

# DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR CONTEMPLATIVE GROUPS

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## *Background*

IN THE FALL OF 1973 I PUT OUT A CALL for people interested in meeting together once a week for two hours to explore ways of deepening their immediate presence for God both together and in daily life. A diverse group of twenty-two people responded, including members of religious communities, seminarians, and clergy and laity from different Christian traditions and occupations.

Regardless of their particular religious context, members of the group were unanimous in believing that they had not been offered adequate resources for deepening their direct presence for God. Certainly I shared this sense of inadequacy, despite exposure to a wide range of resources from my own Anglican and ecumenical experience. I had recently returned from a sabbatical leave where I had supplemented Christian resources for the spiritual life with some intensive months of meditation with a Tibetan Buddhist lama in a group setting. The qualities of presence fostered during that time had a way of helping me to connect more deeply with Christian contemplative tradition. I also became more sensitized to what felt like 'holes' in the process of Christian spiritual formation and support for the deeper spiritual life.

In speaking with many Christian contemplative leaders during that time and in later years, it became more and more clear to me that we had wonderful words about the deeper spiritual life from beautiful souls in Christian tradition, and some skeletal structures to assist that life, but that we were not so good at offering a careful, discerning process that truly helps others into immediate givenness to our own true nature in God over time.

Even those communities intentionally ordered for such assistance have often admitted such inadequacy. They have seemed to be hearths that could now well kindle the embryonic flames of the Spirit, inadvertently fostering choking smoke or misfirings instead. Everyone could be referred to indirectly helpful reading and talks about the spiritual life and to certain general practices. However, mutual and discerning support

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for the immediate, living divine fire together, and for its sharp immediacy through the ordinary day, in the light of each member's unique readiness and situation, has been more difficult to come by. The great increase in the availability of individual spiritual direction has alleviated this situation in ways, but this has not filled the need for a flexible corporate experiential practice and attentiveness that is different from liturgy, teaching, spoken prayer and group discussion (though able to overlap with these at times).

The mystery and timing of God and the easy confusion of our own spiritual consciousness give limits to what can be understood and provided together, of course, but the human side of our co-creativity with God perhaps can be assisted in its attentiveness more fully than has been normally offered. This does not imply that we can be confident in a any particular staging of the spiritual life. God is free to act in amazing ways that defy any securing attempt to blueprint and domesticate the spiritual journey. Indeed, the deeper the spiritual life, the more sure we can be that 'for freedom Christ has set us free' (Gal 5:1), there is a potential unpredictability to a person's life that results from being so given to the *living* Spirit of God. The affirmation of such freedom can be a very valuable dimension of a contemplative group, in light of the threat that it engenders in us when we cannot trust this freedom in God or in ourselves.

The frequent addition to the spiritual quest of psychological insight and method in recent years has helped to illumine and sometimes dissipate the shadows of much illusion and sickness, but the psychologies of the day, normally cut off in their origins from deep spiritual awareness and aim, have brought their own confusion and deflection from response to that deepest yearning of the spirit in us. So much that goes under the name of spiritual in religious offerings today seems to have an aim of greater human efficiency and securing self-definition in it (as my psychiatrist colleague at Shalem, Gerald May, would put it). So much of the more self-shaking, disorienting invitations to live closer to the purging, illumining fire that alone will reveal the home we seek are missed when we seek what we can control.

Such views have emerged over the past nineteen years through my own spiritual struggle and the struggle of a dozen others who have been servant leaders with me of Shalem spiritual formation and deepening groups every year since then. They also arise from our listening to the several thousand participants in those groups over the years. These people continue to come from a broad range of religious contexts and vocations. They share above all a sense of something moving them to

deeper and more authentic immediacy with God in daily life and a drawnness to guided solitude in community on a regular basis as a means of assistance.

