


“Where is God in this?”

Discerning God’s presence in spiritual direction

Alicia Buhler

Colette nestled into the couch as I sat across from her, sipping my tea.¹ After years of psychotherapy necessitated by the rocky foundation laid for her by a parent struggling with addiction, Colette had asked to meet with me for spiritual direction. She had collected and sorted many of the pieces of her shattered life, but she still did not feel whole and named a deep spiritual longing.

Colette grew up with a distant relationship to the Anglican Church and had sought belonging in an evangelical community in her early 20s, which resulted in further confusion and heartbreak. Neither church experience had been sufficient for the answers or tenderness that her soul needed. As she sat down for her first session with me—a minister and spiritual director—she asked upfront if I was going to try to convert her or get her to go to church. I appreciated her ability to ask directly for what she needed and assured her that I had no such agenda. I was more interested in her story.



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She shared with me the dysfunction of her childhood and her meandering journey to find healing in adulthood.

During her story, Colette paused, drawn to the dancing shadows of branches illuminated on the wall behind me by the midday sun. I asked what she was noticing. She confided in me her attraction to light. I watched her defenses relax as she shared with me the comfort she received as a child from the sun reflecting off a lake, about

¹ Names and identifying details of spiritual direction clients, also called directees, have been changed to preserve anonymity.

the candles she lights out of her desperation for light on dreary winter evenings, and how she soaks up the sun every chance that she gets. I noticed her own radiance as she talked about the light, and I wondered out loud if perhaps light was one of the ways God shows up for her. Having had a complicated relationship with God her whole life, she had never considered the light to be of God, though she had certainly experienced it as transcendent, a comforting and healing presence. Colette followed up with me after that session to say that understanding her relationship with light as the God-presence in her life seemed so obvious to her now and had been a missing piece on her spiritual journey.

Searching for connection and meaning

Those who seek out a spiritual director to companion them do so out of diverse life contexts and for various reasons. However, at the center of

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their search is a desire for deeper connection and deeper meaning. We are spiritual creatures. As such, we are inclined to make meaning out of our lives. Those with the cognitive capacity to do so are usually asking, *Why?* Sometimes this search begins as we face a transition or acknowledge dissatisfaction with the way things are. More often it is when we have experienced a trauma or a loss, or when we are suffering, that we delve

into the depths to make sense of things. It is often in the hard stuff of life where we discover that finding meaning has less to do with finding a reason and more to do with finding a connection beyond ourselves, a connection to something or someone greater than ourselves.

Where is God in this? is the foundational question asked by spiritual directors. As directees share experiences from their day-to-day life, reveal what is on their heart and mind, and tell their story, directors listen with an ear tuned toward the Holy. *Where is God in the relationship difficulties between parent and child? Where is God in the monotony of work routines and school pickups? Where is God in the responsibilities of leadership? Where is God in the darkness of depression? Where is God in the prospects of a new job, new relationship, or new life course? Where is God in the chaos that is cancer or climate change? Where is God in the joys and challenges of living?* While the question takes many forms, directors are interested in cultivating that connection,

inviting the one they are companioning to open their awareness to themselves, to those around them, to the Holy, and to all of creation.

Discerning God's presence

Asking the question is simple. Discerning the answer is sometimes more difficult. In my work as a spiritual director, in my church community, and in life generally, I have noticed an emerging dis-ease with claiming something to be of God. Having a significant spiritual experience is not uncommon; talking about our spiritual encounters is. If we do risk sharing, we often place a caveat in front of our experiences of the Holy, offering that we *may* have sensed God's presence or received something from God in prayer, but we cannot be sure. We tend to view with suspicion those who claim certainty about knowing God's will, receiving a word from the Lord, or experiencing the Holy palpably.

Many of us carry heavy packs of spiritual baggage. Much harm has been done in the name of God. We are caught up in the whirlwind of abuses of power and the aftermath of people carrying out their own will in the name of God. I do not blame anyone who is suspicious of God-talk and understand the temptation to walk away from religion altogether. I also understand that others are grasping for certainty. They search for straightforward answers, boxes and boundaries, and binary right-and-wrong ways of looking at life or understanding God. I am witness to the desperate spiritual seeking of our time, the longing for deeper connection and deeper meaning in an age of mistrust and skepticism. This is why I am committed to the essential question, *Where is God (or other name for the Holy) in this?* and sifting through the spiritual baggage to find the answer.


Encountering the God of love

In order to discern where God is, we need to begin with who God is or what the nature of God is. Somehow, we need to be able to recognize the Spirit of God in our midst and be able to name it. Sorting out the answer to these questions is a monumental task that has been chipped away at by theologians, philosophers, ministers, the troubled, the curious, and the faithful for millennia. Given the countless books that have been written on the subject, I am tempted to surrender myself to the fact that God is only ever knowable in part.

