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How practical is it to guide  
Christians one at a time?

# THE INGLORIOUS WORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

*In the Spring 1983 issue of LEADERSHIP, Eugene Peterson wrote "On Finding a Spiritual Director." He described his personal pilgrimage toward the idea of asking one godly individual to guide his development as a Christian and a pastor.*

*In this follow-up article, Peterson explores what he has learned trying to do the same for others.*

I have been talking with friends and colleagues for several years now about spiritual direction. Many are familiar with the term and uneasy with the implications. Most don't think they are qualified.

But when we talk of what they are actually doing, a surprising amount of it is spiritual direction. However, what I call spiritual direction is almost always *what they are doing when they don't think they are doing anything important*. It is what takes place in the corners, in the unscheduled parts of their day. It is offhand. And they do less of it than they otherwise might because they are so tightly scheduled, or so intently involved in completing a task or project. A lot of us would do it a lot more consistently and skillfully if we realized how much more important it is than our teachers ever told us, and how large a place in pastoral ministry it always filled in earlier centuries.

The culture conditions us to approach people and

situations as journalists do: see the big, exploit the crisis, edit and abridge the commonplace, interview the glamorous. The Scriptures and our best pastoral traditions train us in a different approach: notice the small, persevere in the commonplace, appreciate the obscure.

Spiritual direction is the task of helping a person take seriously what is treated dismissively by the publicity-infatuated and crisis-sated mind, and then to receive this "mixed, random material of life" (Erich Auerbach's words in *Mimesis*) as the raw material for high holiness.

Spiritual direction takes place when two people agree to give their full attention to what God is doing in one (or both) of their lives and seek to respond in faith. More often than not, these convergent and devout attentions are brief and unplanned; at other times they are planned and structured conversations. Whether planned or unplanned, three convictions underpin these meetings.

One, God is always doing something: an active grace is shaping this life into a mature salvation.

Two, responding to God is not sheer guesswork: the Christian community has acquired wisdom through the centuries that provides guidance.

Three, each soul is unique: no wisdom can simply be applied without discerning the particulars of this life, this situation.

## Reluctance and Rush

No one I talk to deliberately rejects the work of spiritual direction, nor goes very long without engaging in it somehow or other. Still, by and large it is a fringe activity for most of us. Being a spiritual director, which used to loom large at the center of every pastor's common work, has been pushed in our times to the periphery of ministry.

Ironically, this is the work many people assume pastors do all the time: teaching people to pray, helping parishioners discern the presence of grace in events and feelings, affirming the presence of God at the very heart of life, sharing a search for light through a dark passage in the pilgrimage, guiding the formation of a self-understanding that is biblically spiritual instead of merely psychological or sociological.

But we don't do it all the time or nearly enough of the time. Some of us don't do it very much because we don't have time for it, or don't think we have time for it, which amounts to the same thing. Others of us slight it because we have no idea how important it is.

Whenever we do it, though, most of us know instinctively that we are working at the very center of our calling.

Spiritual direction means taking seriously, with a disciplined attention and imagination, what others take casually. "Pray for me" is often a casual remark. The spiritual director gives it full attention. All those moments in life when awareness of God breaks through the crust of our routines—a burst of praise, a pang of guilt, an episode of doubt, boredom in worship—these take place all the time and are mentioned in half-serious ways while we are on the run to something big or important. Being a spiritual director means being ready to clear space and arrange time to look at these elements that are not at all peripheral but central—unobtrusive signals of transcendence. By naming and attending and conversing, we teach our friends to "read the Spirit" and not just the newspapers.

A friend did this for me recently. I had returned to my parish after several weeks away. One of the elders met me and said, "Weeds have sprouted in the garden while you were gone." He gave details: carping criticism about little things, fault-finding remarks about me—nothing substantial, but the kind of thing that can develop into an atmosphere of suspicious, distrustful unrest.

I was hurt and disappointed. And then I was angry. Everything had been working smoothly when I left. Now a handful of people with some careless and perhaps malicious talk had put things in commotion.

