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## My Journey Into Spiritual Direction

Recognizing God's work in your life usually requires a guide.

**Bill Shereos**, sidebars by **Anita Lustrea** and **Lee Eclov** | posted December 29, 2015



I suddenly realized I had traveled a very long way. The trip to see a spiritual director for the first time was further than the 12 miles from my local Evangelical Free Church to the home of a Catholic religious order just outside of town. As I set out, I thought traveling beyond the boundaries of my faith tradition might be perilous. But it has proved to be a rewarding journey.

In my second pastorate, I became embroiled in a bitter church conflict. It was a lethal combination of long-term systemic problems in the church and my own inexperience and insecurity. In my youthful bravado, I focused on my agenda and failed to recognize that God had already been at work in that congregation long before I arrived.

When criticized, I responded defensively. Conflict grew, and the congregation became polarized. Each side saw the other as the enemy. Before long a group of 40 people met secretly to have me removed.

Feeling out of my league and desperate for help, I began seeing a counselor. For years, I told people that seeing a counselor was a means God used for healing. Yet, when it was my turn to see a therapist, I questioned that sage advice.

The Christian counselor helped me understand my own family of origin and the role I played within it. As a former pastor, he also helped me understand my new congregational family system. I discovered the ways I contributed to the dysfunction of that system. I also learned healthier ways respond to church members and manage my own behavior. I am deeply grateful for a skilled counselor who enabled me to better understand relational dynamics, which enabled me to better work through my own insecurities and address the congregational conflict.

After my counselor and I determined I had made enough progress to end our sessions, I asked how I might better navigate spiritual and emotional health after therapy. He suggested I engage in spiritual direction and recommended a local Catholic priest as a director.

The language of spiritual direction was new to me. Was a spiritual director the Christian version of Obi-Wan Kenobi, a spiritual Jedi master? I quickly discovered my expectations were inaccurate. I found I would not go to him for answers. He was much better at asking wise questions.

## Therapy vs. Spiritual Direction

Our conversations were not about my psychological health or family systems. That's therapy. Our conversations focused on the Holy Spirit's presence and guidance in my life. The healing agent in therapy is the counselor. In spiritual direction, God is the agent of healing.

My director reminded me he was a spiritual companion to help me focus on God and my response to God's work in me. My counselor helped me learn to recognize and address unmet childhood needs. My director pointed me toward maturity in Christ-likeness.

[My director was a companion to help me focus on God and my response to God's work in me.](#)

Therapy is important for emotional and psychological issues. Spiritual direction helps me give attention to God. It isn't something I can do well for myself. William Osler said, "The physician who treats himself has a fool for a patient." On a number of occasions when I have received clarity from the Lord regarding a particular personal or ministry issue, I've thanked my director. His response is consistent, "I can do it for you, but I cannot do it for myself. I too need a spiritual director."

## Spotting God's Activity in Me

Spiritual direction is rooted in the belief that God is always active in a person's life, and everything in our lives is raw material for our spiritual formation. My role as a directee is to become aware of God's work in and around me. The prophet Samuel was a good directee as he prayed, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." A central question in spiritual direction is, "Who is God to me, and who am I to God?"

An important instrument in the toolbox of a spiritual director is Scripture. Some of my initial fears about entering into this relationship were allayed when I encountered my director's use of Scripture.

Early on I shared my fears of addressing an issue with an authority figure in my life. My director brought me to [1 Samuel 16:7](#). "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'"

Ironically I had been memorizing that very Scripture and happened to have that verse in my shirt pocket on a 3x5 card. Yet I had not realized its application until our conversation.

The process of spiritual direction has encouraged me to explore classic spiritual disciplines. Reinforcing that God is the agent of sanctification, my director encouraged the use of classic spiritual disciplines, which I had not encountered after my conversion to Christ. For example, he coached me into the practice of solitude and silence. I became a Christian during my late teens and had never engaged in intentional solitude and silence until now.

## **All of Life Is Under Consideration**

Our monthly conversations enabled me to make a major shift from regarding my circumstances as a series of events I had to navigate to regarding my circumstances as elements God is using in his curriculum for my spiritual formation. Whether we are in ministry or in the marketplace, it is in the midst of our everyday life we learn to be more like Jesus. I also began to look for ways God was already at work around me redeeming his world and discovered it was not up to me initiate that work.

Learning that the Lord works through our thoughts and feelings was also revealing. While thoughts and feelings can come from a variety of sources, the indwelling Spirit is certainly one of those sources. Since the Spirit dwells within us, it only makes sense that his presence would affect my affect.

## **Consolation and Desolation**

My spiritual vocabulary grew as I learned concepts like "consolation" and "desolation." Consolation occurs when I am moving toward God. Desolation occurs when I am moving away from him.

In consolation I connect more closely with God and others. It may bring new energy within and a greater sense of God's interaction. Consolation isn't just positive things occurring in my life. I can drift away from God when experiencing things others consider positive. I may even experience consolation during difficulty such as grief or loss.

In desolation I move away from God. Desolation usually cuts me off from community and my true self. It may result in negative thoughts, drain me of energy, and lead to sense God's distance more than his nearness. That goes deeper than just happiness and sadness. Becoming more aware of these interior movements has helped me move toward God and his will for my life and ministry.

## **Decision-Making and Discernment**

The distinction between decision-making and discernment has also become important. When I try to make good decisions, I evaluate the facts and try to determine the best course of action. Many times life requires me to make good decisions. Discernment, on the other hand, means seeking God's will and purpose for my life.

## Your Area

My first spiritual director and I met once a month, which is typical. Since she was a staff pastor, my meetings were free, but you can expect to pay from \$0 to \$100 per hour. A director usually asks you to pay what you are able. Some say, "Pay what seems comfortable and add a little extra so you feel a slight ouch." Probably a good rule of thumb.

