

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Attending to the Holy

PERHAPS LIKE MOST PERSONS engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction, I never tire of contemplating its mystery. What is it that we do? We are neither pastoral counsellors nor psychotherapists, and the quality of friendship that we offer is distinctly different from even the warmest and most deeply committed 'ordinary' friendship.

Increasingly I am persuaded that, by our prayerful presence and careful listening, we attend to the holy and – more importantly – help those who have come to us to do likewise and thereby grow in their awareness of the experience of God in their lives. This is enough: that we attend to the holy.

Two little words, rich with meaning and unplumbed depths, as familiar little words often are – *attend* and *holy*. I would like to play with them for a bit, explore them, tease out their meaning in this special context of direction. And I would begin with the more difficult – at least at first glance – of the two. I marvel at my own temerity in presumably explaining, exegeting, somehow dealing rationally with THE HOLY. The old academic in me thinks, 'Surely everything I say should be footnoted, and then the footnotes should have footnotes'. In this anxiety, I am succumbing to the very human tendency to seek control, to get a handle on the holy (and by implication on God), and then to present the reader with a neat package.

But such an approach offers false security, deadening the liveliness of encounter. So instead, I shall write from my own experience of doing spiritual direction, of working and praying both as director and as directee, and from my experience as director of the Center for Christian Spirituality at the General Theological Seminary, where we know that we cannot teach people to be spiritual directors, but where we can help them claim and deepen their gifts for that ministry. My words will be personal (and hence limited by my own experience), honest (I hope), and practical. I expect to ask more questions than I answer, perhaps push out the boundaries a bit so that some new perspectives can be enjoyed.

I offer several basic assumptions about the place of the holy in spiritual direction. First and perhaps most important is acceptance of the possibility of experiencing the holy, and that recognition and articulation of a 'God-experience' is not to be dismissed as pathological, trivial or impossible. This may seem obvious, but we must remember that ours is a culture (on both sides of the Atlantic, whatever our other differences) where the numinous is regarded with suspicion, if not distaste. To speak of the holy, perhaps even to recognize its existence, is to be out of step with the secular society.

A second basic assumption is that people seek spiritual guidance to find a sounding-board for their experience of God. The raw material of the conversation may overlap with that of pastoral counselling or psychotherapy – but at the heart of it is the clear purpose of spiritual direction: to explore where God is in the life of that person. This must be at the heart of our work; otherwise we are doing something else, not spiritual direction.

My third basic assumption is that it is very difficult to talk about the holy. Ultimately, there are no words: Rudolf Otto speaks of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The holy is beyond logic, beyond rational explanation. In its presence, we are aware, indeed overwhelmed by our own nothingness.

Our experience of God is the most intimate possible topic. In the late twentieth-century industrialized West, we have come to talk easily of sex and are getting somewhat better at speaking of death. But – perhaps rightly – we approach the holy tentatively in our conversation, even in the safety of the spiritual-direction relationship. We can use liturgical and devotional language as a crutch or screen. I suspect all spiritual directors have witnessed the phenomenon of the facile use of language as a means of avoiding the depths of experience. To be nakedly ourselves in the presence of the holy, to try to give voice to that experience in conversation with another, and then to live into the profound questions raised thereby is *hard* work. Nevertheless, it is the work of spiritual direction.

And it is a counter-cultural work. It comes as no surprise when students of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tell us that the majority of us value logic over affect and sensing over intuition. In our worship of technology, we live in the mistaken and ultimately disappointing belief that we can understand and control *anything* if we can just name, describe and thereby limit it. We are uncomfortable with the ‘non-factual’ – whatever is not rationally explainable is dismissed. Interestingly, the fruits of this dismissal of and discomfort with the holy can be found in our secular culture’s perverse fascination with the unholy, as witnessed by the popularity of Stephen King’s novels, the burgeoning genre of horror movies, and fascination with the occult.

Yet the holy is a part of life. An essential learning from Benedictine spirituality (although it is by no means exclusive to the Benedictines) is the understanding that God is not ‘out there’ or ‘up there’, but present in the everydayness of our lives. Consequently, in spiritual direction, we acknowledge a ‘God-component’ in all human experience. (This may, of course, be experienced negatively: God is *not* there, or at least not *perceived* to be there.) The wise fathers and mothers of the fourth- and fifth-century desert knew this, when they said: ‘Go to your cell, and your cell will teach you everything’. In our own century, Gandhi voiced much the same idea as Abba Moses, while showing greater recognition of the sanctity of human interconnection: ‘If you don’t find God in the very next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further’.

There is a misperception among directees (and others!) that the experience of God is reserved for identified mystics, along with the tacit understanding that

the only good mystics are dead mystics. People on fire with the experience of God have a hard time in our society – and all too often in the Church. As spiritual friends and guides, we can nurture even the tiniest flame in the most ‘ordinary’ of our directees. In offering hospitality, we can welcome those who might be frightened or put off by traditional terminology, who might be anxious that they do not quite qualify. When I first heard the words ‘spiritual direction’, I assumed that they had little to do with me, that this was something for people of exceptional holiness – in other words, for mystics. Now I have decided that we can all be mystics, or at least that we all have the capacity for attentiveness to the God-component in our human experience.

