

# THE HEALING WORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The goal of all spiritual care is spiritual well-being and spiritual health. Spiritual direction is important in this regard as it emphasises developing one's relationship with God which inevitably leads to greater integration of one's inner and outer life. This article will highlight the practice of spiritual direction which fosters healing and wholeness and is a legitimate approach to caring for the needs of the spirit.*

*This article focuses on how spiritual direction heals. It highlights the nature of the direction relationship as one of presence and nurture and the ministry of compassion that must be engaged in that relationship. Secondly, a by-product of direction, the inner healing of emotions is discussed, as well as selecting appropriate language to communicate hope. Thirdly, within the direction relationship identifying specific spiritual needs is an important resource to facilitate spiritual health. Finally spiritual direction in our South African context can be a healing and life-giving relationship for both the director and the directee.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

In our typically Western culture, people have become accustomed to hearing the message of the Christian gospel presented in the language of emotional and psychological healing, recovery and human wholeness. The biblical world view has always maintained a unified view of the person where God's actions relates to the whole person (1Thess. 5:23-26). God's actions, as well as the healing ministry of Christ and his apostles, relates to the whole person.

Health, therefore, ought to mean wholeness, or an integration or harmony between body, mind and spirit, between the individual and others, and between the individual, nature and God. Health also comes to mean not merely the absence of physical or mental diseases, but a maximum quality of life called wellness. It is a reaching toward the maximum integrity and integration that is possible both within and without the person. Wholeness comes not by “treating” in the narrow sense of the word, which means acting upon an organism (Allen 1994:11). Rather, it comes by healing as understood as salvation. The salvation of the scriptures means to be totally transformed. In as much as healing is total transformation, then salvation and healing are one and the same. Ultimately for Christians, a relationship with God is the foundation which causes all other harmony to become possible. The person being healed is an active participant in terms of expectancy, co-operation and self-help. Healing becomes a genuinely personal experience only when it can be understood as a call to a personally lived response.

Today’s world is increasingly fragmented and broken. There have always been impediments to spiritual growth, the various negative blocks which both can arise within a person and can come upon him or her from outside. These can range from a plethora of human evils and sins which press in upon peoples lives, and which seek to find a habitation within them, to the mere fact of human limitation. Any one of these can prevent the Christian from spiritually developing.

What is needed is a process that can lead believers through the impediments towards that wholeness which is natural to human life. This is where the work of spiritual direction is of the utmost importance because it is essentially a work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18): by removing the various obstacles which have led believers astray into alien life paths, spiritual direction can open up the natural way which leads to God.

This article highlights this particular activity to show how spiritual direction promotes healing, thereby bringing on spiritual and emotion well-being in believers. Spiritual direction should not be regarded as unique because the theory is expressed theologically. On the contrary, the defining of what spiritual direction is and how it heals involves explaining the interrelationship between the director and the directee, the direction process and how this process can bring about healing. In particular, spiritual direction presupposes that di-

rectors have a pastoral identity, regard direction as a ministry of pastoral care and interpret this through theological reflection.

## 2 WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

Spiritual direction is also known as spiritual guidance, spiritual friendship and spiritual companionship. Definitions span the gamut from “spiritual direction is the application of theology to life of prayer” (Thornton 1984:1) to “spiritual direction, or the cure of the souls, is a seeking after the leasing of the Holy Spirit in a given psychological and spiritual situation” (Leech 1994:34).

Arguably the most quoted modern definition of spiritual direction is provided by the Jesuit tradition represented by William A Barry and William J Connolly (1982:8) as:

...help given by one Christian to another which enables the person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God and to live out the consequences of the relationship.

This definition is important because of both its simplicity and breadth. Spiritual direction here is grounded in the experiences associated with the development of an intimate relationship with God. They expand on this theme by casting spiritual direction as “an interpersonal process in which two people work together toward the goal of a deeper, more explicitly intimate and mutual relationship with God” (Barry & Connolly 1982:155).

