

Spiritual direction

Space for transformation

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I open the door to enter the building, and I check my watch. As usual, I'm a minute or two late. On my way in to the office, I find my steps losing their sense of urgency. My pace slows, not in hesitation but in anticipation and preparation. I enter the office and move to my seat. I take a deep breath and exhale as I bend to take my place. Another deep breath helps me become aware of tight muscles. I try to release them and let the couch hold me up. My heart rate slows, as does my breathing. I am here. For the next hour I will receive spiritual direction. I wonder what will happen.

For six years I have been receiving spiritual direction. Over time, I have noticed that these physical changes occur as I enter the office of my spiritual director. I notice because so often my body is in a different mode of being. I am a woman, I am a mother of three young children, I am a pastor, I am a wife, I am a church member, I am a friend, I am a spiritual director, I am a daughter. While all these callings have their element of receiving, they often involve giving. My body is often in an active mode. It is creating, it is bearing another up, it intervenes, it resists the urge to intervene. This active mode is good. My body was made for it. But for one hour, once a month, my body welcomes the change offered in spiritual direction.

My experience of physical change as I enter my hour of spiritual direction each month stands as a sign, signaling to me that transformation is possible here. Clearly, transformation is not a guaranteed outcome of the encounter, nor does it occur only within the boundaries of spiritual direction. Nevertheless, I believe that transformation and spiritual direction are linked. I know this in my body.

The task, then, is to explore at least some of the links between spiritual direction and transformation. Even an initial definition of

these two terms will begin to reveal such links. Spiritual direction is a conversation between two Christians. This conversation is one context in which the Holy Spirit actively reveals the believer's

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search for God and God's search for the believer in the midst of life. Marlene Kropf helpfully expands this concept of spiritual direction by identifying some of the questions this conversation probes. "What is the quality of the relationship [between the directee and God]? How is God's presence being made known? How is the person responding to God? Where is the Spirit calling for transformation and growth?"¹ As

you can see, the word "transformation" is already linked to this understanding of spiritual direction.

My dictionary defines transformation as "any change."² But in the context of spiritual direction, the word needs further definition. Transformation is any change that frees us to claim and live out of our status as God's children (Eph. 1:5–6).³ In other words, to participate in transformation is to move ever closer to God's intention for humanity in creation. This is a lifelong journey. We cannot travel this way alone. The Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ sustain us on this transforming journey. Spiritual direction is one aspect of this sustaining and transforming ministry. But how does it happen?

Transforming conversation

I must turn slightly to face my spiritual director. She does not sit directly opposite me but slightly to my left. We greet each other warmly and exchange friendly chat for a moment. To anyone else, it might appear that we are engaged in a typical conversation. But we are not, and we both know it. Soon our chatter quiets.

Silence.

Into the silence, in a gentle unhurried way, my spiritual director offers Scripture, a poem, or a reading.

Silence.

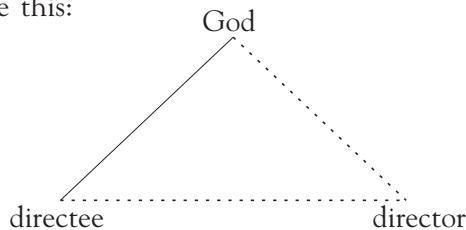
In those profoundly simple moments, my spiritual director has welcomed the Holy Spirit into our midst. The Holy Spirit is the third party to our conversation. I understand again why my

spiritual director does not sit directly across from me. The space to my right leaves plenty of room for the Holy Spirit.

When I am ready, I add my voice to the silence. I speak of me. In the speaking of me, an opening is created to witness God's activity. This truly is no typical conversation.

I often emerge from spiritual direction with a different sense about the world. The chaos does not seem quite so chaotic. The busyness does not seem quite so pressing. I leave with a spaciousness in my soul for myself, for others, and for God. When I first began direction, I attributed this change to the revelations I received there of how God was active in my life. Spiritual direction seemed so fruitful at the beginning. I was forever hearing invitations from God. Sometimes the invitation was a nuance of one I had already received, and sometimes it was a new invitation. But over time I have probed aspects of me that require more exploration than can happen in one hour. I have left many sessions with no new revelation of God's activity in my life, yet the different sense about the world is still mine. Even in the midst of difficult grief work, I have experienced this change. I now attribute this different sense about the world to the transforming power of spiritual direction.

Let me explain. The conversation offered in spiritual direction becomes transforming precisely because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In training to become a spiritual director, I became aware of the triangle shape of the conversation. It looks something like this:



In many instances, a triangle is used to diagram unhealthy forms of communication.⁴ But I believe that in spiritual direction, conversation that takes this shape becomes redemptive.

As noted, the focus of the direction hour is exploring the relationship between the believer and God. The directee's job is to bring the stuff of his life into the conversation. The director's job is to listen to this story carefully and prayerfully. Thus, a

conversation is going on between two people. But the director is simultaneously participating in another conversation. She is also in active conversation with the Holy Spirit.⁵ The director may be asking the Holy Spirit, "What is God's activity in this story?" The Holy Spirit may be nudging the director to a particular Scripture, or to keep quiet, or to ask a question. Before the director speaks, she often checks with the Holy Spirit to confirm that sense. The director cannot be absolutely sure of God's revelation, of what invitation God is giving to the directee. She asks questions and probes possibilities arising from the directee's experience. When the director actually engages with the directee in the conversation, then, she offers as possibilities these nudges by the Holy Spirit. She offers them tentatively, because it is the task of the directee to claim the working of the Spirit in his life.

