

SEEKING GOD EVERYWHERE AND ALWAYS

Ten Trends in Global Spiritual Direction

Liz Budd Ellmann

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, humans have sought spiritual companions to deepen their awareness of God's presence and guidance. Today, around the world and across traditions, the ancient spiritual practice of meeting regularly with a spiritual director is still growing and developing to change the way we live individually and in community. On each continent, the spiritual direction movement is taking shape in forms that support us in becoming friends of God and encourage us to become prophets for God: contributing to peace, justice and living in right relationship with all creation. As the executive director of Spiritual Directors International (SDI), I have been privileged to share insights and trends in spiritual direction from around the world and across spiritual traditions. By examining ten inspirations in the global spiritual direction movement, drawing on my personal experience with SDI, I would like to look at how God is guiding the ministry of spiritual companionship for the future.

But before exploring these ten inspirations, I shall share a poem by Jennifer (Jinks) Hoffmann, a South African Jew who serves on the board of directors of SDI:

The Third Chair

You are a Spiritual Director.
I sit in my chair
you in yours.
I have come to see you
with a longing
that mystifies me.
You draw my attention

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to the third chair
in the room:
You invite me to see
with the eye of my heart
the Source
of my longing:
the Eternal, invisible, loving, guiding,
challenging, insistent
Mystery
in the third chair.

When I meet one-to-one with a spiritual directee, we listen together for God or the Holy Spirit in the third chair. We listen for God's movement in that person's life. When I meet my peer supervision colleagues in group spiritual direction, we listen together for God's guidance for each person in the group and for our group as a whole. I invite you to imagine many, many chairs, thousands of spiritual directors around the world and across traditions, thousands of seekers of many spiritualities and none. My hope is to share something of what we can 'see with the eyes of our hearts' about God's movement in the ministry of spiritual direction at large.

1. Spiritual Direction Contributes to Health and Healing

Several years ago, I volunteered in a hospice, listening to the stories of people living with AIDS and the concerns of their families and friends. That work contributed to my interest in spirituality and eventually led to a call to ministry and the study of theology. Before I knew the term 'spiritual

direction', I knew what power sacred listening provided to families and loved ones who suffer.

In 2009 I was invited to participate in a summit of spiritual-care and health-care leaders. We worked together to identify how spirituality might improve health care, especially at the end of life. Spiritual direction, not only for patients but also for health-care providers and family members became one of the key recommendations. The book *Making Health Care Whole: Integrating Spirituality into Health Care* summarises our work together.

Caregivers, health-care providers and patients benefit from meeting regularly with a spiritual director. Where violence and trauma have made life unbearable, spiritual direction, offered in conjunction with appropriate therapies, alleviates suffering and helps communities heal.

2. Spiritual Direction Builds the Capacity for Compassion

When I graduated from Stanford University in 1982, there was no interest in integrating spirituality into health care, environmental work or the legal system. Now, Stanford University and other universities around the world study the effects on the brain of contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation. Neurologists and brain researchers are discovering connections between contemplative practices and compassion by studying Tibetan monks and Christian contemplatives.¹

Stanford University's Center for Compassion website features the story of one its major donors, Chade-Meng Tan.² Tan works for Google, where he teaches contemplative practices at work. He donates his time and resources to Stanford to learn more about how contemplative practices contribute to peace and compassion.

Spiritual direction also has a role to play in creating a healthy work-life balance. Before becoming executive director of Spiritual Directors International, I experimented with taking spiritual exercises such as the Ignatian Examen into the workplace of Amazon.com and offering group spiritual direction in other workplaces with a medical doctor, Bruce Davis. The workplace is fertile ground for cultivating compassion through spiritual direction. Sometimes offering spiritual direction in groups is much more effective; SDI's journal *Presence* provides articles by spiritual directors who are experimenting with creative ways to offer group spiritual direction.

¹ See Isabel Clarke, 'Beyond the God Spot: Transcendence and the Brain', *The Way*, 53/1 (January 2014), 49–55.

² See http://ccare.stanford.edu/press_posts/can-meditation-impact-entrepreneurship-and-the-world-googles-happiness-guru-thinks-so/, accessed 10 March 2014.

3. The Number of Clergy and Congregations Engaging in Spiritual Direction Is Increasing

Work–life balance is also an issue in institutional religion. Many pastors are burning out. Many congregations and parishes are shrinking—or growing so fast that the staff becomes exhausted maintaining programmes. Self-care is encouraged among the clergy, but what does that mean?