Such sharing and listening demand much from both persons involved in the direction dialogue. Trust, openness, confidence, awareness and sensitivity to the ways of the Spirit in one’s heart allow the person to reveal the depths of the mystery of God in his or her life. The director or companion waits in readiness to receive this intimate revelation, to respond in wisdom, discernment and love to what has been shared in order that both may see more clearly the direction in which the Spirit is leading (Guenther 1992:23).

Spiritual direction typically occurs in the context of prayer, and a priority is placed on discernment of spiritual experiences. It focuses on the maintenance and development of spiritual health and well-

being, and assumes that the person is already whole, but has not yet fully embraced this truth for themselves (Sperry 2002:10).

To be a Christian is to be on a journey and there is a progression of spiritual growth. David Benner (2002) discusses spiritual guidance in terms of accompaniment on a voyage of becoming. Martin Thornton views this transformation as covenant-encounter-incorporation (1984:102-4). There is a relational movement as the directee moves from merely obeying orders (covenant) to getting personally acquainted (encounter) to a relationship of some measurable depth (incorporation). Tilden Edwards has developed a similar approach to spiritual direction based on a pattern of growth that stresses the personal-existential dimension of progress (1980:251). This pattern is called “cleansing, aligning and resting.” The whole process is called the “healing process.” Spiritual direction is undertaken in this broad framework of growth.

As the process of spiritual direction reaches fruition several things become evident: (a) the person begins to awaken to her true identity with God’s grace, dethrones the false self; (b) conversation and communion with God increase and deepen into a sense of spiritual union; (c) the various dimensions of the person become united by the presence and love of the indwelling Christ.

### **3 THE HEALING WORK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

Since the ancient church, spiritual direction has always been an effort to *heal* the person and the traditional literature is replete with titles which utilise medical terminology (Foster 1988:16). This usage was already firmly rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, where healing was seen occurring through the “sage” who guided the person into the inner life. Thus Socrates saw himself as a “soul healer” (Foster 1988:17). St Anthony of Egypt, the father of monasticism says, “The fathers of old went into the desert, and when they were made whole, they became physicians, and returning again they made others whole; therefore it is said, ‘Physician, heal thyself’”(Waddell 1972:147).

The goal of spiritual direction has always been the same as that of the Gospel itself: to lead individuals deeper and deeper into the struggle for the Christian life towards wholeness and healing. Spiritual direction is more the province of persons who seek *coherence* and *communion*, a renewed meaning in their lives and a deepening

relationship with the Source of their being. The emphasis is on growth motivation rather than deficiency motivation and goes beyond functional living to “optimal Christian living”(Benner 2002:7). Tilden Edwards argues that therapy and counselling cannot answer the needs of the spirit concerning meaning and purpose for which the adult longs. But spiritual direction, in the context of relationship, community, conversion and faith can help the adult with those specific dimensions of their spiritual journey (Edwards 1980:56).

Spiritual direction has always included those elements relative to both the daily struggle for wholeness and healing and to a proper ongoing prayer life. Here it should be emphasised that spiritual direction has never concerned itself with the person’s prayer life without also dealing with the thoughts and actions (somatic, psychological, sociological, etc.) of his or her everyday life. It is the person’s experience as a whole which becomes the very content of dialogue with the director.

When considering healing some people think of God as an external Being who somehow penetrates the individual with healing power (Allen 1994:6). There is a strong sense of dependency in this concept. Rather, God should be thought of as already present with any process in which self-revelation, the search for the truth about the self, or genuine growth toward love and faith are experienced. As the person becomes more aware of his inner strengths he understands that he is using resources that he did not create, that he finds them within. They are part of God’s creation in the nature of humankind; they are also a means of grace and healing. The task of the spiritual director is that of helping persons discover the healing forces that God has placed within the individual and then to symbolise that experience in ways that are meaningful to him or her. The spiritual director is aware that he or she is dealing with the depths of a person. He or she is participating in an experience of profound religious significance (Gratton 2000:162).

