TRAINING SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

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WHAT DO WE WANT from spiritual direction? Are we hoping for the wise, gentle and strong elder who has seen it all before and can tell us just what we need to hear to navigate this particular stage of our lives—a Dumbledore to our Harry Potter? Or perhaps we would prefer insight: the person whose intuition is so finely tuned that her or she can see into our souls, and know just what we need to hear right now? Or is our preference for the holy prophet who has a direct line to God and can tell us with confidence what God is asking of us and how we should respond?

Speaking personally, I think I have hoped for a combination of all three at various points in my life. Being a good Christian would, it seemed, be so much clearer (and easier) if someone else would give me all the answers. Answers to questions such as: what does God want me to do? What is the best way to pray effectively? How does God affect my life? Why is life falling apart when I am doing my best? How can I be different and better at this faith stuff?

For many people, a traditional image of a spiritual director is of someone who has travelled a path of faith for many years, experiencing the highs and lows, and learning the wisdom needed to tell others how to live their faith. This is still the case for many people seeking spiritual direction, and there are, indeed, some wise and experienced directors who are able to work in this way. There are also other approaches, and in recent years there has been an explosion of interest in spirituality and spiritual direction training courses which involve a different style of direction—often called 'accompaniment', to make clear that one person is not 'directing' another but rather walking alongside as he or she explores the life of faith.

This is not to say that many directors from such a background do not have moments when they look more like one of our three caricatures above—when Dumbledore pops up with a piece of experiential wisdom, or an intuitive comment seems to hit the nail on the head in a way that brings clarity and insight to an otherwise murky experience. But these are

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not the main aims of a style of spiritual direction that is primarily interested in the experience of the speaker, and the possible action of God in that experience, rather than the learning and experience of the director. In such an approach, the norm is to help those coming for direction to explore their experience and notice what is more likely to be of God, in order that they can respond.

This style of direction as accompaniment is not in itself new, and one approach to it is seen in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. When referring to someone making an important life decision, Ignatius advises the one giving the Exercises in the following way:

> … during these Spiritual Exercises when a person is seeking God's will, it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future. Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (Exx 15)

In such an approach, directors are not expected to have all the answers or be able to find precedents for all experience in the great spiritual classics, but rather to have the capacity to listen and discern how God may be uniquely communicating with the person speaking to them, and to help the speaker in his or her own discernment. There will, of course, be many occasions when a director's own experience and knowledge do come into play; this discernment is not done in a vacuum, and it is important that the director has some grasp of theology and spirituality, but the main tool, certainly in an Ignatian approach, is discernment of spirits.

Until recent decades, training courses for spiritual directors did not exist. Directors emerged from the community or were appointed by

religious institutions—for example in seminaries. Ideally they were people who were recognised as gifted in the area and so sought out for their skills in helping others find God. This is still the case today, and by no means every spiritual director receives training. In this context the place of training courses can be twofold.

1. They offer people who may feel called to accompany others a chance to explore this call, to try it out with the help of others, and to further their discernment as to whether this is for them.

2. For people who do possess some of the experience, gifts and skills for accompaniment, a course can help them to develop these, to refine their focus, to broaden their experience, to come to a better understanding of what they are trying to do in accompaniment and to affirm their call to this work.

As an example of an approach to training spiritual directors, I am going to describe some elements of courses given at Loyola Hall, a Jesuit spirituality centre in the north-west of the UK which closed in 2014. Loyola Hall had been offering courses in spiritual direction and spiritual accompaniment for over 25 years, and these have now been transferred to St Beuno's Jesuit Spirituality Centre in north Wales. The courses are Ignatian and relatively short. Course 1 is eight days, residential, and provides an introduction to accompaniment. Course 2 is twelve days, also residential, and builds on the experience of the Spiritual Exercises—all participants will have made the full Spiritual Exercises in some form. Both courses take as their starting point a highly simplified model of accompaniment which allows team and participants to explore different aspects of the work. This model of accompaniment is outlined in more detail by Rob Marsh,[1] and can be briefly summed up here as follows:

- ***Listen***—actively encourage the speaker to speak about his or her experience of life and prayer;

- ***Notice***—what seems to be significant in terms of discernment of spirits, what seems to be leading toward God or away, where there is movement and countermovement;

- ***Stay/Explore***—focus on the spiritually significant and explore it further, letting it become conversational.