The elder advised me to take care of things imme-

diately to preserve the peace and unity of the church. Confront, explain, smooth over, do a little cheer-leading along the way. He didn't want me or my ministry to be misrepresented. And he didn't want the church's life disrupted. I agreed. I made plans to smooth the waters.

At this point a friend introduced spiritual direction. He asked me to sum up what was going on. That was easy: I was angry over what had been said about me personally, and I was concerned about the seeds of dissent in the congregation. What was I going to do about it? I was going to confront the people who were criticizing behind my back and force them to deal with me face to face. I would

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rebuild the peace of the congregation through visitation and preaching. Actually, it was routine pastoral work.

He interrupted my conventional approach. "Don't you think there might be more to your anger than righteous indignation? Don't you think it could be a symptom of pride that you didn't know you had? Why don't you explore the dimensions and ramifications of your anger?"

"As to the unrest: What if the Spirit is preparing something new in the congregation? What if the whitecaps on the recently smooth waters are caused by the wind of the Spirit, not the whispers of critics? Isn't it possible you are working for a premature peace when something deeply creative is in motion?"

He named the anger as sin; he discerned the unrest as Spirit. The things I had set out to do still had to be done, but they were now mere footnotes to the major work he set before me. In my passion to clear myself and have a smilingly harmonious congregation, I hadn't so much as noticed the obvious.

That is why the work of spiritual direction is essential—because we need to deal with the obvious, with sin and with the Spirit, and we would rather deal with almost anything else.

## Our Best Work

In these moments when we are in conversation

with another and spirit touches spirit, "deep calling to deep," there is often a confirming sense that we are doing our best work. So we don't need to be talked into doing this—at least most of us do not. For most pastors, being a spiritual director doesn't mean introducing a new rule or adding another item to our overextended job descriptions but simply rearranging our perspective: seeing certain acts as eternal and not ephemeral, as essential and not accidental.

Spiritual directors used to be important because they attended to what everyone agreed was important; they are important still because they are about the only people left who confirm the insights and longings that everyone in fugitive moments thinks might be important—but get brushed aside by urgent and hurrying experts on their way to a therapy session or a committee meeting. So many other things clamor for attention that these timidly voiced, apologetically phrased needs and longings get bypassed. The spiritual director is in charge of attending to these quiet necessities.

But there are not enough of us. The consequence is that too much spiritual direction is off-the-cuff work. We dabble.

I was meeting with my friend Tom, a pastor in a nearby town. At midmorning we walked across the street to a diner for a cup of coffee. I went to the washroom and, returning, found Tom in earnest conversation with the waitress. I picked up a newspaper and looked through it so as not to interrupt them. The conversation lasted perhaps three minutes.

Then I returned to the table. While we were finishing our coffee, Tom talked about how often this waitress asked questions about God. "I wish I could spend a lot more time at this sort of thing," he said. "I sometimes have the feeling I am more of a pastor in this diner than I ever am in my church study."

"Then why on earth don't you do it more?" I asked.

He looked at me in a kind of surprise. "Where would I get the time? And besides, that is not what they're paying me to do, is it?"

That seemed outrageously wrong—that Tom should acquiesce to a view of what he was getting paid for that prevented him from engaging in what

pastors have always been expected to practice.

### Naming the Particulars

But a recovery is underway. More and more pastors are seizing this old identity and making it their own, refusing any longer to let it be marginal to their ministries.

The basic requirement for being a spiritual director is simply to take seriously what we already know are serious matters—a sign of grace here, a desire for prayer there—and to shape the agenda of our work from the souls of people we meet, not from the

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demands to which they give voice.

The difficulty in taking these kinds of things seriously is that we are not Indian gurus sitting quietly in ashrams receiving people who come hundreds and thousands of miles to observe us in postures of sanctity. Nothing in our culture and little in our churches encourages us. If being a spiritual director is going to be something more than a wistfully procrastinated intention, we must consciously oppose the principalities and powers of the air.

A simple act of naming is part of the recovery. What is unnamed is often unnoticed. Naming focuses attention. The precise name—whether "spiritual direction" or a synonym—confers dignity.

