

A TURBULENT JOURNEY IN TURBULENT TIMES

Freedom, Companionship and Fullness of Life

Ann Wigley and Tshifhiwa Munzhedzi

ALL CREATION IS GROANING in one great act of giving birth. Africa is not unique in this, but because we live here, we hear the groaning day and night when we walk the streets, read the papers, listen to the radio or listen to people's stories. We hear the groaning and we hear the longing for better days. Jesus' words 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10) respond to this longing and groaning that is being experienced. Life is a gift of love from God, a gift freely given, and is supposed to be received freely and treasured as such. It is an expression of God's continuous presence in our lives and God's generosity towards all of creation. God gives us all that we need to have and to live life abundantly. However, our experience of reality shows that life is not always seen and enjoyed as such. We know that many people do not live life to the full; they do not have the opportunity to experience life abundantly; life is often felt to be a drag, to be endured and suffered through. Millions of people on the African continent are going through a time of intense suffering through violence and fear, through poverty and illness, through wars and displacement. All the violence, the xenophobia, the genocides, the abuse of women and children is in direct opposition to the essence of African spirituality which regards all people and all things as sacred.

Human beings are constantly finding ways to return to the state of experiencing God's love after being damaged by one painful experience after another, and spiritual accompaniment is one way of finding this inner healing and forgiveness. The experience of Job is an example of a long journey from turbulence to inner peace. He lived through what Meister Eckhart speaks of when he says:

Every person, everything will direct you to God.

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Take your grasp from whatever is not of God, and there will be a new birth of awareness in you.

It is when we let go of all that we break through into the all of God.¹

The Nature of Spiritual Direction as We Understand It

Thomas Merton says of spiritual direction:

... direction is, in reality, nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey our real Director—the Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our soul.²

Companionship ... through which the Holy Spirit shines

Spiritual direction is all about having a human companion who helps us to discover the true companion, who is God, in our journey of life. Spiritual direction means companionship with another person or group of people, through which the Holy Spirit shines with wisdom, encouragement and discernment. This companionship could be of a professional nature, with a trained, supervised, and perhaps even certified, spiritual director; or it could be informal, with the spiritual director being some wise person in the community or someone known by the directee who accompanies and guides that person in the ways of God and journeys with him or her. It can also happen within a group, either one offering peer accompaniment or led by someone with more experience. We prefer to talk about spiritual *accompaniment* rather than *direction*, as this includes all these forms and avoids the impression that the director is in charge of the process. The model of guru and disciple is used—and useful—in some cultures, but it is not what we are advocating or talking about here.

It is an ancient custom in many tribes in Africa to seek help for one's life's journey from an elder or a wise member of the community. Often this is simply seeking advice or conflict resolution. Just as often the wise elder helps seekers to discover their answer within themselves. This may happen within a group, particularly in times of transition such as from puberty to adulthood or from the single to the married state. In modern urban life this custom is often not followed, but the need remains, and spiritual accompaniment by one other or by a group—or simply the help of a friend—can fill the vacuum.

¹ Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 4', quoted in Rose Dowling and Mary Pat Le Roy, unpublished paper on discernment, Johannesburg, 1992.

² Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1960), 39.

Accompaniment in hearing the voice of the Spirit within and responding to it according to our gifts and circumstances is an integral part of spiritual direction. In our world, where social, economic and religious structures seem to be crumbling and there are so many voices calling us to false values, the need for help in discerning the voices that are genuinely of the Spirit becomes ever more vital. It is not only voices calling us to false values that create confusion in us, but also our changing understanding of the universe and our role as human beings in it. As our knowledge of who we are changes, so does our knowledge of who God is. It is difficult and frightening to let go of old stereotypes and accept a new way of being. The role of the spiritual companion or director can be extremely helpful in these circumstances.