The triangular shape of the spiritual direction conversation assumes the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit offers clear revelation in the context of the conversation. Other times, the Spirit abides, waiting, creating space and readiness to receive the revelation. However it works, this Spirit is the same Spirit who was at work in creating order out of chaos. This same Spirit empowers the church to carry out its ministries. This Spirit brings us into relationship with God.⁶ This is the Holy Spirit at work in the conversation of spiritual direction, empowering transformation.

Transforming space

My body is no longer calm. I feel the weight of grief bearing down on me until it makes my shoulders stoop. I feel it compress my heart and my lungs. I struggle to breathe. Grief spills out of my mouth and eyes and fills the room. I look for the Holy Spirit in that space to my right, but I see no one. I cannot find God at all. All my crying out is met with nothing. I get no relief or comfort for this pain.

My director does not jump up to help me bear this pain. She does not ease the tension in my shoulders. Rather my director sits there, not fixing anything. There is no urgency in her; in fact I almost get the sense that she is lingering. She offers a lot of silence, the occasional question that probes my experience, and absolutely no answers. However, I do not want to stay here. This

hurts. This is difficult. I long to revel in God's love again. But quick fixes are not offered here. I think I knew they wouldn't be.

This willingness to linger in a disorienting experience is a gift given to me, although I may have trouble recognizing it as gift. My director's lingering opens a transforming space. First, she does not recoil at the intensity of my experience, nor does she claim the intensity of the emotion. She simply remains, listening. Nancy Pfaff writes, "Perhaps this is the greatest gift we can give the

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journeyer, a physical representation of God's presence, listening."⁷ And that is precisely what my director has done. In making space for the grief, or rage, or despair, she becomes God's messenger, bringing the assurance that I have not been abandoned. Not even by God. The recognition of God's faithfulness is a transforming moment in my life.

Second, my director sees this experience as something to be explored. She does not view it as something over which one can triumph. Rather she sees an invitation to participate with God in a new ways. Nancy Pfaff is helpful here, too. "God's purpose for the dark night [is] a new kind of seeing God,

of being with God."⁸ If I eventually say yes to this invitation, it is an opportunity for further transformation. For as I move toward God, changes will occur that offer freedom to claim and live out of my status as God's child.⁹

Transforming celebration

Silence. I feel welcome again. I can rest here. Presence. God. I am at home. I smile and begin to speak of me. I share places where I recognize God's activity in my life and in the lives of those around me. I may recall situations my director has heard many times before, but they are new now with this new revelation of God's activity. I must tell the story again, but this time in its new framework. I may share new experiences of God's activity in my life and in the lives of those around me. These stories must be added to the framework, giving it support and colour. But I am not restricted to recounting the ways God has been active in my

life. I am also free to share the choices I have made to participate actively with God, although I may be shy about this at first. But the delight my director expresses at these stories makes me bold. I join in the celebration.

I don't always find these stories easy to tell. These stories are not without their own pain. But they stand as testimonies to God's faithfulness and to my own transformation. And so we celebrate with laughter and tears.

I am still myself. I am a woman, I am a mother of three young children, I am a pastor, I am a wife, I am a church member, I am a friend, I am a spiritual director, I am a daughter. But now I engage in these callings with eyes that see in more Christ-like ways. I celebrate now not because I will never again experience the pain I have just come through. That is not the way of Christ. I celebrate now because celebrating will sustain me as I continue my journey. I need the light of celebration to stand in my various callings as a testimony to God's activity in the world. I need the laughter of celebration to stand in my various callings as a sign of God's justice in the world. I need the joy of celebration to stand in my various callings in opposition to the despair of evil in the world. I need the tears of celebration to know that I do not stand alone in any of these callings.

Next month I will find myself opening the door to enter the building. If I check my watch, I will see that I am a minute or two late. On my way in to the office, I will find my steps losing their sense of urgency. My pace will slow, not in hesitation, but in anticipation and preparation, for I will be at the beginning of a new hour of spiritual direction, wondering what transformation the changes in my body foretell.

Notes

¹ Marlene Kropf, "Spiritual Direction: Sisters and Brothers to Keep Us Faithful on the Way," *Gospel Herald* (April 29, 1997): 2. Another helpful definition of spiritual direction can be found in William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 3–12.

² *Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1982).

³ As the Ephesians text makes clear, claiming our status as God's children is not only an individual endeavour. As soon as people recognize their status as children of God, they are immediately invited to participate in the community known as the church.

⁴ See Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and*

Synagogue (New York: Guilford Pr., 1985), 35–9.

⁵ I believe that this call to pay attention to the activity of the Holy Spirit means that spiritual directors must be trained not only in spiritual direction but also biblical studies and theology. It is imperative that directors participate in a congregation and that they receive direction themselves. For it is the church and the Scriptures that give the context in which we discern the movement of the Spirit.

⁶ See Article 3, “Holy Spirit,” in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1995), 17–20.

⁷ Nancy Pfaff, “Spiritual Direction and the Dark Night of the Soul,” *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International* 4 (May 1998): 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ For insight into the spiritual growth of a directee, see the first chapter of Frank J. Houdek, *Guided by the Spirit: A Jesuit Perspective on Spiritual Direction* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Pr., 1996).