[1] See 61, above.

This model encourages people to focus on what is proper to spiritual direction, which can be defined as:

> Help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, and to live out of the consequence of the relationship.[2]

In addition to this tight focus on experience and the person's relationship with God, other aspects of spiritual direction can also be present and explored in a session; such aspects may include:

- help with understanding discernment of spirits;
- help with methods of prayer;
- exploration of decisions—gathering of data about options;
- strategizing about situations or difficulties;
- some exploration of theological issues.

However, on the whole it is better if these sorts of issues do not dominate a session in which a person has come to explore what is happening in his or her relationship with God. It can be very interesting to talk about theology or to problem-solve, and both director and directee easily become engaged in such activities because they seem to be fruitful. At such times, directors need to keep their eye on what the primary purpose of the meeting is, keeping their own interventions short and as far as possible, focused on what is going to foster the directee's relationship with God. A useful guideline for this can be to look at the amount of time for which each is speaking; if the director has more than about 20 per cent of the 'airtime' it may be useful for him or her to reflect on what is happening in the session.

In the courses I am presenting here there is a combination of input from the team, demonstrations and role-plays, and a lot of practice. The topics in the basic course explore different aspects of spirituality and spiritual accompaniment with the participants and include the model of accompaniment, listening skills, ways of praying, discernment, graced life history, finding support in accompaniment, working with difference, images of God, exploring decisions, call and vocation, and spiritual

[2] William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 8.

conversation. The second course is based on the Spiritual Exercises and the input sessions explore different parts of the text, and in addition cover areas such as the life of St Ignatius, supervision, the person of the director, ethics and boundaries.

The other main aspect of both courses is the practice sessions, working in small groups to try out accompaniment skills by listening to each other and receiving feedback from observers. As far as possible speakers in such sessions share real experiences and thoughts rather than engaging in role-play, enabling listeners to respond to what is explicit, but also to 'feel their way' towards what may be implicit and need attention. At the end of a practice session, observers use the model of accompaniment to give the listener clear and specific feedback about what they noticed as they watched. Listeners benefit greatly from such concrete feedback, which can help them come to a greater awareness of their body language, verbal constructions and general responses. In this way the participants are able to use their natural gifts, their acquired experience and the specific teaching from the course to broaden and develop their practice.

Accompaniment Skills

The central skills involved in accompaniment according to the model used in the courses may be explored in more detail.

Listening

Good listening is not solely about keeping quiet while someone else speaks, waiting patiently for your turn to come. Many insights into how to help people become better listeners have been gained from the way in which counsellors and therapists are trained. Active listening skills, such as paraphrasing, mirroring, reflecting back and summarising, can help speakers to articulate their experience and their thoughts in a fuller manner. Appropriate questions and other interventions can focus on aspects of the experience that have not been fully noticed, or bring to light implicit dimensions of the experience. Such listening is far from passive silence; it requires the listener to remain attentive, open and interested.

Although many of the skills involved in listening are transferable, the key difference between spiritual direction and, for example, counselling is what is being listened for in the session. The director's focus is on listening for the clues as to where God may be present in what is being described by the speaker—in other words, discernment of spirits. The focus is not problem-solving, catechesis, theological reflection or teaching spirituality—though each of these may come into a session peripherally.

In addition to these discrete active listening skills, other insights from counselling and therapy can be of help in training directors and, adapted appropriately, the following form part of the courses:

- core conditions of listening: unconditional positive regard, empathy, congruence;
- paying attention to boundaries;
- supervision;
- ethics and codes of conduct;
- safeguarding.