We encounter the further misconception that the experience of God must be some kind of state of altered consciousness or out-of-body experience. Certainly, it *might* be, but I am wary of those who seek adventure for adventure’s sake, spiritual highs instead of chemical highs. Most of us – and the people with whom we work in spiritual guidance – are blessedly ordinary folk.

Parenthetically, I must note that I am wary of self-proclaimed mystics. It is rather like identifying yourself as having a good sense of humour: it is usually better to wait for someone else to point out that quality. Fortunately, I do not meet many. I *do* encounter the spiritually immature or perhaps anxious, those who try to live in a spiritualized denial of the holiness of the everyday. (I recall a woman who apologized for her inability to talk about ‘anything spiritual’ – her mother had just died, and she was filled with grief.) Occasionally encountered, too, are the magical thinkers. They may be afraid to want *anything* for fear that it is not God’s will and, conversely, assured that *any* bit of goodness is a sign of God’s intervention into the natural order. Theirs is a distorted kind of pride, masked in a vocabulary of great humility and surrender to God. Only rarely do I meet the truly disordered.

It is my usual experience that most people seeking spiritual direction are yearning for God and have already experienced the holy, even though they may not be aware of this, may minimize or dismiss it, and certainly not articulate it clearly. Commonly they are reluctant to talk about their experience of the holy (or seeming lack thereof). They fear being labelled ‘crazy’ or being laughed at or shamed. They do not trust themselves to articulate something so delicate, something not subject to our culture’s standards of classification, naming and measurement. And perhaps they fail to recognize their encounter with the holy for what it really is. Our expectations are shaped by our context, especially our ‘religious’ framework and vocabulary. We expect to meet God in church or at the brink of the Grand Canyon, but not in the shower or the supermarket.

All this brings me to the second important word – *attending*, with its connotations of paying attention, waiting, and simply being present. It offers a succinct definition of our work: as spiritual directors, we attend – and we help those who come to us also to attend, to be attentive.

Paying attention is hard work, especially when we are flooded with stimuli. But even a cursory search of our memories (or a glance at a concordance) reminds us how often we are adjured in scripture to do just that – to hark,

hearken, behold, see, look, listen and watch! A wise Benedictine, the Abbot of St Benoit-sur-Loire, has noted, 'We're likely to pass God by without even noticing him'. It is safe to assume that God's voice can be heard when we pay attention and that, conversely, we can tune God out by failing to do so.

As spiritual directors, we pay attention. This (along with our prayers) is perhaps the greatest gift we can bring to those who turn to us. It is a tragic fact of our times that being heard, attended to, is a rare experience. In the United States, with psychotherapy as a growth industry, we *buy* attention.

In addition to paying attention ourselves, we foster the gift of attentiveness in the directee. I stress again: many come to us with a tendency to discount their own experience, to minimize the ordinary because they cannot perceive the holy in their own lives. Here we can function as gentle guides – look at this! have you noticed that? did you hear what you just said? Thus we can help our directees toward awareness of the God-component, the bits of holiness embedded in everydayness. We can help them toward awareness of and the possible encounter with the holy in unlikely places and circumstances. We can nurture openness to the God of surprises. Scripture provides us with a list of resources.

In our age of psychological awareness, it is easy to dismiss *dreams* or at least to eradicate the holy from them by over-interpretation. Or we might, with Ebenezer Scrooge, find a physiological explanation – like Marley's ghost our dreams might be blamed on bad digestion. But scripture makes it clear that God uses dreams, those manifestations of what is unexplored and uncharted in our unconscious. The prophets and both Josephs did not share our culture's bias toward the logical, quantifiable, what can be analysed.

We can encourage our directees to recognize their God-dreams and to be attentive to symbols, stories and images. We can encourage them to befriend their dreams, to play and pray with them, never dismissing the absurd, the comic, or the 'disrespectful'. Journaling is always helpful for those who do not find writing a burden or constraint. As spiritual directors, we need not be professionals with specialized training in dreams; indeed, a certain *naïveté* may be an advantage.

We can also help our directees watch for *angels*. Here again there are scriptural precedents – Abraham and the three strangers by the oaks of Mamre, Jacob in his wrestling match, the annunciation, the women at the empty tomb in all four Gospel accounts. The big question for the spiritual director, of course, is how to recognize the angels. They are easy to identify in works of art, stained glass windows and Christmas cards. But how many do we miss seeing? In attending to the holy, we are well advised to remember the injunction in the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'. Who knows when and where angels might turn up? I watch for them on the city streets and in the subway nagged by the suspicion that they disguise themselves and mingle with the beggars and the homeless. With our directees, we can raise and keep raising the questions: what annunciations have you missed? have you spotted any angels lately?

