
*St. Augustine wrote of God, "You have made us for yourself,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you."*

Chaplain Joy L. Smith

Spiritual direction is an art form. It is an ancient practice, extended with intent to help individuals advance in their ability to identify and value the inner workings of their souls (psyches). The work is about listening for the movements of the Spirit—or Imago Dei¹, the image of God within the human soul. The people who seek our help are those who desire to better understand themselves and the meaning of life. In the process, God's presence becomes more evident day-by-day.

The term "spiritual direction" is a misnomer, as within this work we do not direct a person's soul. Those of us who train for this work accompany the progress of a person's spiritual understanding and advancement. A directee's belief system is identified and valued throughout the work. Changing what a person believes is not the goal. The goal is to first find the parameters of a person's belief system, then to verify and strengthen those existing beliefs in ways that make that personal belief system work more effectively within the challenges of daily life. There is great value in having a spiritual mentor who not only accompanies you on the journey, but also interfaces with you in a nonjudgmental way.

Spiritual direction increases clarity regarding what so often puzzles people: 1) the purpose and meaning of life; 2) struggles, hopes, dreams, anguishes; and 3) what is truly held dear, cherished and sought within one's spirit. The happenings of life can get in the way of this clarity.

A spiritual director helps a directee sharpen her or his ability to see psychological and social traits more clearly. This supports a person's desire to move more fully into a harmonious, integrated wholeness.

Spiritual direction is a growth process, different from counseling. Counseling is about problem solving. In the setting of spiritual direction, a person explores his or her interior with the guidance of a spiritual mentor. The process between "director" and "directee" opens doorways for developing a better understanding of the workings and attributes of God, based on the individual's own experiences. Thoughts, questions, doubts, hurts, hopes, dreams, fears, restlessness and struggles of every kind are grist for this process.

The intent of directors is not to influence changes in the decisions a directee makes. Rather, the role of the director is to listen, while leaving directees free to interact with the Creator's leading within their souls. Remember, the words "soul" and "psyche" are synonymous, comprising the mind, will and emotions. This mentoring relationship prompts discernment as to what the Holy Spirit of God is speaking within one's soul and spirit.

Besides listening, the work of spiritual direction involves discerning what is happening for the directee. Validating the spiritual journey of another includes affirming what can be affirmed and questioning what calls for questioning. For instance, a directee once said, "For me, God is like a meanie, holding a thumb on my head." We probed that "thumb" for several months before she came to recognize what was behind the "thumb"—and it wasn't God. After a few more sessions,

the woman said, “I see God in new ways! The thumb was something I created out of fear of not being able to do anything right in life.”

Normally, director and directee commit to meeting on a monthly basis. However, directors work with people more frequently or less frequently based on the expressed needs of each person. The sessions can be done in person, by telephone or through using Skype, an Internet program which allows visual and audio interaction. The directee indicates what will work best as regards the time, place or mode of interaction. What best suits his or her interior life will make this work a highly regarded process of discovery.

Ultimately, the work of spiritual mentoring can be what the directee wants it to be. Most, but not all, come to spiritual direction by way of a desire for an intimate experience of God. For some, the process will include expressing why a belief in God is not comprehensible, or at least difficult for them.

Another woman shared her insights. She was new to spiritual direction. After her sixth session, she said, “Most people don’t want to hear about my thoughts of God, or what I’m learning about myself as I watch for God’s leading in my life. Mostly, people I know are uncomfortable with this kind of conversation.” She spoke of the benefits she found through setting time aside for spiritual mentoring. Several clients have indicated that the work creates a daily awareness of what was happening in their spiritual quests. A reward that seems evident for most directees comes through their growth in accepting spiritual experiences as authentic. One directee expressed her experience in these few words, “This keeps me moving forward within this mostly-unknown territory of my being.”

Matters pertinent to spiritual direction:

- Openness to growth
- Openness to exploring beyond what is already known about oneself and about God

Questions common within sessions:

- What is your definition of prayer?
- How do you “see” God? (A description is sought, here, of what is known or felt.)
- In what ways do you perceive God speaks to human beings?
- Do you believe God speaks to you?
- Do you listen for God to speak to you?
- In what ways are you seeing your life being affected by what is taking place within the process of spiritual direction?
- Are you perceiving God in different ways than was true for you in the past?
- Are you experiencing God’s presence more surely, or more often?
- Are there ways in which you wish your life could change? (If so, identify the ways.)
- Do you want to grow in your understanding of yourself, of life, and of God?
- Can you recall ways in which you have recognized participation between yourself and God during this past month?

Exploring the kinds of reading material that inspires the person is also done within sessions. Keeping track of what is read and what is gained from the reading can be included, but only if the directee finds this helpful.

Within sessions, the director may ask about anything pertinent to daily living, including the following:

- physical health
- energy level
- regularity of diet and goals for one's diet
- work environment and involvements
- current events among relationships with significant others
- emotional challenges
- how life, in general, is going
- current level of interest in prayer practice (on a scale of 1-10)

For people who embrace a life of prayer, there are times when the pump seems to go dry. Prayer can feel less enjoyable when this happens. The spiritual director will then suggest the possibility of changing the format the person is using in prayer. For instance, moving from formal prayer to a more spontaneous form of prayer, or vice versa, can be suggested. Changing to a prayer form that is new to the person may quickly bring back the enjoyment factor. Otherwise, a discussion of how this felt “distancing,” or “darkness” within the journey is experienced actually helps the person get past it.