The spiritual companion listens and helps us to be clear about the hints and guesses, the invitations and the 'nudgings' of the Spirit in our life. He or she helps us to be aware, to notice, to 'wake up' to the spiritual relationship we have with God. The companion may help us with discernment, spiritual practices, methods of prayer, and at times suggest scripture and other spiritual reading that may enlighten our path. He/she is present as a compassionate and respectful witness to the joys and sorrows of our journey. Together we pray for that 'closer walk' with God. Prayer is part of the relationship and our director continues to hold us in prayer between sessions.³

Because of the great value that community has in Africa, sometimes group direction is preferable to individual direction. This is more effective if the group includes people of different ethnic backgrounds, to overcome tribalism and the tendency towards xenophobia which have had, and continue to have, such disastrous effects on the continent. This situation is not unique to Africa: in recent history we have had enough examples in Europe, Asia and the Middle East to know it is a human problem which needs to be addressed in the spiritual as well as in the political and social arenas. In fact it will not be dealt with effectively in the political arena if enough people have not dealt with it in their spiritual journey.

The journey to God is not meant to be a solitary journey. As we walk this earthly path we walk in communion with others. Often God's desires for us are made known through the wise guidance, support and loving challenge of another person or a group of caring people. Every

³ At <http://www.johnpaul2center.org/Lay-Formation/Spiritual-Direction.htm>, accessed 15 April 2012.

faith tradition in the world has seeker–guide relationships. Jesus is the template for all spiritual directors in the Christian tradition. He drew people into relationship, walked with them and illuminated their lives with the startling truth of his Father’s Kingdom.

Inner Freedom Leading to Fullness of Life and Expression of Our Life in the World

From the way we relate to other people and groups, and to creation, it is obvious that our understanding of freedom needs purification and serious reflection. To quote Thomas Merton once again:

The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of a man’s life, to get behind the façade of conventional gestures and attitudes which he presents to the world, and to bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul. This is entirely a supernatural thing, for the work of rescuing the inner man from automatism [i.e. of ‘conventional routine’] belongs first of all to the Holy Spirit. The spiritual director cannot do such a work himself.⁴

It is clear that Job only reached this freedom when he let go of his own false inner arguments and those of his friends, and listened to God speaking to him directly. He could then say honestly:

I know that you are all powerful. What you conceive you can perform. I am the one who obscured your designs with my empty headed words. I have been holding forth on matters I do not understand But now having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all I have said. (Job 42:2–6)⁵

This kind of honesty arises out of a deep and clear knowledge of our own inner movements. As the one accompanying, it is crucial to understand one’s role as that of companion while the person accompanied delves deeply into her or his soul to find God, who is ever present and ever speaking, in suffering and in joy. Where this happens a person grows in inner freedom and so is able to make choices that enhance life rather than destroy it. The seeker, the director and the Holy Spirit meet in holy conversation so that we ‘may have life and have it abundantly’

⁴ Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, 16.

⁵ *Good News Bible*.

(John 10:10). The longing for the freedom to live our lives as we think we need to is at the root of every liberation struggle, every strike, every war. The greater our inner freedom and the clearer our expression of our true selves in the world, the more we will contribute to the freedom and beauty, the peace and the justice in our continent and within the whole earth community.

In her amazing autobiography *Left to Tell*, Immaculée Ilibagiza shows how she survived the genocide in Rwanda through her great love for her family and for God.⁶ She was able to come through unimaginable suffering as a forgiving person because she

encountered God in both the victim and the killer. Our God is a living God, not a dead one, and God shows us how to respond in the midst of suffering in a way that decreases rather than increases the suffering in our lives and in our world.

In his book *Hope against Darkness*, Richard Rohr suggests that there is more we can do in the world than letting ‘the waves of history carry us and keep us afloat somehow?’⁷ The choice between life and death is ours. There are some amazing people who have found their inner freedom, and whose very existence gives guidance and meaning to our lives—great leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, Albertina and Walter Sisulu, Molly Blackburn, Sheena Duncan, Ellen Kuzwayo and innumerable others, who have lived lives of love and service no matter what was happening to them.⁸ At all times they retained their



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Immaculée Ilibagiza

⁶ Immaculée Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, Ca: Hay House, 2006).

⁷ Richard Rohr, *Hope against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger, 2001), 3.

⁸ Albertina and Walter Sisulu, Molly Blackburn, Sheena Duncan and Ellen Kuzwayo were all anti-apartheid and civil rights activists in South Africa.

own inner freedom to make choices and not simply to be victims of circumstances. Often this freedom gave them the ability to act against civil and religious leaders, and against the mores of their times.