*The nature of a Shalem contemplative group*

Over the years we have found certain constants to be important in such a group that are relevant to leadership. Many of these are spelled out in much more detail, along with issues of leadership and particular approaches to prayer and meditation, in my book, *Living in the presence: disciplines for the spiritual heart*.<sup>1</sup>

1. *The pre-eminence of intent.* All methods used in a group must be subordinate to the foundational intent of the group: to assist an environment for people to be open for God's immediate, enlivening presence in all that is, calling them to deeper communion and to caring for God's creation, i.e. calling them to deeper conversion and transformation. Without this shared intent in all that is done, the group can easily slip into different intents that can diffuse the deeply touched yearning for and givenness to God that is its foundational strength. Diverting intents can include such things as heart-removed, over-defining theological discussion, role- and persona-focused socializing, desire for emotional highs, psychological problem solving, and the desire for mastery (control, salvation, securing) of one's life through powerful self-willed techniques.

2. *The need to be aware of a life-time's spiritual journey.* No one is beginning their spiritual journey in a group. God has been at work with its members since they were conceived, and will continue to be at work after they leave the group. The leader and the group's process can help people to notice the connection of their experiences in the group and during the week with what God has been up to with them over a lifetime, and what is being called for now.

3. *Solitude in community is a powerful environment for practising the presence.* Collective silence with other people who are yearning for God can be an incredible incubator for birthing an awareness of God's Spirit connected with one's own and one another's spirit. Particular methods can assist this awareness, methods that, between them, can include all our senses, our bodies, our minds, our wills, as well as our 'empty' presence. A particular rhythm of a group can be helpful as well, such as: a) simple body stretching and releasing; b) some 'way in' to a living silence, such as scripture, chant, icon, word, etc.; c) journal keeping; d) Quaker-style sharing i.e. speaking only from the spiritual heart, surrounded by silence and sometimes another person's response—a process that can approach group spiritual direction at times; e) intercessory prayer.

4. *A willingness to let God's Spirit lead.* The leader seeks to be attuned to God's living Spirit moment by moment, for the sake of this group of people. That is quite different than seeking to be attuned to the desires of the group apart from that givenness to God in the moment. In this hoped-for attunement the leader has the humility to recognize that s/he does not know for sure how the Spirit may be moving, individually or collectively, but s/he desires and trusts the reality of this movement, seen or unseen. Its movement does not depend on the leader's words or acts. In one sense the greatest act of the leader is simply to stimulate the gathering of the group for spacious attentiveness to God. Everything else is optional, though what else the leader does may well be called for and valuable for at least some people present in their attempts to be truly open. The quality of presence, acts and words of others in the group may be equally or more valuable for some people than those of the leader. The Spirit is operative through the whole group for one another in many unpredictable ways.

#### *The programme for leaders*

Five years ago the need for assisting the development of leaders for such groups outside of Shalem itself became apparent to us. After a pilot year with nine local participants, we began a year-long extension programme for participants from anywhere in the English-speaking world. We based the design of the programme both on our own experience in developing Shalem's group leaders, and on the experience of another longer Shalem extension programme geared to the enrichment of spiritual directors. As with that programme, we worked out an arrangement with the Washington Theological Union to provide graduate credit for those who wanted it. The requirements are the same for credit and non-credit students who wish to receive a certificate of completion.

As with the certificate provided for the direction programme, we make it clear that it is not a certification of the graduate as a group leader. The certificate simply states that the person has completed the required disciplines of the programme. This is an important point to us, because we believe that both the ministry of spiritual direction and of contemplative group leadership is a charism that must be confirmed ultimately by the Holy Spirit in the process of carrying out that ministry, and not definitively by us. We want to avoid the professionalization of these ministries, with its temptations to over-define and control such ministry. Any potential value of professionalization, such as the development of widely agreed-upon standards for understanding, ethics and

preparation in such ministries, we believe is outweighed by the danger of attempted domestication of the Spirit's freedom in these ministries. Thus we tread the line between ignoring any kind of careful help for people called to such ministry on the one hand, and trying to over-define and control what they do on the other.

