

Responding to Difference: Challenges for Contemporary Spiritual Directors

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The global village of interdependence and diversity is evident every day. Whether it is the profound effects of the economic crisis, the increasingly multicultural and interreligious character of cities and neighborhoods, or the voices of racial and ethnic minorities in every aspect of life, we are all challenged to meet and embrace diversity. Spiritual directors are not exempt from these experiences since they accompany those diverse in culture, religion, gender, race and ethnic background, sexual identity, economic class, and age cohort. These differences present three areas of challenge for spiritual directors: reflecting on the diversity of their experiences as directors, becoming more culturally self-knowledgeable and self-aware, and developing interpathy in relation to gender and religion.

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS RELATIONSHIP

The numerous definitions of spiritual direction emphasize a common aspect: relationship. One person, variously named “directee” or “seeker,” shares an experience of God, of Ultimate Reality, of the Spirit of Life. The director or companion listens, receives the sharing with reverence and respect, and assists the seeker to discern the movement and forward direction of God in the seeker’s life.¹

This is a daunting experience for the director even if the director and seeker share commonalities in all aspects of their lives, for example, two Roman Catholic Jesuit priests in their 40s, both of German ancestry, living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who both are heterosexual and whose parents were all middle-class professionals. Such a shared experience, however, is increasingly rare. The director is likely to accompany seekers who are different from herself in many ways. Language, non-verbal communication, and cultural and religious assumptions interact with gender and sexual identity perspectives. Age cohort and economic class matter. A woman in her 60s accompanying a homeless man in his 20s truly comes from a different world. A naïve trust that “God will lead us and everything will be OK” is dangerous. The differences are real, and they shape both director’s and seeker’s experiences in profound ways. These challenges are not to be feared but to be embraced as sources of rich knowledge and entry into new dimensions of human experience.

Directors can grow in their ability to listen to the sacred journeys of people who are different from themselves by first reflecting on the diversity of their direction experiences. Are the persons you accompany now or in the past from other cultures? Of other races? Of another Christian tradition (if you are a Christian)? Of other faith traditions? Of the other gender? Of another sexual orientation? Of another age cohort (at least fifteen to twenty years older or younger)? Of another economic class? Who is your most memorable seeker? What kinds of difference were part of the relationship? What has been the most difficult direction relationship, perhaps including strong transference and/or counter-transference experiences? What gifts have seekers who are different from you in one or more aspects given to you? What gifts have you given to them?

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-AWARENESS

A major challenge for the director is self-knowledge and self-awareness. This is a constant theme in the literature of the Christian spiritual tradition and other religious traditions. Augustine of Hippo prayed, "O unchanging God, this is my prayer: let me know myself and let me know you."² Teresa of Avila wrote often of the importance of self-knowledge as the foundation of the life of prayer.³

Questions that facilitate this self-knowledge and self-awareness are these: Who am I? What is my cultural background? My religion? My racial and ethnic identity? What does it mean for me to be a woman? A man? Heterosexual? Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgendered? What generational age cohort do I belong to, and how does it shape my worldview? How does my economic class inform my choices?

Some directors have lived all their lives in one culture, while others have moved in and out of various cultures, learning new languages and world views. Clifford Geertz asserts that "There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture."⁴ The ideas, values, convictions, ways of organizing life are all human creations; they were shaped at some historical moment, evolve, and change.

Culture is like the "air we breathe." It is so natural to us that only when we enter into new cultural experiences does the "oxygen content" change. We, then, feel ill at ease and disoriented, the phenomenon known as "culture shock." Entering into a new culture often means learning a new language, eating different food, and learning distinct customs of greeting and hospitality and new rhythms of life. For example, the concept of time is different in different cultures. Westerners expect trains, buses, and planes to run on time; in South Africa where I live, those who use public transport in taxis (large vans) know that the taxi will leave when it is full, even though the passengers are supposed to get to work or school more or less on time. Here is a clash between African traditions—an event begins when people are gathered—and Western expectations that the work day and the school day have a starting time.