Increasingly, clergy who try meeting regularly with a spiritual director or in group spiritual direction share the benefits with their whole congregation. Clergy who learn the value of spiritual formation and contemplative practices are better able to prepare congregations and staff to discover a balance between contemplation and action.

I noticed during the 2012 ‘Cultivating Compassion’ conference in Boston, Massachusetts, which included people from five continents, that more and more Protestant and evangelical Christians are discovering the spiritual benefits of the mystical Christian traditions and contemplative practices, including spiritual direction. In the Methodist tradition, spiritual formation programmes are blossoming in congregations, and many include spiritual direction as part of the programme. Pastors in South Korea and their congregations are very interested in spiritual direction and its ability to build spiritual communities.

A hundred years ago, spiritual direction in the Christian tradition was primarily for Roman Catholic clergy and religious. Spiritual direction helped to form sages and saints in the Catholic tradition. Today, spiritual exercises and contemplative practices that were formerly available mainly to priests are open to everyone who longs to grow closer to God.

4. Contemplative Practices Are Part of Our Human Heritage

Seekers have met with spiritual guides throughout history. Meeting a spiritual director regularly is itself a contemplative practice. Spiritual direction is also a way of passing on our human heritage of spirituality and the contemplative practices of prayer, meditation, *lectio divina* and spiritual exercises. In 2009, the international Fetzer Institute invited 25 individuals involved in the field of contemplation, including myself, to examine the impact of contemplative practices during the last 25 years. The book *Contemplation Nation*, published in 2011, brings together their work.³ My own contribution centres on the training and formation of spiritual

³ See <http://www.fetzer.org/resources/contemplation-nation>.

directors. Spiritual formation though spiritual direction continues to transform lives around the world and across spiritual traditions.

5. Public Interest in Spiritual Direction Is Growing

In 2010, two programmes on spiritual direction in the series *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* were aired on US television.⁴ Pictured here is Lucky Severson, a television producer from Washington, DC, interviewing three spiritual directors known as the Interfaith Amigos: Pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon and Sheikh Jamal Rahman. In Alabama, the programme *Focus@4:00* also featured spiritual direction in a short television news item. 'Are you religious or spiritual?', the newscaster asked. Spiritual direction was highlighted as a process that can support people whether they see themselves as religious, spiritual or not sure, helping them become closer to God or a Higher Power and to live at peace and in service to their community.⁵

In Africa, Austral-Oceania, Europe, the Americas and Asia, spiritual direction is moving out of the churches, synagogues and temples and into



Filming for Religion and Ethics Newsweekly in 2010

⁴ The programmes may be watched at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/02/26/february-26-2010-spiritual-directors/5787/> and <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/05/14/may-14-2010-spiritual-direction/6281/>.

⁵ See <http://www.sdiworld.org/blog/focus400-abc-3340-features-spiritual-direction>.

prisons, homeless shelters and even parks where gang members hang out. In April 2012, as part of the publicity for the Boston SDI 'Cultivating Compassion' conference, we worked with the *Boston Globe* newspaper on a front-page feature story about spiritual direction with gang members. The spiritual director involved meets regularly with a gang member in a public library.

6. *Spiritual Direction Connects People to Caring for Life in All Forms*

In 2010, the internationally acclaimed cosmologist Brian Swimme was one of the keynote presenters who helped SDI celebrate the twentieth year of its mission, 'tending the holy around the world and across traditions'. Swimme challenged conference participants to understand the role of spiritual direction in changing the way humans engage with all of God's creation. He said:

The task of spiritual direction is to deconstruct the maladaptive story that humans are living out of. The central task of spiritual direction is to create a culture that amplifies life's hum ... to learn that Earth is not a collection of resources but a community of life that the human is invited to join.⁶

Participants in the 'Spiritual Direction in the African Context' conference in Johannesburg in 2012 honoured the connection between spiritual direction and caring for life in all forms by blessing and planting a tree that SDI had given as a gift to St Augustine College. SDI has been planting trees all over the world as a way of celebrating how, in many spiritual traditions, trees symbolize life itself—the tree of life evolving and growing. We planted an acacia tree—sacred to Africans—and the acacia was present with us during the conference, next to the podium, inspiring our wisdom and blessing.