Our main criteria for acceptance into the programme fit closely our sense of the charism of contemplative group leadership. Does the person find other people asking for such leadership from him/her? If s/he has led a group with at least some dimensions of a contemplative one, have the participants told the leader that their presence for God was assisted by him/her? Does the person personally feel caring and called to be a servant leader in this particular way? Is the person clear about the difference between such a group and one that involves primarily a cognitive teaching kind of leadership, or one aimed at psychological or other issues? Is there a sense of readiness and calling for more intense attention not only to the person's leadership but also to her/his personal spiritual life?

This last question relates to our sense that people's gifted leadership finally stems from their own deep yearning for the truth of God in themselves and others, and their willingness to shed whatever is not of God as it is revealed and empowered by the divine love that would burn away all falseness in us. The most humbling moments of the group's life together are those where God's Spirit is seen unexpectedly and powerfully at work in a participant's life, drawing her/him to deeper conversion and its freedom for God.

The staff sometimes feels that the most important thing we need to pay attention to in the structuring of our residencies together is leaving room for and heeding these unplanned moments of spiritual deepening. Such moments feel like God's way of asserting divine freedom to act in God's own way, through but not because of the structure and leadership we are providing. Such experiences help everyone to realize how fundamental this understanding is to the leadership of contemplative groups. The leader prayerfully sets the stage for s/he knows not what. The group in trust invites the Spirit to move as it will, through the incubator of the group's forms.

A normal class of about twenty-five associates (as we call them) reflects great diversity: people from eight or nine denominational traditions, from all sections of the United States and usually some from other countries, parish clergy, chaplains, teachers, counsellors, home-makers, artists and a great range of other occupations. We no longer feel that the mix of the group is an accident. Again and again we have seen how

particular individuals become icons of God's Spirit for others, as though that meeting was the real reason why they were brought to the residency. The staff many times has watched with awe the spiritual friendships that emerge.

For some associates living in relative isolation from others who are seeking God in a radical way, the discovery of so many others often like themselves in depth-seeking helps them build greater confidence that they are not weird, crazy and alone. They often become more free to risk what comes out of their immediate givenness to God in their leadership, and less trying cautiously to manage, please and look good to members of the groups they lead. They become, in short, more free to trust the Spirit immediately at work in a group's life and depend less on their calculated advanced planning and controlled structuring of the group's life.

#### *Programme structure*

*Before the first residency.* Associates spend the first months of the programme, beginning in February, working in their home locales with readings, personal spiritual practice, and preparation for the first residency in May.

The *readings* consist of articles and books related to the spiritual life in general and to certain theme areas that might be used in groups in particular. The latter include presence for God through scripture, the body, sound and silence, interior words and images, icons, 'common' prayer (liturgy, intercession, petition, thanksgiving, healing), beauty, physical movement, daily living and social concern, methodless openness, and interior listening and discernment through and between thoughts and feelings. A little time also is spent on residential retreat contexts, which overlap in some ways with on-going group contexts.

*Personal spiritual practice* involves a monthly relationship with a spiritual director, a daily prayer practice, journal-keeping as needed, and the use of an audio tape specially designed for the programme that guides the associate through certain kinds of meditation and prayer. The purpose of this last practice is to provide associates with some commonly focused experience before arriving at the first residency. *Preparation for the first residency*, besides the above work, involves the selection of a thematic area through which to lead a group at the residency, and other forms of preparation for that leadership.

#### *The first residency*

In May associates gather for a week's residency at a Roman Catholic seminary/religious community complex in the Washington DC

suburbs. The time together alternates between seminars led by the staff and peer group sessions led by the associates.

The *staff seminars* include both theoretical and experiential attention to the thematic areas mentioned above in the readings. Special weight is placed on intention rather than method in leadership, as previously mentioned. Intention can be spoken of in many ways, but one way or another it involves givenness to a trust in the leadership of the living divine Presence mysteriously at work in a group, with all the immediate attentiveness and humility this implies for the leader. An ecumenical team of five different staff members, including ordained, religious and lay people, share leadership of these sessions.