Cultures have divergent ways of thinking and orientating. For example, the West is focused on the future, while Africa lives in the here and now.⁵ In planning a conference, Westerners will compile lists of all the things that need to be in place when the meeting begins, while Africans

trust that all will come together on the day with a minimum of planning, and it does. There are different interpretations of causality. In Western culture, a heart attack is seen as a sign of coronary heart disease, while Africans will seek an external cause, such as the displeasure of the ancestors or disharmony within the family. The construction of the self is culture-specific. Most African languages have a saying similar to “a person is a person through others,” emphasizing communal experience, while the West is known for its focus on the individual. Africa is a place of great and generous hospitality and at celebrations the food never runs out, no matter how many people might come, while in the West a festive dinner is planned according to the number of RSVPs received, with little leeway for unexpected guests.

Many of our responses to others are culturally-conditioned and often barely conscious. This “boundary checklist” is a good examination of one’s own cultural and religious preconceptions. While it has a Christian perspective, it can be used by members of other religions as their primary perspective:

- I find I sometimes compare the worst of the other culture/religion with the best examples of my own.
- I see the abuses of the other group and instinctively contrast it with my group’s graces. (I avoid contrasting our abuses with their graces.)
- I often note the lack of social concern by others at the point where my own group is most concerned. (I do not immediately see where they show concern that is missing among us.)
- I see the lack of compassion for the poor among other religious leaders and compare it with such Christians as Mother Teresa, but I do not contrast their noblest examples with our apathetic majority.
- I frequently contrast the ideal Christianity with the real Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, but I overlook the real contradictions in my own community.
- I sometimes pit the internal consistency of Christian theology at its best against the visible contradictions of the popular or folk practices of the other faiths.
- I remember the other faith’s tragedies of history while recalling only the wisdom, art, and beauty of my own tradition.

From within the safety of one’s own cultural and religious perspective, these negative comparisons may not be noticed. But when one meets

the “other” in the other’s reality these judgments become huge obstacles to deep relationships.

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

A spiritual director’s self-awareness deepens as the director reflects on the range of cultural experiences. To live in only one culture throughout life is an impoverished life. Questions that promote self-awareness: Take a moment to remember the countries and cultures in which you have lived. What new languages have you learned, at least partially? What in these experiences has been most difficult? What has been comparatively easy? If your experience has been in one country, in what ways have you met other cultures? Other ethnic identities?

Each of us, even if we have lived in ten countries, has a “home” culture through which we view life and compare and contrast experiences in new cultures. This home culture gives us values that will impact our ministry as spiritual directors because we meet the seeker in an interpersonal relationship in which two cultural worldviews interact. No culture is complete and whole; every culture has both negative and positive values. For example, the American worldview of superiority will not be helpful in accompanying persons of other cultures because the director may unconsciously assume that this Filipina woman, German man, Kenyan woman, or Mexican man is inferior to me. On the other hand, the gentleness and respect for others characteristic of many Asian cultures will assist those directors in meeting each seeker with reverence for the person that they are.

Directors who accompany people of other cultures face many challenges. They must take time and effort to come to know something of the cultural richness that this seeker brings. Basic geographic knowledge is important. Find out where this Korean woman’s home is. Reading the literature of the culture including poetry and myths, listening to its music, attending rituals, learning what voice tone and eye contact is proper are all important. When I lived in Ghana in the 1980s and accompanied persons in directed retreats, I learned (mostly by trial and error) the importance of the differences in voice tone, space between the director and the seeker, and eye contact.

Some cultures, such as those of Africa, are much more community focused than in the West. So a seeker may bring a friend or family member to the direction session so that they will feel more comfortable. The world-

views of director and seeker may be totally different in some situations. A dream for an African seeker may be a way of ancestors communicating, while a Western director may try to use a Jungian interpretative framework to help the seeker understand relationships with those who have died. What will result is miscommunication. The director seeks to enter into the cultural worldview of the seeker by suspending the director's own presuppositions in order to think and feel with the seeker.