Spiritual direction is also attentive to one of the central concerns of Christianity: the dynamic of change through conversion, the radical transformation of the person in Christ. Conversion or *metanoia* is never a matter of an exclusively cognitive activity, a changing from one belief system to another. Rather, it is relational, personal surrender to a personal, living God. This *metanoia* is understood in the context of the person’s whole life and not restricted to a perceived exclusive “spiritual” realm.

This article highlights the healing work of spiritual direction mediated in one of the following ways: a healing relationship and the ministry of compassion that must be engaged in that relationship, the healing of emotions that opens the path to spiritual growth, selecting appropriate language to provide hope and identifying spiritual needs as a strong resource for spiritual care.

### **3.1 The healing relationship**

One of the most important things the director can bring to the directee's healing journey is that of relationship. Relationship is like the container and the soil in which the seed is planted so that it may grow into a healthy plant. The direction relationship itself is healing as it expresses a personal relationship of genuine understanding. Seeking truth has to do with entering into a relationship, a covenant with others in which individuals might learn together in an environment of trust and intimacy. The relationship promotes healing by creating a context or atmosphere of nurture and support within the dialogue.

A self-conscious and intentional responsibility of the spiritual director is the creation of this atmosphere in which the directee knows that it is safe to explore, doubt and wonder. Every conversation is a complex, fluid interplay of what the directee says and does and who and how he or she is. Conversing-companionship represents this interplay among words, actions and character. Arnold Goldberg (1990:158) observes that "the ability to connect has become more important than the ability to know." Henri Nouwen (1974:33-34) notes the importance of companionship:

The word care finds its roots in the Gothic *Kara* which means to lament. The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate no-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

In this healing relationship it is less important that a "cure" be found, that an ending point be reached, than that "care" be given and a ministry of compassion be engaged.

The director's use of active listening and empathy fosters an atmosphere in which the directee could share prayer with the director and discuss his or her relationship with God, including his or her doubts and fears, spiritual practices and life concerns.

A good direction relationship when dealing with the healing of emotions creates an environment that through *its very nature and quality* counteracts these experiences and teaches other, more helpful ones (Kinsler 1992:166).

Healing requires a synthesis of patience which encompasses endurance and humility, and of hope in the Lordship of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Dallas Willard (2002) posits six basic and inseparable aspects in human life: thought, feeling, choice, body, social context and soul to describe spiritual formation as allowing the word and Spirit to transform each component of the person to Christlikeness. Jacques Pasquier claims that there are three theological elements necessary in any healing relationship, and which are particularly applicable to the caring aspect of this process. These are listening, affirming and freeing (Pasquier 1976:209).

The first step in the healing process is when the pain is truly perceived. Pasquier declares: "This is what listening is all about" (1976:209). The spiritual director listens in such a way as to appreciate and perceive the real content of what is being said – the pain behind the words, the fear behind the aggression, the insecurity behind the rigidity. In order to convey to the directee the feeling of acceptance which can lead to the directee's own self-acceptance, the director first listens without judging, evaluating, or minimising what is said. The director should drop his or her self-image as an all-knowing "messiah" and like his or her suffering directee, accept that sometimes it is in powerlessness that God's healing power is made known (Leech 1994:57).

The second element in caring is affirmation. "To affirm is to say 'yes' to whom the person is: to recognize that there is in each person the power of self-reconciliation, of growth, of becoming whole again." (Kinsler 1992:165). Often the process of healing becomes activated only after the person finds affirmation by the external "other" (in this case the spiritual director) but then he or she is able to let the true inner person express with the full activity of the conscience. The spiritual director believes that with proper care, the directee will find the power within to make the correct choices, and thus become a co-creator with the God in whose image he or she is shaped.