Spiritual direction can be done one-on-one, or in a group setting. However, both the director and the directees commit themselves to meeting monthly for a specified period of time, usually one hour. In this way, events that seem most evident of God's presence, or most absent to individuals, are noted and considered. Here, ground is provided for considering various intensities of relating with God, which is part of the development of prayer. For people who have just begun their spiritual journeys, this is a new venture. For others, spiritual direction offers an opportunity to further advance their ability to “walk and talk with God,” which creates a rich and rewarding relationship with one's Creator and, makes for a blessed life.

Getting “off beam” in the venture is explored, along with the fear of getting too close to God, which is common. Some people fear God will ask too much of them. The director serves to support and verify a person's thoughts, questions and experiences, while also helping the directee avoid possible pitfalls that can come within this inner work.

This process is superbly helpful, since the directee knows that each month he or she will be meeting with their spiritual mentor who can note keen movements of the Spirit and ask the kinds of questions that prompt deeper thought and greater openness to God. The directee gains more clarity as to how life is affected by “seeing” and “listening” from a different perspective, from the core of one's being. Many will express a desire to know what God desires. This becomes an adventure which, at points, involves mystery.

What spiritual direction can do for you:

- help overcome disappointments in life, in yourself and in others
- prompt growth in humility
- increase your ability to forgive yourself and others
- unleash self-esteem and expand good self-care
- augment an understanding of God's call toward serving and blessing others

- help in discovering and overcoming undesirable characteristics
- expedite acceptance and love of others
- empower forgiveness of what life has handed you, or not handed you
- give purpose to releasing all disappointment and judgment of your life
- teach discernment within various aspects of life's journey
- provide an expanded and enjoyable experience of discerning what is God's will
- validate the search for a richer life and a more settled, peaceful soul

What should a person look for in a spiritual director?

A spiritual director needs to be settled in her or his state of life or vocation, and be reasonably happy. An unhappy person should not do spiritual direction. The person needs to be living a prayerful life and have a vital relationship with God. This will be revealed through compassionate, confidential care, as well as the director's ability to be nonjudgmental and accepting of what the directee is thinking, feeling, expressing and believing. A good spiritual director portrays merciful love, acceptance and patience. He or she is well acquainted with prayer. A wise director will take time with the directee, mentoring patiently, and will commit herself or himself to pray for each directee. No soul is alike. Therefore, spiritual direction facilitates an individual's own unique way of experiencing God.

A spiritual director needs to be skilled in:

- listening carefully to what the person is saying (and what she or he is not saying)
- the ability to listening inwardly to what the Holy Spirit may be saying
- the ability to affirm the directee's giftedness, successes, experiences and insights as appropriate
- the ability to be forthright, able to confront when unreasonable or distorted thinking is obvious
- teaching, at times when this is appropriate, but only if the directee indicates a need for this
- the ability to recognize when counseling needs to be recommended

Although spiritual direction is not about problem solving, there are times when a person wants help in getting through a difficult matter. Expressing this within this setting is appropriate. Yet, an astute spiritual director is able to recognize when the problem is disturbing the directee's relationships, daily work or health. At that point, counseling is an essential suggestion. It is helpful if the director has a degree in psychology, but not required.

Why is a fee charged?

A spiritual director has acquired specialized training for two years or more depending on the school attended. There are costs involved for the director, including Association membership fees, certification fees, continued education and insurance premiums. A fee usually covers these costs. Conversely, paying a fee means the person receiving spiritual direction will value the work, acknowledging spiritual direction as a professional service. In this way, a keener sense of accountability results.

What is expected of a directee?

- The directee comes to the session with a willingness to discuss what area(s) of her or his spiritual life is bringing the most satisfaction or frustration.

- It is the directee's prerogative to raise questions and to express emotion.
- Keeping appointments is important, while giving 24-hour notice when an appointment must be postponed.
- Payment is due in advance of the appointment, or at the time of service when meeting face-to-face.

Willingness to expand one's level of trust enables the directee to see God as loving, kind and merciful. This is primary in spiritual growth. Otherwise, it will be impossible to let one's life be guided and governed by God, or to find one's hunger truly satisfied.

How to find a spiritual director

Finding a spiritual director takes patience, as the "right person" may not be found with the first attempt. That is why there is an ethic in spiritual direction that must be honored: Either the director or the directee can, at any point, indicate that she or he feels the match is not quite right. This is a matter that is felt in the heart and there must be freedom to leave the commitment at any time.

It may be possible to find a director through your pastor or bishop, rabbi or other source of spiritual leadership. Meanwhile, it is helpful to continue current practices and to perhaps expand that practice through writing in a journal. On the web site for Spiritual Directors International (<http://maps.sdiworld.org/seekandfind.php>) a listing of spiritual directors in cities throughout the world is provided. Simply type your city in the search box. The SDI home page also provides beneficial information about spiritual direction.

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¹ The Hebrew for imago dei is **צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים** and stands for God's likeness. Genesis 1:26-27 and Gen. 9:6 make it clear that both men and women are created "in God's image." Therefore, we have intrinsic value, which exists as an asset within each human being that is independent of our abilities, effectiveness, or functionality. The Latin term *Imago dei* refers to this theological premise.