This is a daunting task and never complete. Two signs that real cross-cultural communication is happening are a holy silence and laughter. To be in awe together of the presence of God is gift and grace. Humor is very culturally specific, and so, when there is laughter in the direction session, the two people are on their way to deeper communication.

THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERPATHY

These experiences of profound communication between persons with significant differences are signs that interpathy is occurring on the side of the director. David W. Augsburg has given us a helpful triad of experiences which assist us in measuring how we are entering into the experience of the seekers whom we accompany.⁷ He uses the structure of "frame," or the cultural worldview, and "picture," or my own experience, to describe how the director begins to let go of a cultural worldview (or any other worldview) in order to think and feel with the seeker.

Sympathy is the spontaneous response to another's emotional experience. We might say to a friend whose mother has died, "I know just how you feel—my mother died three years ago." Of course I cannot know the other's feelings. I am projecting my own feelings on the other. I am both frame and picture, and my own feelings are an inner barometer for my response. In spiritual direction I judge the seeker in terms of my feelings, not theirs. And so the seeker may struggle because the director seems like a "wall;" his or her experience seems to be external to the director—and it actually is.

Empathy is much more helpful. Here the director continues to speak and feel from their own cultural frame, but now the seeker is the picture. I do not own the seeker's experience, but I share it and interpret it from within my own frame. This is an experience of compassionate active imagination. For example, a male African director is listening to an American woman seeker's struggle with inclusive language in the liturgy. She is

learning to be more comfortable with addressing God as “Mother.” He finds this very strange and says, “I am astonished that you feel this way. I have never thought about this before. God is male for me and that is good for me.”

Directors are challenged to go further and become persons of interpathy. In this experience one enters the other’s world so that their frame and picture become my frame and picture. The director begins to “feel with” and “think with” the other, trying to believe, feel, and think as this seeker does. In order to think as well as feel across cultural boundaries, the director may need to bracket preferred ways of knowing to enter another’s very different world of thought. This is a temporary experience and is never complete, but it can and does grow as the director lets go of certain values and attitudes and sees and feels with new eyes and new emotions.

An Irish Catholic priest listening to a Kenyan woman tell of her horrendous experiences of physical and emotional abuse from her husband is deeply challenged to cross over into her world and feel and think “woman, Kenyan, married, abused.” Interpathy is always partial and incomplete because I am always myself. But I do cross over into another’s frame and experience and return different—enriched, disturbed, humbled. It is a time of *kenosis* and self-emptying since as a director I cannot decide for the other what will happen. I am with my seekers as a temporary pilgrim in their cultural or religious experiences.

The first step in growing in interpathy is reflection on my experience as a director with people who are different from me. This growth can be facilitated through the following questions: Call to mind each person that you are accompanying now. When and with whom is there sympathy? empathy? interpathy? Reflect on examples of each of these experiences. What are they teaching you about yourself? To what in the other’s worldview, image of God, image of self and community are you not open? This describes your limits in interpathy now. When do you experience discomfort in the direction relationship? Is it due to a lack of openness in some area? Or is it because it is very different? How free are you to listen with all your heart? To walk out of your cultural frame and picture and be with the seeker in their distinct experience?

INTERPATHY AND GENDER

In the past, spiritual directors were priests, except for women who were novice directors in religious congregations and extraordinary women, such as the English Anglican director Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). This was so since spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic traditions were intertwined. It is now recognized that spiritual direction is a charism of the Spirit for the whole church and can be given to anyone—male or female, ordained, religious or lay. Generally, more women than men seek spiritual direction. Both male and female spiritual directors need to grow in interpathy as they accompany people of the other gender.

