstacle to long-distance direction—a loss whose consequences have been voiced often in articles about the malaise experienced by those favoring virtual relationships in a virtual world over real relationships in a real world.

That being said, I have both offered and received long-distance direction and never have I experienced these relationships as virtual rather than real. Still, if my directee in China had an extended hospital stay there, I could not visit her; if she had a broken leg I might not know it; and if she needed a referral, to whom would I send her? The referral question alone invites us to consider the ethical challenges inherent in long-distance direction and to discern potential solutions to the dilemmas it raises.

In spite of the challenges of long-distance direction, however, I, too, have experienced many of the benefits Mabry has so aptly named, and I have another to add to the mix, one whose power has taken me by surprise: I can close my eyes while listening. As I do, I find myself hearing more nuances in the conversation, much in the way, perhaps, that having one impaired sense heightens those that remain.

What is more, with my eyes closed, I notice and can respond to a far greater volume of intuitive information, information that I do not have as much access to when I engage my consciousness in the visual aspects of the other. For example, I sense in greater detail the feedback my body is giving me about the conversation and I see more images in my mind's eye. In a sense, then, in offering direction long-distance via phone or audio-Skype, I sacrifice the visual gaze in the external world exchange for enhanced inner vision. Spiritual directors, whose best work relies on inner vision, may find this the greatest benefit of all when it comes to long-distance direction.

In closing, I find myself musing on Francis de Sales, a 17th-century Bishop of Geneva and Catholic saint who shattered the conventions of his age by involving himself deeply in the spiritual life during an era when monks and nuns laid claim to the ladder of perfection, while bishops tended to the workaday tasks of managing the ministries under their care. Not only did de Sales attend to his own spiritual life, he had the temerity to encourage the laity to do the same, and he assumed the role of their advisor in matters of prayer, often by writing letters of spiritual direction. Further, de Sales re-envisioned the monastic ladder of perfection as an ascending and descending thoroughfare between heaven and earth, one that included lay people and that, far from escaping the world, blessed it.³

de Sales and others like him invited lay people to live deeply in the spiritual life, ruffling more than a few feathers along the way. In providing a means of receiving spiritual direction to those without adequate choices in their local communities, present-day long-distance spiritual directors have ruffled a few feathers of their own.

When Mabry asks whether long-distance spiritual direction is valuable, my answer is a qualified yes, as long as one offers it with integrity, knowing that it solves some problems while creating others and making provisions to address the difficulties it raises.

NOTES

1. See works on the importance of the mutual gaze to human relationships by 20th Century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, among others.
2. Kathleen Norris and Belden C. Lane are two of many voices articulating the impact of geography on spirituality.
3. See, in particular Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, John K. Ryan, trans. and ed. (New York: Harper, 1950).

Advances in technology have created new possibilities for designing educational experiences that promote interaction, foster community, and allow for the development of higher order thinking skills. However, a sizable gap still exists between the computer literate and those who do not have access to the necessary technology. Distance education with a global reach is a desirable goal, but suitable infrastructures for the emerging technology need to be developed in many developing nations. Further, even though peoples are connected, the skills of interaction, group process, and information access and use will need to be part of distance learning. Interactivity does not guarantee a learning community or quality of dialogue. Helping students make sense of information they have acquired but do not understand is a critical task.

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