7. *Spiritual Leaders Validate the Ministry of Spiritual Direction*

We are living during a transitional time, when spiritual leaders from different traditions are learning how to be together, how to collaborate for peace and justice. It is new, and we are a part of the learning process. In our lifetime, the Berlin Wall has come down, apartheid has been abolished and religious leaders from around the world are working together to end violence.

⁶ See <http://www.sdiworld.org/blog/amplifying-life%E2%80%99s-hum>.



Spiritual leaders gathered at Assisi in 1986

A mere 25 years ago, in Assisi in Italy, spiritual leaders from around the world came together to pray for peace, among them African healers and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dalai Lama and the Pope, imams and Native American medicine men, rabbis and Shintoists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians, and many others. It was the first time in human history that such a gathering had taken place. The spiritual leaders found a common language in contemplative silence, in prayer. They reached for and touched a peace beyond understanding.

Imagine yourself in Assisi, standing with thousands of lay people and clergy from all over the world who have dared to gather and pray together for peace, to end violence in the name of religion. Contemplate these words of Pope John Paul II:

For the first time in history, we have come together from everywhere, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace.⁷

What a powerful statement from a spiritual leader!

In May 2011, Pope Benedict XVI praised the Carmelite academic community, saying that it is 'strengthened by the wealth of a great spiritual

⁷ John Paul II, 'Address to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions', n.3, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi-final_en.html.

family, namely St Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross, who were witnesses of contemplative life and inflamed Europe and the world'. The Pope also underlined the importance of spiritual direction:

As she has never failed to do, again today the Church continues to recommend the practice of spiritual direction, not only to all those who wish to follow the Lord up close, but to every Christian who wishes to live responsibly his baptism, that is, the new life in Christ.

Pope Benedict likened spiritual direction to the 'personal relationship that the Lord had with his disciples, that special bond with which he led them, following him, to embrace the will of the Father (cf. Luke 22:42), that is, to embrace the cross'.⁸

In 2013, Pope Francis offered further appreciation for spiritual companionship:

Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization. Paul's relationship with Timothy and Titus provides an example of this accompaniment and formation which take place in the midst of apostolic activity. Entrusting them with the mission of remaining in each city to 'put in order what remains to be done' (Titus 1:5; cf. 1 Timothy 1:3-5).⁹

Spiritual direction is essential 'to every Christian who wishes to live responsibly his baptism, that is, the new life in Christ'. Support from spiritual leaders helps us communicate the value of spiritual direction for today.

8: Technology Makes Spiritual Direction More Widely Available

SDI has posted more than a hundred YouTube videos online exploring the question, 'what is spiritual direction'? The response rate has been incredible: over 100,000 views. We invite spiritual leaders from many spiritual traditions, clergy and laity, to comment on the value of spiritual direction for today. Many of the videos discuss the connection between spiritual direction and world peace.

People all over the world are learning about spiritual direction through the internet, and then they call our office, send an e-mail or go

⁸ Benedict XVI, 'Papal Address to the Teresianum: "How Can We Remain Indifferent to Such Love?"', available at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/papal-address-to-the-teresianum>.

⁹ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html.

**People are hungry
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to the SDI website to locate spiritual directors to interview in the 'Seek and Find Guide'. People are hungry for companionship on their spiritual journeys. In rural communities, seekers are finding new ways to connect with spiritual directors using Skype and e-mail. Seekers also use the internet to find retreat centres with spiritual direction and places to discern the call to offer spiritual direction. SDI continually updates an online global listing of retreat centres offering spiritual direction as well as almost three hundred programmes that help people discern the call to the ministry of spiritual direction through formation and training.¹⁰

9: A New Generation of Spiritual Directors Is Emerging

Young adults are curious about spirituality. Living in a complex world where scientific discoveries and religious truths remain in active dialogue, young adults look for safe places to explore how to live with mystery, to learn to hold the sacred tensions in life. What do we mean by 'spirituality?' My favourite description comes from Dr Steve Sundborg, president of Seattle University: 'Spirituality is one's lived relationship with mystery'.¹¹

Young adults are engaging in their relationship with mystery by meeting with spiritual directors. To honour the growing number of young adults involved in spiritual direction, SDI has created a New Contemplatives initiative. Seven spiritual directors under the age of forty were sponsored to attend the 2013 'Cultivating Compassion' SDI conference and, in 2014, six New Contemplatives will be sponsored to attend the Emerging Wisdom conference. They experienced the conference as a cohort, a group of learners within the greater learning community. At the end of the 2013 conference, the six shared what it was like to be part of the larger learning community. They said,

I found my tribe.