Images of God are central issues in the relationship of gender and interpathy. Directors are challenged to reflect on their predominant image of God: Is God more masculine? Feminine? Inclusively personal? Transpersonal? Impersonal? Has this been consistent or have the images changed over time? Awareness of one's own image of God gives the "picture" that will be challenged in the experience of interpathic listening. A male seeker may be more comfortable with masculine images of God while his director relates to God in creation images. A woman may be struggling to feel comfortable with female images while her director prays to God as both male and female.

There is a growing body of literature that addresses male issues in spiritual direction.⁸ Donald Bisson points out that there are "seasons" of a man's life when direction is often sought.⁹ During the "thirties transition," men seek a structure for their lives. During the midlife transition in the 40s and early 50s, this structure needs to be renegotiated in order to have more meaning and depth. Retirement focuses on aging, limits, the deaths of one's spouse and friends, and one's own death. Men are often ambivalent about organized religion and may "vote with their feet," leaving a church if they are dissatisfied. In contrast, many women stay even though the experience may be painful and oppressive. Men desire clarity and so are more at risk for fundamentalism.

Bisson lists other issues that may influence the direction experience for men. These include needing to keep up a "false front" and be on guard about revealing the truth of one's experiences, speaking of successes more than failures, and protecting oneself. Often men will speak primarily about

what they have done but will have difficulty expressing their feelings. God as father is not always a positive image for men.

A woman director accompanying a man is challenged in many ways. His culture almost always supports male experience as the norm, but the fact that he comes to a woman director shows openness and willingness to grow. What are the messages he has received about being a man from his parents? Siblings? Church? Profession? Spouse? Friends? What do I as a woman need to understand about men today in order to listen more deeply? How do I leave, even briefly, my female frame and picture and enter his masculine experience?

Men accompanying women face equal challenges. Valerie Saiving's 1960 foundational article on women's experience, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," asserted that women's cultural conditioning and formation militates against the development of a strong sense of self.¹⁰ Instead, women are socialized to forms of service and self-giving at the expense of having a self to give. It is no use telling women to suppress their pride if they do not feel that they have a self of which they are proud.

Women's sins and weaknesses are often a lack of focus, depending on others for a sense of self-worth, being eager to please others. They struggle with believing and feeling that they are unconditionally loved by God. Some women suffer from a pervasive sense of guilt that they exist. The messages about self-worth that women receive from their cultures, families, church, profession, friends, and so forth can be ambivalent at best. All the progress women have made in education and entry to predominantly male professions in the last two generations does not guarantee that this woman seeker has a strong sense of self.

Janet Ruffing offers important insights on women's growth for those who accompany them.¹¹ Women must find their own voice since so often they have been silenced in society and the church. Some men disregard what women have to say, trivialize their insights, or tell women that their ideas are not helpful but later adopt them as their own without giving credit to the woman who had the original insight.

Male directors of women are challenged to help them develop ego-strength "in order to decide how to support initial and hesitant movements toward self-possession and personal power."¹² Women directors may find their own experience "mirrored" in woman seekers as they try to enter into it with interpathy.

Desire is another crucial area of women's experience. Social conditioning has taught women to respond to others' desires and needs (family, husband, church authorities, and so forth) before recognizing and affirming their own. Our deepest desires are for union with God and this includes our sexuality. Historically, women have been taught that their holiness consists in denying their bodily desires—for food, sleep, sex, pleasure. Although our anthropology today is more positive and embodiment is recognized as God's gift to us, the remnants of this spiritual and psychological conditioning remain deeply embedded in many women. Often women do not truly know what they desire.

As a male director enters into a woman's frame and picture, he is challenged to respond in ways that are alien to his male experience. In order to do this, he must begin to understand the messages she has received from her culture and religious tradition about being a woman. Are some of these messages part of his own belief system? If so, he must listen very carefully when she speaks of painful experiences that his culture and religion have accepted as "normal" and not respond with the messages she has heard all her life. His own growth in interpathy demands that he widen his understanding about the challenges women face today.

INTERPATHY AND RELIGION

Our world is a global village not only in economic interdependence, but also in the movement of peoples of various religions across national and continental boundaries. For example, Islam is now a strong presence in Europe while Americans raised in the Christian tradition are increasingly attracted to Buddhism.