Discernment

An important question that arises in training spiritual directors is 'can you teach people to discern?' In the context of the Spiritual Exercises (which can be described, among other things, as a school of discernment), the one who is giving the Exercises can draw upon that pithy and insightful section, 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits', to help the one making the Exercises come to a greater understanding of what may be happening in his or her prayer and experience. Many directors do not give their retreatants the full set of rules but rather, if they notice something in the retreatant's experience that has echoes of one of Ignatius' rules, they may read out that section. In this way, the one making the Exercises comes to a better understanding of discernment primarily through his or her experiences rather than simply reading the theory. This is an example of how people learn discernment, through reflection on their experience, often in the light of a particular tradition, such as the Exercises. Developing a discerning heart is also often best done with someone else—often we are too close to our own experience and it takes another pair of eyes to notice and point out what we are not immediately seeing.

Can you teach people to discern?

Discernment of spirits is not, however, an exact process. If we look more closely at the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* we see Ignatius' own approach. The actual title of the 'rules' is:

> Rules to *aid us toward* perceiving and understanding, *at least to some extent*, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected. (Exx 313; my italics)

The phrases 'aid us toward' and 'at least to some extent' indicate that, though these guidelines do give very helpful descriptions of the effects of the good and bad spirits, how to recognise them and what to do in response, they are by no means exhaustive or foolproof. So, too, in our lives generally, and in spiritual direction in particular, discernment of spirits needs to be approached with both care and confidence. In his exploration of discernment, William Barry describes this balance that we need to find:

> I must learn to pay attention to the movements of my heart and mind, to reflect on them wisely and carefully with the help of others, especially my spiritual director, and to test them over time. In this process I must learn two equally difficult and seemingly incompatible attitudes: to trust myself and my reactions and to recognise how easily I can delude myself. Discernment requires that I believe that God will show himself in my experience and that I yet be wary of mindless credulity toward that same experience.[3]

So, in training spiritual directors, a number of issues can be identified.

- Those who wish to accompany others must have themselves developed some capacity for discernment through reflection on their own experience.
- They will be better suited to this if they have themselves received spiritual direction that has helped them to notice the unnoticed in their own experience.
- The discernment as to whether a person has the capacity, gifts and skills formally to accompany others in spiritual direction is not categorical; a course cannot offer pass or fail grades in discernment—other methods of assessment are needed.

Observation and Feedback

In the courses being considered a lot of the practice is done in threes and fours, where each participant takes it in turn to listen to another. These practice sessions are observed by participants and trainers, and each observer fills in an 'observation sheet' on which are listed discrete skills.

[3] William A. Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2004), 82 following.

Observation Sheet
Spiritual Accompaniment Course 2

Listener: _____

Speaker: _____

Team member: _____ ***Date:*** _____

1. Presence of the Listener/Body Language *(circle words that reflect what you see)*

at ease still patient contemplative nervous fidgety relaxed
reverent open friendly warm bored tense distracted
other _____ any gestures? _____

2. Active Listening Skills *(circle words that reflect what you see)*

mirroring (a word or phrase) focusing paraphrasing
reflecting back words/feelings summarising comfortable silences

3. Questions

Did you notice many unhelpful questions? YES NO
What helpful questions did you notice? (Note them)

_____

4. Listening and People Skills

Creates a good atmosphere and safe environment 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Hears and understands another's experience 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Is at ease with silence 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Asks helpful, open questions 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Understands and uses the language of the speaker 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Reflects back what has been said or felt 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Contains own material when accompanying another 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Other comments: _____

5. Managing a Session

Time management 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Manages a person who talks much/little 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Begins a session well 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Ends a session well 1 2 3 4 5 L/O
Other comments: _____

6. Going Deeper

Focuses on and deepens the subject of conversation 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to help people notice the full range of their experience and find God in it 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to help people reflect on their experience 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to help people understand their experience better 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to recognise movement and countermovement 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to help people stay with the movement 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Able to help people deepen the movement 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

Shows sensitivity to model of accompaniment 1 2 3 4 5 L/O

*Other comments:*_____

All categories are rated on the scale: 1 – not demonstrated; 2 – shows some skills at times; 3 – shows some skills regularly; 4 – shows good skills at times; 5 – shows good skills used consistently and with ease. A rating of L/O indicates a lack of opportunity to demonstrate this skill in this session.