My most memorable experience of this came in naming birds. I have known what a bird was from an early age and could name a few—robin, crow, sparrow. The ones I named I noticed (not the other way around). I was aware the birds were in the air and bushes and trees but never paid much attention to them.

Then I became a bird watcher. I learned to *observe* the birds, not just glance at them. Within a few weeks I was seeing an enormous variety of birds and noticing how extraordinarily different they were. I began to be in awe of how much there was to know, and how long a lifetime I would need to arrive at mastery, and to regret my late start. A new world had opened up: colors, sounds, flight patterns. Why was I now seeing? In large part through naming. Without a taxonomy, a science of naming, I would neither notice nor remember the red-eyed vireo, touhee, Baltimore oriole, winter wren, Lewis woodpecker.



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Warren had arranged to talk with me. He wasn't experiencing what he observed in other Christians. He had kept quiet about it for a long time, thinking there must be something wrong with him. He felt flat and uninteresting. There was no inward zest. When others talked of grace, mercy, joy, and peace in Christ, he felt left out.

He told me about himself. I learned something he had told no one else, that there was a major relationship in his life that was extremely unfortunate. He had decided he would simply live with it, try not to feel sorry for himself, and get on as best he could. He had concluded this other person was emotionally sick, and improvement could not be hoped for. Still, he couldn't quit hoping. He would be courageous in hoping.

I listened. I listened some more. We prayed. After several weeks I ventured, "You have named this person 'sick.' That implies no one is responsible, but if we try hard enough we might find a medicine or therapy that will make him better.

"What if we named his influence 'envy'? That means there is an actively malicious will at work.

"You have named your part in this 'courage.' What if we named it 'sloth,' meaning you are too lazy to enter into the hard work of prayer in a spiritual warfare?"

Clarification was immediate. By a simple act of naming, the reality of his life was discerned. Emotional deprivation did not cause the flatness in his life; a malign will had enervated his spirit. With continuing direction and encouragement he gave up the fight against "flesh and blood" and took up the battle against the "principalities" and "powers" (Eph. 6:12) and gradually began to know within himself the meaning of grace, mercy, joy, and peace in Christ.

Being a spiritual director means noticing the familiar, naming the particular. Being knowledgeable in the large truths of sin, grace, salvation, atonement, and judgment is necessary but not sufficient. A lot of our work takes place in the details. It is the difference between being vaguely aware that birds are everywhere and naming particular birds. Every temptation has a different look and nuance. Every grace has its own ambience and angle of refraction. In spiritual direction we don't apply truth so much as we discover particular temptations and actual graces. Casual and perfunctory habits of judging and labeling give way to the energies of a disciplined imagination and a prayerful attentiveness.

## Direction Incognito

Nicholas Berdyaev clarifies the grounds for spiritual direction in this sentence: "In a certain sense, every single human soul has more meaning and

value than the whole of history with its empires, its wars and revolutions, its blossoming and fading civilizations." But who is there to insist on this meaning and value in a world craving for generalizations and dealing in commodities? I'm voting for pastors who, in the midst of their other duties, take up the work of spiritual direction.

Any Christian can do this, and many do. Spiritual direction is no prerogative of the ordained ministry. Some of the best spiritual directors are simply friends. Some of the most famous spiritual directors have been laypersons. But the fact anybody can do it and it can occur at any time and place must not be construed to mean it can be done casually or indifferently. It needs to be practiced out of a life immersed in the pursuit of holiness.

What is required is that we bring the same disciplined prayer and discerning attentiveness into the commonplaces that we bring to preparing sermons, sharing crises of illness and death, celebrating births and marriages, launching campaigns, and stirring up visions. It means putting the full spotlight of prayerful concern on the parts of life that get no other spotlights.

For most spiritual direction takes place spontaneously and informally in unplanned but "just right" moments. I have been given spiritual direction by persons who didn't know they were giving it while waiting for a red light, while climbing a mountain,



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"... and we found this near the top of Mount Ararat."