Interfaith and ecumenical experiences in spiritual direction are no longer rare. The spiritual director may accompany seekers of different religions or, if a Christian, members of other Christian churches. In some direction relationships, the spread of difference may not be very great, for example an Episcopalian director and a Lutheran seeker. But others may be extremely challenging, such as a Buddhist director and a Muslim seeker.

In order to grow in interpathy, the director in these situations is faced with important questions. First, what as believers do we share? Christians, Jews, and Muslims hold beliefs of the oneness of God. Christians of various traditions focus their commitment on Christ. Secondly, how is the seeker's

tradition different from my own experience? It may be language about God, specific beliefs, styles of prayer. What personal experience have I had with persons of these traditions? Perhaps I have Buddhist and Baptist friends in my neighborhood. Have I attended services in this tradition and read its sacred texts? What nourishes me in this tradition, and where do I find discomfort?

As I listen with interpathy to this seeker, is there language I need to learn? Perhaps this seeker speaks of "being slain in the Spirit" or of doing Zen sitting or the challenges of keeping Ramadan. In both ecumenical and interreligious direction, the director is challenged to respect the individual journey, not to proselytize, and to avoid stereotyping.

MODES OF INTERFAITH SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

John Mabry has developed three modes of interfaith direction that apply also to ecumenical direction experiences.¹³ The first he names as "wisdom sharing." Both director and seeker are secure in their faith traditions, and they share from them freely. There is no conscious desire to "convert" the other. Both recognize that there is wisdom outside of and beyond their own tradition and their experience of it. Directors can feel free to offer examples and insights from their own tradition even as they listen with growing interpathy to the wisdom of the seeker's journey.

The second mode of interfaith direction is "paradigm shifting," which is a truly an experience of interpathy. The director enters as completely as possible into the world of the seeker and thinks and feels "Methodist" or "Jewish" or "Buddhist." In order to do this, the director needs a growing experiential knowledge and experience of the seeker's tradition. This mode recognizes that the universal religious search can wear different cultural clothes and speak different religious languages. Mabry comments that this mode "demands that we remain with the directee in her or his spiritual universe, speaking in the person's native religious language, and illustrating one's points with stories and examples largely from that tradition."¹⁴

There are many challenges for directors who enter into a direction relationship of paradigm shift. Not only must these directors leave behind their usual language and frames of religious reference, but they might be tempted to assume that they know more about the seeker's religion than they actually do. And since interpathy is always partial even as it grows,

these directors may find themselves returning to their personal religious “frame and picture” when communication and understanding become difficult.

The third mode is termed “beyond traditions” and is very rare. Both director and seeker must share the conviction and experience of recognizing the unity of religious experience. The seeker may have followed several religious paths throughout life, a Christian upbringing, for example, followed by immersion in Buddhism and now study of the Hindu mystics. Or the seeker may continue to be rooted in one tradition while being enriched by many others. Thomas Merton is a good example of someone who lived the unity “beyond traditions.” Merton, a Catholic Trappist monk, called the Christian monastic tradition his home and his chief source of nourishment. But he also immersed himself in the sacred texts of all the world religions and found value and insights for himself. He and other seekers like him in this mode, with their directors, come to a “place where there is no name, but every name, no way, but every way; no distinction, yet many expressions. It is place outside of any one tradition, but informed by many.”¹⁸ The seeker is challenged to ensure that their search is not too eclectic, moving from tradition to tradition with no sense of depth and immersion in the wisdom of each. The director is called to experience interpathy on a very profound level of simultaneously entering into multiple “frames and pictures” of the seeker’s religious experience.

