When difference matters

Reflections on spiritual direction in cross-cultural settings

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A FEW YEARS AGO A NORTH AMERICAN COLLEAGUE mentioned that she was beginning a direction relationship with a Chinese woman and wanted to reread the article I had written on spiritual direction in cross-cultural perspective.[1] She said, 'I know that I will never understand her, but at least I will try not to make some awful mistakes'. Such an experience becomes ever more common in our global world of increased contact between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. My own cross-cultural experience has been in Africa (Ghana and South Africa) for the past fifteen years where I have ministered as a director to both African women and men of many countries and also people of various Asian, European and North American cultures.

The cross-cultural experience in spiritual direction involves factors of difference. Perhaps the most common example is of a woman and man in a direction relationship, communicating across the barriers of gender. But it is extended not only to distinctly different countries (e.g. a Filipina woman director and a Ghanaian man), but also different countries within the same continent (e.g. in Africa), different cultures within one country (e.g. the South African experience), ecumenical relationship and inter-religious experiences (e.g. Christian–Buddhist).

While we can have cross-cultural contacts on many levels, spiritual direction is a particularly sensitive context in which to meet significant differences in perceptions of reality, articulation of experience and discernment of the leading of the Spirit. A simple working definition of spiritual direction is accompanying another in their journey in and with God who is Holy Mystery. Margaret Guenther's description of this experience as 'holy listening'[2] is especially evocative of the depth dimension of direction. It is a multi-faceted experience of listening, responding, affirming, clarify-

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ing, teaching (occasionally), challenging (as appropriate) as two people[3] seek the direction of the Spirit of God together.

Like all others, like some other, like no other

Each human person is 'in some respect like all others, like some others, like no others'.[4] We are like all others in our common humanity which includes our search for the transcendent, named in the language of the divine. We share a culture with others, a particular way of organizing life and its tasks, of interpreting reality and its meaning. We are each utterly unique: biologically, psychologically, spiritually, as every person ever born seeks to find meaning and value in her or his life and to make choices based upon these values.

Thus the two persons entering into a cross-cultural direction relationship are confronted with two distinct levels of difference: culture and the personal uniqueness of each of them. How can understanding be facilitated? How can mistakes be avoided (at least major ones!)?

Sympathy, empathy, interpathy

As we begin to listen to the experience of a person who does not share our own cultural background, three attitudes are possible. David W. Augsburger names them as sympathy, empathy and interpathy.[5] Each is explained in the images of frame and picture. In the first, the director is both frame and picture, providing the cultural context for the directee to interpret their distinctly different cultural background. The director responds sympathetically to the directee's narration of a painful incident: 'I know just how you feel'. Of course, she doesn't, but at least there is the attempt to enter into the other's joy or pain.

In the empathetic perspective the director continues to provide the 'frame' of interpretation of experience, but now the directee's cultural context is the 'picture'. From this vantage point of compassionate active imagination, the director can feel with the directee as she or he articulates their own experience. For example, one's personal experiences of making choices toward a life commitment, e.g. marriage or religious life, provide the frame when accompanying another person in their discernment process. But since the directee comes from another cultural background, they are considering the factors from what can often be a totally different perspective. Western culture is focused on the individual; African culture remains

a community experience, though western influence is increasing; thus to say to a person 'You must do what you feel is right' underestimates (or ignores) the power of the family in this decision-making process.

The third response is that of interpathy, in which the director enters into both the frame and picture of the other. One's own cultural experience and presuppositions are suspended (however briefly) as one seeks to think and feel like a Zulu woman, a Mexican man, an Indian woman, a German man. The experience of interpathy has some affinities with John Dunne's description of 'passing over and coming back'[6] enriched (or baffled) by this new experience. In the interpathic experience I 'become' a Zulu woman or a Mexican man or an Indian woman or a German man as I listen and respond to the other person.

This is the theory. But what of the practice? Complete interpathy is probably impossible but what is possible is an ever-increasing range of interpathic responses. It makes a great deal of difference where the director 'stands' in relation to the other person. If one stands 'opposite' the directee, she or he becomes the 'other': a stranger, or one in need of instruction, or a person to be guided according to 'my way' of perception and values.

But if directee and director stand 'alongside' each other, the dynamic of the relationship changes dramatically. Now there are possibilities for mutual enrichment, learning, understanding different ways of perceiving and organizing life, of sharing one's experience of Holy Mystery. Seeking the direction of the Spirit together becomes more possible in this cross-cultural context now that the director has acknowledged that she or he is not a member of the directee's culture and thus cannot take for granted that each is experiencing God, self, community and the world in the same way, but that he or she is willing to try to think and feel as the directee does (even if only with difficulty).