The third element is freedom which in spiritual direction is viewed as a process rather than a final product. It is a continual unfolding and growth. When Jesus forgives and heals, it is also the beginning of a process: "Go and sin no more" (John 8.11, Luke 7.50). Freedom is realised in forgiveness which is possible only when one has freely decided to be vulnerable to God's continuing self-revelation. When a person knows that God has forgiven him, he then can forgive himself. This means that one accepts into oneself, internalises and fully receives God's forgiveness.

These elements of listening, affirming and freeing are utilised by the spiritual director in the healing relationship in such a way as to help the directee make correct choices and not take away the person's God-given freedom of choice. The person must be made to accept accountability for his or her freedom and thus the responsibility for growing towards God.

### **3.2 Healing of emotions**

Spiritual direction is not indifferent to emotional difficulties or developmental arrests in the person. Spiritual direction at times can be crisis-centred. In spiritual direction these issues are seen as intimately related to the process of integration by the spiritually orientated adult.

In spiritual direction attention is given to the interplay of the spiritual and psychological progress (Studzinski 1985:7), addressing three areas of the inter-relationship: (1) self-discovery is necessary for emotional maturity; (2) attention to the physical body is important for spiritual and psychological health; (3) there is a need to "...to travel the way of the unconscious in order to recover the awareness of God" (Leech 1994:106).

As the individual is led to a deeper communion with God, there is always a focus on what is operational *within* him or her, the perceptions of the heart and mind and *between* him or her, God and other, i.e. behavioural concerns. It is through shared interpretation – a "life-hermeneutic" – of the individual's experiences that the spiritual director has always aimed at awakening in individuals the truth regarding their motivations and predicaments whether the truth is positive or negative, constructive or destructive (Allen 1994:5). If truth is denied, no healing can occur.

One of the by-products of the spiritual direction relationship is the discovery of the true self that lies under all the hurts and fears,



under all the defences against hurt and pain (Studzinski 1985:9). Agonizing memories which distort behaviour and broken relationships are open to healing. These past and present hurts which occur time after time include among others, rejection in all its forms, crisis of self, problems with self esteem, feelings of restlessness, search for meaning and anger and guilt, both guilt for actual sins and the kind of neurotic guilt which has power but little basis in past actions.

The spiritual director helps in discerning whether motives correspond to the truth and grace of God. This is what it means to be truly human: not to pretend to be who we are not, but rather be a person who has been stripped of all false selves and has become fully human. This stripping away of the false self is painful, especially the realisation of the lie one is living (Studzinski 1985:13). But to be in touch with the authentic self is to find meaning for one's life and also to be freed to love.

It is part of the good director to be able to discern when the pain and difficulty which a person is experiencing lie within their competence and are properly open to healing through spiritual direction and when the right course is to ask for a more intense therapy.

True inner healing implies change at both psychological and spiritual levels. When hurts and fears are put aside, individuals discover the self that is connected to God. Working through emotional issues frees people to focus on their spiritual development; letting God into their lives helps soothe the pain of their suffering and allows them to grow emotionally and psychologically into the people they were meant to be. Matthew Linn, Shiela Fabricant and Dennis Linn (Bilich, Bonfiglio & Carlson 2000:43) have expressed similar sentiments:

God has built into us patterns of emotional development, stages which we go through in developing as a healthy mature person. Hurts can interrupt this process and cause us to remain stuck in development. The grace of healing builds upon a natural process of growth, and the effect of prayer is to mobilize and strengthen this process

### **3.3 Metaphorical language**

Experience is an avenue by which God enters human life to effect restoration, reconciliation and growth. Healing is the heart of spiri-

tual direction and so must take advantage of all the tools available. The therapeutic and theological can be put together in a united praxis by also selecting appropriate language in spiritual direction. Jesus made use of illustrations, examples and narratives in talking to people, but his primary means of conveying a lesson was the parable. Metaphor provides a most natural form of “carrying over” crucial lessons to directees and providing a common interface for theology and therapy. As Sally McFaggue (1988:15) defines it:

Most simply a metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending “this” is “that” because we do not know how to think or talk about “this” and so we use “that” as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.