What I have noticed in listening to people's sacred stories, however, is that there are generally two working understandings of God. Directees either know the Holy to be a God of love or a God of fear. Those who

have encountered the God of love generally have sensed God to be a compassionate presence and have experienced belonging in the Source of Love without need of earning their place or proving themselves worthy. In contrast, those who relate to God out of fear exhibit unhealthy self-sacrifice and too much concern with getting it right. These are signs that directees are working out of an inherent belief that God is not on their side, that God needs to be appeased, and that they must somehow earn their place of belonging. Sometimes the two are conflated: people may talk about a God of love, but when their stated beliefs are teased apart from their actions, it becomes clear that they are living as if God is harsh and judgmental.

Having done the necessary work of shifting my own image of God, I now recognize how these two faces of God played a role in my own spiri-



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tual development. While my childhood faith was nurtured in the language of a loving God, the practice of my faith was still focused on getting it right so that God would not be angry. Through academic study, therapy, and personal encounter, I released and continue to release false perceptions of God as I come to know ever more fully that the essence of God is love. Spiritual practices and contemplative prayer that invite me to dwell in the love of God have aided my


spiritual re-formation. This lens of love changes everything and has become my most important tool in discerning, *Where is God in this?* If God is a God of love—and love is at the heart of the Christian faith (Matthew 22:36–40, Mark 12:28–31, 1 John 4:7–8)—then when I see signs of love in someone’s life or in the world, I believe God is present there. If I say that God is a God of light and life (John 1:4–9), then when I see signs of light and life, I suspect God is there too.

Focusing on the God of love in spiritual direction

The lens of love, light, and life that serves as a way of looking for the presence of God has been an important part of my spiritual direction practice. Some may argue that this method of discernment is too simple. I believe love can be simple. I am talking not about a sentimentalized version of love but about a love that is straightforward. I also recognize that love can

be complex. My focus on love, light, and life does not assume that whatever feels good is right. It is not a version of the adage, *If you're happy, then God is happy*. Love can demand a lot of us. It asks us to be and do better. It is expansive, diverse, and all-encompassing. It challenges us to grow in new ways. Indeed, faith lived with an understanding of a loving God at times may look much the same in practice as faith lived with an understanding of a judgmental God. However, the act of loving one's neighbor has a different quality depending on whether those actions come out of the foundation of generous love or desperate fear. There is an energizing quality to love, light, and life that is palpable.

Seeking God through the lens of love rather than judgment was particularly helpful in my work with Hans. Hans had been struggling with crippling anxiety for many years when he came to spiritual direction. He was able to identify that much of his struggle was rooted in his fear of God. When Hans was a young boy, his Sunday school teachers had literally put the fear of God into him, which was an effective way to get a rambunctious boy to behave but also resulted in a toxic image of God. While Hans talked about a God who loved him, his experience was of an abusive



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and judgmental God who was distant, withheld love, and required great sacrifice in order to be pleased. Hans's fear of a supposedly loving God caused his anxiety to spike, as he felt he should not be afraid God. Hans led an upstanding life, but he lived with the constant regret that every decision he had ever made was outside of the will of God.

In order to overcome Hans's anxiety, we began to sort the false teachings he had received about God from the truth. When I considered the question, *Where is God in this?* I did not sense God in the judgmental presence that permeated Hans's life. Hans feared God, but

Jesus did not have the same fearful hold on him, so Jesus became a trusted companion in the process. As we worked through his entrenched beliefs, I invited him to prayerfully ask Jesus questions such as, *Do I need to be a missionary overseas for God to love me? Do I need to read my Bible every single day without fail in order to be accepted in God's eyes?* Time and again I heard

Hans’s desperate plea to Jesus, and time and again the response was compassionate love. I affirmed the moments in his life when Hans felt loved and accepted as reflecting the true nature of a loving God, and where fear remained, I gently suggested that more healing was needed. We worked together in spiritual direction for several years, and I watched as Hans was gradually released from the grip of anxiety and was welcomed into love.

As I companion directees who are seeking connection and searching for meaning, I am in awe of the ways in which the God of love shows up, nudging each person toward greater wholeness and desiring them to become all of who they have been divinely created and called to be. Thanks be to God.

About the author

Alicia Buhler, MDiv, is a spiritual care provider in private practice in Kitchener, Ontario. She is a graduate of Canadian Mennonite University and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and her education and ministry experience have focused on counseling, chaplaincy, and spiritual direction. She offers an awareness-based and spiritually integrated approach to inner growth work, informed by her interest in creativity, mystery, and embodied spirituality.