Spiritual accompaniment is one of the gifts we have that can help us through this time of labour. It is one of the means of reaching the still centre within us where God dwells and which inspires all of our relationships and ways of responding in our world. To break the cycle of hatred and violence that plagues the African continent we each need to practise the vigilance advocated by Nelson Mandela. He suggests that internal factors are crucial in assessing one's development as a human being, and wrote:

Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others—qualities within reach of every soul—are the foundation of one's spiritual life. Development in matters of this nature is inconceivable without serious introspection, without knowing yourself⁹

Catherine of Siena, in her writings on the spiritual journey and the discernment of the spirit in our lives, equally emphasizes the need for self-knowledge. In her *Dialogue* and in her letters she again and again encourages us all to 'enter the cell of self-knowledge'.¹⁰ One of the fruits of spiritual direction is nearly always the ability to know and honour whom we really are. This serious reflection suggested by Mandela and by Catherine of Siena is the only thing that will lead us to our true selves, our true desires.

The story of Mama Irene,¹¹ like the story of Immaculée Ilibagiza, is the story of one of millions of people in Africa who have received this gift of God and who have repeatedly chosen life rather than death, finding strength through sharing with others. With this story we learn the value of group accompaniment and sharing the faith journey. It shows that together we can move mountains and bring healing to one another, and be able to forgive ourselves and each other. Here is the story of Mama Irene in her own words

⁹ Nelson Mandela, letter to Winnie Mandela from Kroonstad Prison, 1 February 1975, in *Conversations with Myself* (London: Macmillan, 2010), vii.

¹⁰ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 25, translated by Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980), cited in Diana Villegas, 'Discernment in Catherine of Siena', *Theological Studies*, 58 (1997), 19–38, here 24.

¹¹ Not her real name.

The Story of Mama Irene

I grew up in the homeland and came to Johannesburg seeking employment. I found a job and even managed to get a house in the township where I lived with my children. Unfortunately tragedy struck, I got retrenched and lost my job.

This could not have happened at a worse moment in my life. I did not only lose a job, but I lost my livelihood. When I lost my job my eldest daughter was dying of AIDS. This child had had a baby when she was a teenager. After giving birth to her child she left the baby in my hands and disappeared. So I brought the child up as my own. When my daughter came back she did not return alone, she brought back another baby who was also sick. My daughter finally died and left me with another child who needed to be fed and clothed. I buried her with no money; how I managed was a miracle.

When I lost my job I also lost my house. My children and I went on to the street. But I told myself that as long as I have two hands I would do something for my children. So I built a mukhukhu.¹² At this time my brother also came to live with us, but he too came because he was sick. This was another problem I had not foreseen, another person to feed and clothe from nothing. In due time he too died and I do not know how I managed to bury him, but I did. Most days my children and I would go hungry; on



¹² A house built from corrugated iron. In most cases it is only one room

the days that we had something to eat we felt lucky and blessed, but many times we would go inside the mukhukhu and hide because we did not want people to see that we were dying of hunger. Because of this suffering I became physically, spiritually, emotionally and mentally disturbed. I thought I was going mad. This situation continued for a long time.

I heard that there was a need for volunteers to go and work at a project that was being started. It was a home for children and mothers infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. This place would cater for them during the day and also provide meals. Volunteers were needed who were willing to come and work as house mothers, gardeners, etc. for these people. I volunteered. At this place they offered us volunteers space where we could share our own personal stories and receive accompaniment from one another and the person leading us. We also shared our faith journey and how we saw God active in our lives. I started having a purpose in life, to help others die with dignity and respect.

What carried me during the many years of my suffering and misery was determination. I was determined not to give up. The other thing that carried me was prayer. I continued to pray that God would help me. My strength came from the scripture text of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego (Daniel 3:26). I told myself that if God could help them get out of that fire and they did not burn, this same God could do the same for me. If God could act in the past, this same God can do the same acts that God has done in the past for me. Although I knew this all through my difficult times, it was only when, with the help of this same God, I found others with whom to share my pain and my longing that I found my way to a new way of being that has lasted until today! In sharing my story and listening to others share their stories I was able to find the God who had never left me even in my deepest moments of loneliness and loss.