When my first director moved out of state, I had to figure out how to find another. Ask for personal recommendations. If you don't want to meet with the same person your friends do, ask their directors for referrals.

There are also a few professional organizations you can search to find a spiritual director in your area. For instance, Evangelical Spiritual Directors Association

([www.graftedlife.org/esda/search](http://www.graftedlife.org/esda/search)) allows you to search for a spiritual director in your area. Or Spiritual Directors International ([www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)) has a seek-and-find guide with spiritual directors for all faiths. You can read about each director to initially see if they are a fit and then follow up with a call.

Be prepared to ask a variety of clarifying questions when calling a director to see if he or she is a good fit theologically and relationally. Spiritual directors expect this. Finding someone who

out on my own. I might experience discernment through God's "whispers" or having an internal sense of something just being "right."

## Prayer of Indifference

When I heard the phrase *prayer of indifference*, I thought it must be something negative. Yet, in context, I learned the prayer of indifference is helpful in our relationship with God.

St. Ignatius, the 16th-century Jesuit who is a central figure in the tradition of spiritual direction, once wrote, "We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to the deepening of God's life in me."

But the "prayer of indifference" was prayed long before St. Ignatius. Mary, Jesus' mother, made use of that prayer when she prayed in [Luke 1:38](#) "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Jesus also prayed such a prayer in [Luke 22:42](#) just before going to the cross: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

Abandoning ourselves to the will of God brings freedom.

## The Journey Continues

My Christian counselor helped me over a period of several months. But throughout the rest of my ministry in that congregation, I met monthly with my spiritual director. The problems I encountered early on in that ministry were complex and multifaceted. I am confident that I could not have stayed on for thirteen and a half years and experienced personal and congregational healing had I not had the support of a spiritual director.

When I moved to an urban Chicago congregation, the Lord led me to a new director with whom I've met for well over a decade.

understands your specific faith background is important, and someone with whom you feel comfortable telling personal details.

First sessions with spiritual directors are usually free, and most directors tell you at the outset to give the relationship three or four months before re-evaluating. A director will not take offense if you decide to move on. The sacred space of a spiritual direction session needs to be a place of deep connection with God and your director.

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Ever since that initial 12-mile trip, I've continued seeing a spiritual director. The journey has been much longer than I expected, but God often leads in ways we don't anticipate. Journeys have a way of enabling us to cultivate new friendships, appreciate new experiences and learn from the traditions of others.

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## **How Spiritual Direction Works**

### **Finding the Spirit in the deeper recesses of your soul.**

Bill is my spiritual director. Several years ago, over breakfast, he told me the story he's written here— how he first connected with his spiritual director and how he has grown in Christ through it. I wanted someone like that in my life.

When I was a high school kid, growing up in a tiny town, I thought of myself as deeper than my peers. I'd go for long walks late at night, preferably in the rain, to think deep thoughts. Problem was, I couldn't think of anything. I wasn't all that deep. I felt something similar as a young pastor. I was well-grounded in evangelical theology and blessed with godly models, but I had the vague feeling I didn't know my own soul, that I wasn't very deep.

Gradually through writers like Richard Foster and Eugene Peterson I became familiar with the language and literature of the contemplative life. I began to see the soul-ish side of Scripture. I sensed that there were dynamics in my life with the Lord that I didn't know how to discern, almost like when there are conversations going on upstairs in your home that you can't quite hear.

Finally right after Christmas a few years ago, I arranged to visit Bill to see if he could help me find a spiritual

director. About a half hour into our conversation, I realized he'd already begun. We've met monthly ever since.

Before we meet each month, I try to identify the stand-out moments or movements of my life with the Lord over the last weeks. An undercurrent of sadness perhaps, or some truth from sermon preparation that just keeps reverberating within me. Quite often we start with something incongruous, unresolved, that vague sense that something is out of whack in my heart, like why a meeting upset me unduly.

Important things in our lives can be floating, untethered from God's gravity, as if the rope crew beneath one of those giant balloons in the Macy's Parade has lost their grip. Bill helps me tether my experiences to the truth and ways of God.

Some of our conversations have a kind of sideways challenge, like when Jesus asked the crippled man, "Do you want to get well?" Once I was saying how I should schedule a half day of prayer but just never get around to it. "Nobody will take responsibility for your spiritual life but you," he said. "You know how to do it."

Sometimes—often, actually—we talk about joy I've missed that was right before my eyes. A couple of times Bill has asked, "Do you realize how you completely brightened when you talked about that?"

Often Bill turns my questions to prayers. Not long ago I puzzled over my resistance to a ministry task I knew was important. "Why don't you ask God why you don't want to do that?" he asked. Bill doesn't have to tell me to pray, but he helps me true up the angle of my prayers.

The most common direction is toward God's grace. I often come to our meetings disoriented by inadequacy, frustration, or guilt. For an over-responsible person like me, grace can be hard to take! So Bill listens and waits for the lurking lies to come out of hiding. Then through his generous silence and Christ-like observations, the gospel does its work in me again.

The phrase *spiritual direction* is something of a misnomer. My friend only rarely *directs* me. It's more like he *reorients* me. He restores my bearings on the Lord. Recently I drove past an amusement park. They had a huge maze made of panels and poles, twisted passages and dead ends, daring the customer to find their way from one corner to the other. Right in the middle of the maze was a tower where an overseer could call out directions to disoriented and frightened kids. That's what happens when I see Bill, my spiritual director.

### **For further reading:**

William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (HarperCollins, 2009)

David Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (IVP, 2002)

Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992)

Gordon T. Smith, *Spiritual Direction: A Guide to Giving and Receiving Direction* (IVP, 2014)

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