When she goes on to point that “as a form of religious language, the parables, a metaphorical form of language in the New Testament, are very different from other symbolic sacramental language,” she offers a valuable insight into how language can serve the endeavour of healing (McFaggue 1988:14). Morgan states that “metaphorical language “is a way in which we can articulate an experience and comprehension of ourselves, others and God” (1989:99).

Metaphors reveal and offer the potential to re-interpret our ways of being and acting in the world and can be put to use in the course of healing. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan provides a linkage between “everyday, normal experiences” which directees bring into the dialogue of spiritual direction and can point to the healing power of the Gospel. Thus there are two lessons about the language of metaphor which the spiritual director uses (Allen 1994 82-83). First, he or she encourages a person to *be* and *act* metaphorically as he or she looks back over the events of a lifetime. The director can introduce various stories and parables from scripture, general literature, even his or her own life, for the directee to meditate upon. These are carefully selected to illustrate that the directee is not alone, that the present experience has already occurred, and that at least one example exists of a person he or she can admire having walked through a similar valley in his or her own life. Second, since

everyone has been touched positively or negatively by past relationships, the directee is led to understand the influences and impact of individuals from his own past. It is important to realise that these relationships do not remain buried in the past; they continue to influence and press in on the directee's judgments long afterward, and the director utilises these experiences to help promote present healing by learning to "listen" to metaphorical memories.

Every mundane experience can thus provide the forum for healing from God. The language need not be "religious" or "spiritual" per se. Many of Christ's parables demonstrate this truth; they speak of simple experiences which are at once therapeutic and theological.

### **3.4 Addressing spiritual needs**

Working with spiritual needs in spiritual direction provides a strong resource for spiritual care. This is an ideal situation where spiritual director and directee can become aware of the directee's spiritual needs as they discern how God is leading the directee. In this way spiritual direction can be a key tool in spiritual well-being.

Human beings are composed of a body, mind and spirit and they have needs in all three areas. To become a whole person, the spirit itself has needs which are centred on religious beliefs, practices and rituals. In the first edition of the book *Basic types of pastoral counseling*, Clinebell (1966:51) lists four basic needs:

1. to find meaning in life
2. to have a sense of the transcendence
3. to relate healthily to God, other people and nature
4. to experience inner awareness, creativity and freedom

These four spiritual needs inform our personalities and persons. Added to these needs are the needs to give and receive love and the need for forgiveness and hope (Topper 2003:14-16). These spiritual needs deepen and unify the psychological perspective of the person in that they bring completion to psychological needs and in this process integrate and complete them. For example, love brings integration and more completion to psychological self-esteem and happiness.

To further clarify, psychological needs bring individual health to the person in her or his mind or psyche, for example self-awareness, expressions of feelings, or findings one's identity. Spiritual needs are

those that transcend the material nature of the person (Fitchett 1993:35). They enable the person to attain a certain state of being that reflects peace and expansiveness.

In spiritual direction, directees will not state that they have a need for meaning, for connection or for hope and forgiveness. By observing a directee's behaviour and listening to what lies beneath his or her words the spiritual director can identify spiritual needs and can become a more effective care-giver. For example, a directee may feel dejected for a number of days without knowing why. It may be because he or she is afraid of failing in a work project. Once the director labels the deeper feeling as "fear," the directee can specifically name or label this deeper feeling that is hidden and can make progress. The spiritual director can now facilitate hope through drawing upon the religious system of the directee or simply through a strong listening presence to the directee's sadness and worries.

Even though the spiritual direction relationship is a more reserved, intuitive and subjective process, this does not prevent the director from discerning and pointing out issues that are obstacles in a person's spiritual growth and formation. The reality is that people do not progress through life problems until they know what is happening to them by naming it.

Faith communities acknowledge a strong healing process in the confession of sin. Naming the sin begins the process of healing. So in spiritual direction, there is great value in naming or at least becoming aware of specific spiritual needs in the person requiring direction as it points to where people are spiritually. From these needs the director can identify the areas or points to which people might grow spiritually. This begins a healing process.