Faith in God, Ourselves and Others

When Job was faced with a search for God in the midst of his suffering, his so-called friends gave him the accepted religious responses and beliefs that did not correspond to his own inner belief. They did not help him to search for answers within, but gave him their ready-made solutions. In the end only his growing relationship with God allowed him to see more deeply than the accepted answers. But his friends, even though they were not very helpful, nevertheless did help him to discover the true God who dwelt in his heart. In the end he discovered the God who

had always been there, had never left him and would continue to help him see the greatness of God's love and care in all of creation around him.

The biblical message for spiritual direction is that deeper growth into awareness, acceptance and understanding of suffering is found in openness to asking questions that lead to an encounter with the Divine. Without asking questions one remains closed to allowing God to enter into human suffering and redeem it. Spiritual accompaniment becomes a field where the sufferer and God can encounter each other, and where the sufferer experiences God's presence. This is possible because of belief in the gratuitous gift of love that God offers to human beings, and in response to which humanity serves God out of disinterested faith and love. This means, as we have seen in the stories we have heard, making a journey of the heart from what is learnt and known in the head to what is experienced and felt in the heart. The spiritual companion helps to allow us to go more deeply into relationship with God, knowing that we are not alone on this journey, no matter what hardships we encounter.

Spiritual accompaniment is meant to help liberate us from a faith that is not open to facing the questions of life, into a faith that brings our daily life experiences into the realm of God. In this way it brings God close to us, so that God no longer seems unapproachable, distant from human misery. We accompany people as they make a journey from superficial acceptance to a deeper awareness and acknowledgement of suffering. On this journey we confront the dynamic interchange taking place in the heart with regard to questioning the presence or absence of God in suffering, and move towards an awareness and encounter with God, recognising God's 'infinite generosity in the gratuitousness of creation'.¹³ This journey involves acknowledging that destruction and birth, life and death, are integral parts of creation. The paschal mystery is not just a theory. It permeates us, our lives and our world.

Questioning That Leads to Enlightenment

In spiritual accompaniment it is amazing how often one sees people move from a passive acceptance of their situation as inevitable to an acceptance that helps them move into a deeper, more meaningful relationship with

¹³ Jean-Pierre Prevost, *Why, O Lord? Suffering in the Book of Job* (Montreal: Mediaspaul, 1996), 58.



the living God which matures in the course of their suffering, sharing and reflection on their life. Even when a person sees that the hardships he or she is enduring are undeserved and that there is something wrong in the way things are, in his or her encounter with God life becomes meaningful in spite of suffering.

We have had pastoral experience of people who, for fear that they would be rejected by the community of faith when there was something in their lives that they could not accept as the will of God, have left the Church for a time in order to deal with their problems in the way they saw fit. Often they have reverted to traditional practices which have proved sensitive to their lived situation. And once they had done that they have come back to the Church and continued with their Christian faith.

But God does not condemn people because they dare to question the injustices of their suffering, thus questioning God's plan and rule over the earth. For some it is hard to ask questions because they feel guilty of blasphemy in daring to challenge God as if they were equals. They feel that such questions should not be directed to God: God is too omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient to be addressed in that fashion. This is where a spiritual director can help by listening to people voicing what is in their hearts, allowing them to sort out the genuine search for God in the questions they ask and in their struggle to face life as it is, and helping them to find God in their own reality. Job shows that asking

questions is part of the journey towards a deeper and more meaningful encounter with God. In his questions, Job demonstrates that he takes God and God's presence in his life seriously. For him God is alive and active, and, when necessary, has to be challenged to make sense of life's questions. In a similar way, Jesus allowed the two disciples on the road to Emmaus to ask questions about what they believed and what had happened, so that he could enter into deeper dialogue with them about God and God's revelation in life.

The Changing Relationship with God, the Self and the World

Many African people are deeply religious, even when they do not profess to belong to any mainstream Church or religion. This is evident in the way people talk and relate to each other, even when faced with unbearable suffering. Often one hears statements such as: 'God will see'; 'I leave it all in God's hands'; 'only God knows'; 'if God is willing'. Continued trust and belief in God is evident in everyday activities: this is the underlying sustaining power for people who are faced with severe hardships.