I felt respected and understood as a young contemplative—it's so counter-cultural to value silence in our noisy, busy world.

Thank you for valuing MY voice, for listening to me even though I am new to the contemplative life.

¹⁰ If you notice that your training programme or retreat centre with spiritual direction is not listed, please contact the SDI office so that we may continue to create online hospitality for people seeking God.

¹¹ Stephen Sundborg, address at the official opening of the Seattle University Institute of Ecumenical Theological Studies, July 1997.

Another example of the next generation of spiritual directors is the Franciscan Brother Dan Horan. He connects with the new generation of seekers and spiritual directors through his *Dating God* blog, and offering lectures, such as 'Finding Francis on Facebook: Franciscan Spirituality and Mission in the Digital Age'.¹²

10. We Must Listen for Where God Is Guiding the Ministry of Spiritual Direction

This article would not be complete without honouring my elder, mentor and friend, Mercy Sister Mary Ann Scofield, one of the founders of Spiritual Directors International. She cared deeply and passionately about the ministry of spiritual direction and served as the charity's first executive coordinator in the 1980s. Sister Mary Ann returned gently to God in June 2012, just three weeks before the conference in South Africa. I imagined her hovering above us, smiling and encouraging all of us to pay close attention to the ways spiritual direction in Africa is being called forth in our lifetime to foster hope and love, peace and justice. May her memory be a blessing.

Nearly 25 years ago, SDI emerged to foster peace through multi-faith support of spiritual companionship. SDI's publications, including the journal *Presence*, and multi-faith educational programmes, equip people to cultivate inner peace which outwardly creates peace in our communities. SDI helps seekers find peace beyond understanding and courage to be prophets for God's work in the world. More than six thousand members on six continents form a global collective of wisdom about contemplative ways towards peace, towards justice, towards living in right relationship with all creation. As a dynamic global learning community, SDI cultivates compassion and communities of peace.

Before the 2012 conference 'Spiritual Direction in the African Context', I visited the Sterkfontein Caves, where the 2.3-million-year-old fossil *Australopithecus africanus* (nicknamed 'Ms Ples') was found in 1947. The caves are located at the UNESCO World Heritage Site called Cradle of Humanity, north-west of Johannesburg. I was deeply moved to be walking with a group of visitors from all over South Africa who were curious, like me, to get close to the African heritage of us all.

¹² See <http://datinggod.org/> and 'Finding Francis on Facebook: Franciscan Spirituality and Mission in the Digital Age', *The Cord*, 62 (July–September 2012), 243–267.

During my pilgrimage to Cradle of Humanity, I learnt that Phillip Tobias, a renowned South African palaeo-anthropologist and expert on early humans, died very recently. Tobias wrote about his life, saying it was enriched by ‘serendipity, coincidence, synchronism, eureka moments’. He said,

You go to search for something—an odd tree—and you find something else, something that may prove to be even more important than that which you had set out to examine! This is the essence of serendipity.¹³

Our group’s excellent guide told us how Tobias had encouraged him and his fellow anthropologists and archaeologists ‘to carry on his legacy, by trusting the search’.

Likewise, Sister Mary Ann Scofield’s legacy lives on through all of us. We must trust the search for God everywhere and always. Being friends of God and prophets for God was very important for Sister Mary Ann. She keenly understood the responsibility that comes with spiritual companionship. From her heavenly home, she encourages us to trust the search and the international sharing of the journey to learn how God is guiding us.

Liz Budd Ellmann lives in Seattle, Washington, USA and serves as executive director of Spiritual Directors International. Before joining SDI, she founded SoulTenders, a multi-faith organization dedicated to tending the spirit of working people through the teaching and support of spiritual practices in the workplace. As a former vice president of Global Markets for Bankers Trust Corporation in New York, she has a keen appreciation for the challenges of the corporate environment. Liz has served as adjunct faculty in Seattle University’s executive leadership programme and has extensive experience as a spiritual director and group facilitator. She earned a BA from Stanford University and a Master of Divinity from the Jesuit Seattle University.

¹³ Philip Tobias, *Into the Past: A Memoir* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa and Wits UP, 2005), 45, 47.