The *associate-led sessions* include a sub-group of eight to ten associates plus a staff member. These peer groups remain together for both residencies. The theme for a given session's leadership normally relates to the one focused upon in a previous staff seminar. Leadership has been prepared with the help of certain guidelines for prayerful and practical preparation. The session is treated as a real time of prayer for everyone, not as role playing. This includes some shared reflection time on individual experience during the prayer/meditation time. Following this, a careful oral and written evaluation process by everyone is focused primarily on how an associate's leadership assisted or hindered personal presence for God. The associate also provides the group with a written list of theological, psychological and group assumptions that informed her/his way of leading, which are discussed by the group.

In the middle of the residency, from Saturday evening until Sunday afternoon, the group is given a 'sabbath time', during which we maintain corporate silence, including at meals. Sunday eucharist is celebrated in this context.

### *Between residencies*

In the nine months between the first and second residencies associates continue reading and personal spiritual practices, as well as lead a contemplative group in their own locales. This group normally must be at least six two-hour sessions in length, plus a full day. Either a co-leader or observer chosen by the associate participates and assists with evaluation of the leader throughout. At the end of the group everyone is given opportunity to provide written feedback concerning the leader's helpfulness in assisting their presence for God. Then both associate and co-leader/observer send evaluations to the staff for comment. Associates send in 'situation sheets' that summarize their personal and group work before each residency.

*Second residency*

The rhythm for this last time together is very similar to that of the first residency, with the primary difference being fuller freedom of choice in the themes for associate peer group leadership, and the option of teaming up with another associate for leadership.

At the end of this residency we review the remaining requirements of the programme, which include a self and programme evaluation (this also is required after the first residency), and a six to twelve-page paper that includes an outline of the planning process for a new group that the associate will or might lead, based on learnings from experience in the programme.

Programme evaluations by associates have been overwhelmingly positive since the extension programme began. What they have most appreciated has been twofold: 1) the opportunity to gain some careful feedback from others about their leadership; 2) the opportunity for going deeper and broader in their own spiritual life afforded by the disciplines of the programme, and by the stimulus of other God-seeking associates and staff. Probably the most frequent shifts in understanding of leadership involve a greater appreciation of simplicity and givenness to God, doing less and trusting more.

*The growing need of contemplative groups for active people*

Among current Christian resources there is an overabundance of opportunities for reading and talking about God, scripture and life in a cognitive mode. Christianity tends to be an extremely wordy tradition, both at its liberal and conservative ends and most places in between. In more evangelical and charismatic circles there often is more place for affect and the expression of one's own relation to God, but there is often little help in going into the deeper regions of the Spirit, and indeed sometimes barriers to doing so. There is great need for groups where a person can feel free to move through and beyond expression of feelings, repressive moral strictures and duty, and a jungle of over-defining and explaining words that can secure us away from the radical, immediate mystery of God's presence moment by moment.

Such groups can give breathing room for the soul by inviting people to be in touch at the deepest place inside, assisted by an economy of inviting words, simple experiential practices for body, senses and mind, attentive silence, and corporate sharing of yearning for and appreciation of one's true being in the Triune God. When a person is conscious of a deep yearning and nudging in them from beyond themselves, they need an open atmosphere where they can learn to listen at the deepest level,



and to connect their experience with the depth of the tradition's experience of that yearning and nudging, and the Good News that it declares is there for us at bottom.

Such groups do not require a great deal of education or sophistication, nor do they need to be restricted to any particular denominational conditioning. They provide room for the basic human spiritual condition of hunger for the divine and God's hunger for our fullness to show itself and find more light of day and discerning companionship for this awesome, unique yet communal journey that is ours. They can lead people more fully to enfold all their daily activities and concerns for the world into the single cloth of God's ubiquitous loving, calling presence.

As with spiritual direction, there is a gifted charism for servant leadership of such groups. No development programme can create a spiritual director or group leader, just as no art school can create an artist. But like an art school, we can help to refine and give confidence in the gift, so that it can be offered in the best possible way. There is great need for such group leadership in the Church and society of today, with the willingness to risk being with others as close to the divine fire as possible. The great trust is in Jesus' words that promise where two or three are gathered in his name, that presence will be effectively present to us, with us, for us and in us, however hidden to our understanding.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987.