The story of the disciples on the journey to Emmaus highlights the relationship between the person accompanying, the one accompanied and God for people who expect God to be acting and talking in their lives. Jesus listened to the story of the two disciples, and only after hearing their story did he show them what they already knew from the scriptures about the life of the messiah and what would happen to him. After reminding them about what they knew he accepted their invitation to become their guest. Even then he still let them recognise him in their own time and when they were ready. God enters the life of the person, which is filled with pain, and transforms that experience into an encounter with the God who is alive and the God who is present in the scriptures.

And all this happens in the one place where God is found, at the centre of each person. As Jeremiah states: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (31:33). It is God's law, written in each person's heart, that allows this connection with God to take place. It allows the relationship to grow in depth and understanding. God will never go against our freedom when offering this relationship. The gift is God's, the choice is ours. We can choose despair or violence; or we can choose beauty, truth, love and goodness.

In the story of Mama Irene we can see that in journeying with others her relationship with God and the world changed for the better. God became her companion in a new way and God became alive; God was no longer someone she met when going to church and left behind after church; God became a living God, interested in her situation, participating in the pain and the joy she experienced, and asking her to participate in God's work for others. This God is present when she is in church and when she goes home. The same God journeys with her all the time and leads her ever deeper into the mystery of life at the core of her being and of all beings. This God helps her to find her true centre and to live and act from there.

Finding Our True Centre

Many people who have chosen to seek spiritual direction end up being whole. They receive the healing they need; they are able to forgive themselves and others; and in doing that they get in contact with the true centre of who they are. They become the person they were meant to be. This is an ongoing process and not complete until we die and rise again.



Nelson Mandela in 2000

There are many people who have come to discover this about themselves and are able to lead whole lives. And yet there is a need to help more people to find this centre. The more of us who find our true centre and live from there, the more humane we will be as a human race. It is extremely difficult to be in touch with our true identity as members of the earth community, and so our understanding of the fullness of life and love that God offers us is severely limited. Mama Irene discovered with others how to receive and to share this fullness of life and love that God is offering to all of us. Catherine of Siena, Mandela, Sisulu and many others have shown us how personal inner freedom helped them to opt, like Jesus, to go against the civil and religious authorities of their day in order to create a more just society for all. They are some of the many witnesses who have gone before us and shown us the way. Any violence we see perpetrated in our societies originates in the hearts of individuals; any efforts towards ending this violence also originate in the hearts of individuals. Seeking or giving spiritual accompaniment is about seeking God, about seeking goodness, truth, beauty, healing, forgiveness, peace, hope and love within ourselves and within our world.

Fullness of Life

We began our reflection by quoting the text from John's Gospel where Jesus said 'I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly' and now, in the end, we come back to it again. In sharing with another person in spiritual accompaniment this is often the gift that we receive. In receiving this gift we are healed and able to forgive ourselves and others. In spite of the hardships we might still endure, we experience life as a gift and receive it as such. We are able to lead life to the fullest because our hearts are filled with the gift of the Spirit that removes all unnecessary clutter. As Teilhard has said:

The day will come when, after harnessing the ether, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.¹⁴

¹⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Evolution of Chastity', in *Towards the Future* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002), 86–87.

These words of Teilhard remind us of Jesus' words when he says: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49).

Ann Wigley OP is a Dominican sister. She was born and raised in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Initial and ongoing formation within her own Congregation and beyond have been an abiding interest and involvement for her. Over her life of more than seven decades, her ministries have been as varied as teaching in primary and secondary schools, being a sports coach, leading her International Dominican Congregation, consultancy work with many church institutes, and spiritual direction. At present she is the General Secretary of the Leadership Conference of Consecrated Life for Southern Africa while still offering spiritual accompaniment and doing retreat work.

Tshifhiwa Munzhedzi OP is a member of the King William's Town Dominicans of St Catherine of Siena. She is a teacher by profession and has worked in adult education as a member of the teaching staff at Lumko Institute in South Africa.