It is only a short step from angels to *prophets*, who as a group are rarely comfortable, attractive people. We like them when they are castigating other people but reject them when they threaten our complacency. When they are addressing *us*, they make us angry, or at least we wish they would go away. It is their very nature to make us uneasy, not because they foretell the future – they are not fortune-tellers – but because they insist that we look clearly at the present, at where and how we are right now. So we help our directees attend to the holy when we ask: who are the prophets in your life? What are the voices you are avoiding? What are you working hard not to hear?

We can also help them listen to God in *others*. In the story of the conversion of Saul (Acts 9) he is struck down and blinded, but the encounter with Christ is completed only when he is led to Ananias. Only then, in the company of another, does he regain his sight, literally and spiritually. The message of the gospel is one of community: relationship with Christ demands also relationship with other persons. This importance of community is made especially clear in the promise of Matthew 18:20, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. Attending to the holy is never a private adventure. This is an area for caution and concern for the spiritual director. When I suspect isolation or (worse) contempt for others, I inquire about family, friends and community. It is all too easy to love humanity in the abstract, especially groups that are geographically distant, while avoiding the intimacy of real engagement.

There can be surprises here when we attend to the holy in others. Christ can be found in unexpected places among the wrong kind of people. It is good to ask the directee: where is Christ mirrored for you in others? where are you mirroring Christ for them?

Scripture also gives us the model of attending to God in *prayer*, where all too often we are more likely to talk than to listen. Yet the Psalmist shows us that sometimes we hear God in the very act of framing our petitions, confessions and complaints. We can encourage our directees toward spontaneity in prayer and boldness in discovering their own imagery and metaphor. God need not *always* resemble the powerful male figure on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Directees may be timid about breaking out of accustomed, officially sanctioned, 'churchy' patterns of imagining God and talking about their perceptions.

Even as we encourage them toward listening in their prayer, we can help them attend to the holy in *silence and solitude*. Our western society values action, achievement and productivity. We can get so busy that we cannot hear God, chiefly because we are avoiding listening. Scripture gives us the example of going apart, slowing down, becoming quiet – Elijah and the still small voice, Jesus in the solitude of the desert after his baptism, the numerous other times when he 'goes apart' to pray. Do our directees build silence – literal and interior – into their lives? Do we set a good example? (I am convinced that we communicate infinitely more by our ways of being than by any wise words we might offer.)

Finally, we must not overlook (even though we might want to) the importance of attending to the holy in times of seeming abandonment and dereliction.

Scripture offers us the example of Jesus in the garden, then on the cross. These are times when God seems not to be listening, hence not speaking to us. For the spiritual director, this is a different kind of attending – this is the attending of being present, of ‘simply’ waiting. Attentive waiting is lonely work. It cannot be hurried. It rarely makes sense. However much we might want to, we know that as spiritual directors, our task is not to rescue or to fix. But we can offer ourselves as prayerful companions in the waiting.

In practical terms, whatever the spiritual maturity and the particular situation of the directee, we can always offer a safe and welcoming space – safe from interruptions and distractions, but more importantly, safe because the directee knows that he will be listened to critically, i.e. attentively, but not judgementally. It should be safe to speak of anything, to be open about doubts and ambiguity. Spiritual direction is the place for free and unedited discourse. The sense of safety may be enhanced if the director shares *judiciously* from her own experience: it can be remarkably reassuring for the directee to know that his experience of the holy (positive or negative) is not unique.

The director can encourage attentiveness by asking the right questions, questions that open doors, that shed light, that invite risk. And she can also encourage attentiveness by interpretations, offered rather than imposed, and – like the questions – invitations to growth, openness and risk. The careful interpretations of the spiritual director are *not* labels, nor are they reductionist eradication of the mysterious. The holy often comes to us in darkness and in silence and melts away in glaring, shadowless light.

The director knows what works against attentiveness and the patient waiting of attending. Is the room used for direction quiet and free from interruptions (ringing phones, knocks on doors, people walking through)? More importantly, is the director able to quiet his own (contagious) inner noise? Comfort with silence is part of attentive attending. Besides some intentional quiet at the beginning of the session and possibly at its end, I have learned to be comfortable with gaps in the conversation and to let silence fall in the midst of animated discourse. (The discourse of spiritual direction differs markedly from that of a dinner party!) There is no need to fill all the gaps – indeed, the holy can lurk in those very gaps.

Those offering guidance must have their own faith communities and their own spiritual discipline. Most importantly, they must have their own directors. They must attend to the holy in their own lives. This seems self-evident, even simplistic, but it is easy to neglect. One hears, ‘I have my superior, my peer group, my psychotherapist. Surely that is enough’. It is not. Unless we too are open to God and attend to the holy, we have failed in our responsibility toward those who turn to us in trust.

We need also to retain our appreciation of the ordinary, our willingness to be surprised, our joy in the Great Adventure.

We need to sit loose, expect the unexpected, and perhaps encourage a bit of creative heresy.

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