OTHER ISSUES IN THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

Gender and religion are not the only areas where interpathy is demanded in the spiritual direction relationship. The seeker’s experience may include differences in culture, race, ethnic background, sexual identity, economic class, and/or age cohort. All of these dimensions of human experience are formative of the seeker’s personality. The director also brings unique differences to the relationship. These multiple factors interact in different ways in the both director and seeker. Since spiritual direction is based on the conviction of faith that the Spirit guides each person as they are deeper into the mystery of God, the conversations between director and seeker are not about the theory or theology of religions, but rather the experience of the journey to wholeness and unity of the person in God.

The need to grow in interpathy in order to enter into so many dimensions of the “frame and picture” of the seeker’s experience demands that the director becomes empty, even if briefly, in order to be enriched immeasurably.

Formation programs for spiritual directors are of various kinds and lengths. They usually focus on listening skills, the many dimensions of the spiritual direction relationship, aspects of prayer and discernment, an introduction to the rich literature of spirituality in the Christian religious tradition, and include opportunities to “practice” what they are learning with other members of the course or program.

It is imperative that attention be paid to the many areas of “difference” that the director and seeker bring to the direction relationship. Each area of difference is significant in itself. The experience of three or more areas in the relationship is an opportunity for the director to grow in interpathic understanding of the seeker’s experience. To ignore or minimize these differences limits the depth of the relationship.

CONCLUSION

The self-awareness of the spiritual director in our globalized world of multiple differences is extremely crucial. This article has presented some of the ways that the director can grow in reflective self-knowledge of their own experience in order to be of greater service to those they accompany.

We are all formed by our culture, and the assumptions and values of this “home culture” remain deeply embedded in our psyche regardless of how much cross-cultural experience we have. Culture, together with gender and religion, are extremely important areas in which the director is challenged to meet the seeker in an attitude of interpathy. Entering into the seeker’s experience and “frame and picture,” even if briefly, is a gift that enriches the director in profound ways.

Spiritual direction is currently undergoing profound shifts and changes, since both directors and seekers are different from previous generations. Directors are female and male, lay and ordained, married and single, of one religion or many, and of diverse cultural experiences. Seekers range from very poor people living on the streets to persons of no religious background but with a strong sense of spiritual search. This diversity promises that the future of this ministry will unfold and develop in many ways as people continue to meet to share what is deepest within them.

NOTES

1. This is the traditional form of spiritual direction, but group experiences are possible and important. See Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) and Rose Mary Dougherty, ed., *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003). I prefer to use "seeker" rather than "directee" since it connotes the active engagement of the person who enters into the direction relationship. "Directee," while a traditional word, connotes passivity.
2. Augustine of Hippo, *Soliloquies*, trans. C. C. Starbuck, vol. 7; Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1888), 2.1.1.
3. Kieran Kavanaugh, *Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle, Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979), 1.2.11.
4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 49.
5. My cross-cultural examples are drawn from Africa since I have lived there since 1982, working in Ghana from 1982 to 1988 and South Africa since 1989.
6. Adapted from David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1986), 39.
7. *Ibid.*, 27–37.
8. See Donald Bisson, "Melting the Iceberg: Spiritual Direction for Men," *Presence* 6, no. 2 (2000): 31–37; Donald H. Gregg, "Men and Spiritual Direction: An Oxymoron or a Conundrum?" *Presence* 14, no. 4 (2008): 6–9; Robert L. Lewis, "Masculine Spirituality: A Journey through The Lord of the Rings," *Presence* 10, no. 3 (2004): 27–33; Brian E. Pearson, "Spiritual Direction and the Mysterious Needs of Men," *Presence* 14, no. 4 (2008): 10–16.
9. Bisson, "Melting the Iceberg," 34–35.
10. Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (April, 1960): 100–112.
11. Janet Ruffing, "Spiritual Direction with Women: Reclaiming and Reinterpreting Key Themes from the Spiritual Tradition." *Presence* 12, no. 3 (2006): 36–46.
12. Ruffing, "Spiritual Direction with Women," 43.
13. John Mabry, "Three Modes of Interfaith Direction," *Presence* 10, no. 2 (2004): 7–14.
14. *Ibid.*, 13.
15. *Ibid.*, 14.