#### **4 SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR OUR CONTEXT**

Many in the Christian world have recently awakened to the truth that wearing the label, "Christian," is not synonymous with experiencing the intimate, moment-by-moment, relationship with God that souls were designed to enjoy, and have begun to place hope in the practice of spiritual direction as a methodology for the way to more abundant living. Across denominational barriers, there seems to be a tidal wave of interest in learning how to experience intimate friendship with God and in guides, directors and spiritual friends who are pointing out what is so easily missed (Ruffing 2000:10).

To understand the process of Christian spiritual formation does not seem difficult. What is difficult to understand, however, is why it is so easy to miss experiencing the ocean of Divine love for all the water. Merton (1960:12) provides indirect hope by reminding that it has not always been this way. Spiritual direction was originally basic and normal to church life.

The individual member of the community was 'formed' or 'guided' by his participation in the life of the community, and such instruction as was needed was given first of all by the bishops and the presbyters, and then through informal admonitions by one's parent's spouse, friends and fellow Christians.

If authentic transformation, becoming like Christ, was once part of normal Christian living, what happened? If "holiness" for John Wesley meant being consumed by and transformed by the love of God, how did that term ever come to connote sin management? It seems that transformation of life and character is *no* part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faithful and eternal living (Willard 1998:41).

Yielding to authentic transformation is difficult because it is easy to choose to be God and consequently to live out of a false identity. Having let go of God, false attachments – what we have, do and control – become seductive and the illusion of our divinity becomes strong. Christian spiritual formation involves awakening from the dream that we are God and remembering our true identity in Christ and then saying "yes" to the pain associated with the death of our false self.

For our wounded South African context spiritual direction is particularly helpful to spiritual transformation and healing. We still have a long way to go in building community. A paradigm of spiritual direction could make a real difference to the spiritual building up of the nation. It is a unique opportunity for people of different cultures to be together in meaningful ways by individual and group direction and come to know and understand one another in a manner and to a degree that is not provided by any other situation.

Spiritual direction allows directees to situate themselves within their own given reality. Each directee comes from a unique background that was influenced by their family, education and the type of society within which they grew up in. God speaks through the scrip-

tures and can equally speak through the directee's given reality. Directors take this reality and experience seriously. In so doing, they teach directees to respect their own experience and try to find God and what God is saying in it all. In this way the directee begins to experience God as relevant and alive.

What is called for on the part of the director is "interpathy" which involves the letting go of one's framework of thoughts and values and the willingness to enter into that of the other, while still retaining the ability to step back and critique values and thought patterns that are not in accordance with the Gospel (Augsburger 1986:29). As Patricia Fresen suggests in "Drinking from our own wells: cross-cultural Christian spiritual direction in the new South Africa" there is an opening of the self to accept the other and to offer the other one's presence, ear and heart (in Kourie & Kretzschmar 2000:178). This is a powerful experience for both people and is possibly the most profound level at which cross-cultural separateness and woundedness can begin to heal.

The different cultures have a great deal to offer one another. Traditional Western culture which is so individualistic and private has much to learn from the African spirit of community. And Africans can draw on the rich Western tradition of spiritual accompaniment as a support to a vibrant spiritual life.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article showed that the work of spiritual direction is healing by allowing the directee to experience being faithfully companioned in a nurturing relationship. Healing is experienced through a concern to understand the perspective of the directee through identifying emotional blockages and deeper spiritual needs and a willingness to further the quality of life of that person, using appropriate conversation and language that communicates hope. The article concluded with the healing role of spiritual direction in the South African context.

For the directee healing is occasioned by experiencing a safe environment where he or she gains a deepened appreciation of limits, courage to face an open future and living into and through new patterns of more connection with God, self and others. This inevitably leads to greater integration of the person's inner and outer life and promotes spiritual well-being.

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