The observation sheets break down the process of accompaniment into different skills and interventions, encouraging the listener to develop new ways of responding as well as relying on natural conversational skills. At first, trainees say it can feel 'clunky' or unnatural to use active listening skills or particular questions for exploration but, in time, as they see the effects and practice the interventions, these become more natural and part of the 'toolkit' of the director. While a natural capacity to listen can sometimes be sufficient in spiritual direction, training in listening skills is particularly useful when directors are accompanying someone with whom they do not immediately have a rapport.

The skills being observed and noticed are not simply the right use of interventions or active listening techniques. There is also a significant focus on 'movement' and 'countermovement'—the objects of discernment of spirits—and the ability to explore these. The 'bias' here is to notice and stay with the 'movement', that is, to focus more on what seems to be of God rather than focusing on what is getting in the way or leading the speaker more toward desolation than consolation. If the main purpose of spiritual direction is to help directees in their relationship with God, this would seem to be the proper focus, even if it is not the only process happening in the session.[4]

[4] For a fuller treatment of focusing on the movement see Robert R. Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 45/1 (January 2006), 7–21.

This method of training, which breaks down a session into various skills and approaches, has the advantage of giving participants a way of thinking about what they are doing in spiritual direction. It is akin to learning to drive. At first it is important that the novice driver learns the functions of the various pedals, the mirrors, the steering wheel, indicators and so on. But in time it is expected that most of the actions associated with these various parts will become less conscious, so the focus shifts to the road and navigation. There will, however, be times when the driver may have to think carefully about what he or she is doing—for example when reverse parking or driving on ice—and at these times conscious knowledge of the controls of the car is important. Before drivers are allowed on the road alone, the licensing agency must be assured that they have sufficient skill to be safe—hence the driving test. In spiritual direction training courses there is no equivalent to the DVLA, and one of the questions that has occupied trainers for many years is how to conduct assessment effectively.

For the past eight years the Loyola Hall courses have used this approach to assessment and feedback based on the observation of practice sessions. This is not without its critics, who see spiritual direction as more of a charism than a skill that can be taught. But, through many years of experience, it has become clear that in order for people to discern if they have the gifts and skills to be spiritual directors, and to develop those skills they do have, it is very helpful to try to give as much clear and consistent feedback as is possible within the limits of a course. The personal discernment of the participant, the discernment of the training team and the 'evidence' of the observation sheets need to come together in order for the participant to move forward.

At the end of these courses, then, each participant is given a feedback form, which combines a record of his or her practice taken from the observation sheets—noting on a scale the skills that are used consistently and with ease, and ones which need work or are not often observed—with a written report from the training tutor indicating the participant's development in the course. In addition, participants write up their own self-assessment, based on their own reflections on their response to the course, what they have heard from observers and previous conversations with their tutor. This feedback enables participants to consider further whether they are suitable to be offering spiritual accompaniment and, if so, in what context.

Just a Beginning

The contexts in which people may wish to use this training vary: some will go on and offer formal spiritual direction or directed retreats (residential, or weeks of guided prayer). Many course participants are already engaged in various forms of ministry (in parishes, or as chaplains in schools, universities or prisons) and find themselves using what they have learnt in formal or informal spiritual conversations or other pastoral situations. There are others who are responsible for religious and clergy formation, using the skills of spiritual accompaniment and discernment in that particular context.

The variety of people attending training courses in spiritual accompaniment continues to broaden. In the past few years the courses have included people between the ages of 25 and 75; laypeople, clergy and religious; a large variety of denominations; and participants from all over the world. Some of those who attend are beginners in giving accompaniment who want to see if this is for them. Others have already been giving spiritual direction formally or informally for some time and come on the course as a way of refining their focus, or as ongoing formation to continue to develop and hone their skills.

For those who seek out training in accompaniment and find themselves affirmed in a course as having some of the gifts and nascent skills necessary, this is just a beginning. A course can equip them with ways of thinking about what they are doing in accompaniment, with an understanding of the skills needed and practice in those skills, and with specific feedback from experienced directors as well as peers. But, in the end, people grow in this ministry of spiritual direction with experience—preferably alongside supervision and ongoing formation. A course can give a way to discern a call, but spiritual directors today, as was probably the case in previous centuries, learn to accompany others by doing it, reflecting on what is happening and continually learning about the surprising ways in which God deals with each of us.

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