Approaching the sacred

Spiritual direction is an encounter in sacred space and time within the context of conversation and sharing. The sacred is the numinous, the presence of the divine named as God, as Holy Mystery, as Trinity in community, as the One beyond all images and words. Chronological time is briefly suspended in a conversation in which both persons take off their shoes (or sandals) for this is indeed holy

ground (cf Exod 3:5–6). It is a moment of *kairos*, of possibilities of encounter on a profound level with oneself and God and others.

The director's approach to the sacred and the ordinary is crucial since it may not match that of the directee. Are the sacred and the ordinary two distinct levels of reality, each with its own spheres of influence, and never the twain shall meet? This has been the classical western perception of reality. Are the sacred and the ordinary, religion and culture one reality? This is an experience shared by many peoples outside western culture. It is a distinctly African world-view, and forms the expectation that God will be experienced in every facet of life. A western director who is unaware of this different perception of reality may be taken aback at the other's common-sense approach of 'finding God in all things', just as an African director can be frustrated by a directee from Europe or North America who constantly puts their experience into little pigeon holes neatly labelled 'God' and 'world'. Each can learn from the other: the African wholistic experience expanding the limited western horizon and the western world-view exerting a note of caution not to ascribe everything that happens to God's direct action, especially situations of suffering.

A third perspective, that of the denial of the transcendent, would make spiritual direction very difficult yet not totally impossible, if the director could replace the language of God in his or her own mind and heart with the language of searching for meaning which is the perspective of many persons today.

Some reflections on culture

Definitions and descriptions of culture reflect the struggle of anthropologists to be exact in denoting what this concept denotes.[7] For the purposes of this article, I prefer to image culture as the 'air we breathe', the oxygen content of one's familiar surroundings in which we each have been taught how to participate in life's activities and what is most important about life. When we leave our home culture (or the one we have become accustomed to) we enter into a situation which has a different 'oxygen content'. We become uncomfortable to some degree (and sometimes to a great degree, hence the experience of 'culture shock') and we say (to ourselves only, we hope!): 'How strange these people are; they don't do anything properly'.

Our culture, whether it is the experience of family (for each family organizes its life and activities just a little differently than do its

neighbours down the street) or the macro-culture which dominates our life as a Canadian, a Japanese, a Nigerian, a Brazilian, subtly and also relentlessly shapes our values and attitudes towards life. The person that we are has been formed by the values of our family, our educational experiences, the friends and colleagues we have, the influences of church, synagogue or mosque, the omni-present media (TV, radio, film, and now the Internet), the values of our society (including its fads and fetishes) and the sense of 'corporate tradition' in our culture. Thus we can speak of Polish culture, teen culture, Catholic culture, and more.

The director's self-awareness

All of this has an impact on the self-awareness of the spiritual director. Since we can only bring ourselves and not someone else to this cross-cultural relationship, it is too late to change our cultural heritage, personality, education, gifts and weaknesses or the story of our journey in/with God when the new directee walks through the door.

It is crucially important that before the director seeks to respond with interpathy to the directee of another culture, she or he reflects on how culture has shaped them as the person they are. Some pertinent questions are:

- How do I experience myself? What is more important: to be autonomous or to be in community with others?
- How do I image God? Where do I 'find' God? How does God 'find' me?
- How do I pray? Why do I pray this way? What are comfortable ways to pray?
- What are uncomfortable ways?
- What do I consider most important in life? The least important?
- What is my image of myself in relationship to the world around me?
- What are some positive values that my culture has given to me? Some negative values?

To the extent that I as a director am aware of my own world-view, values and how my culture influences me, then I will be less likely to assume that this directee of another culture feels, thinks, responds and prays as I do.[8]

Factors in cross-cultural spiritual direction

There are a number of distinct aspects of spiritual direction which are affected by the cross-cultural dimensions of the experience. For example, space and time cannot be taken for granted, for different cultures value and signify them in different ways. Space refers to physical distance between two persons and also to their bodily posture. Different cultures are more comfortable with less space between persons; this is true of Mediterranean and Latin American cultures. North American and Western European cultures are more protective of the physical space between persons. An Italian director might be more comfortable with the directee sitting closer to her but since the directee is from England he prefers a bit more distance from the director.

Much communication in conversation is non-verbal. Eye-contact is a very pertinent example. Different cultures set norms for looking at people. A spiritual direction experience in which one person values eye-contact and the other has been trained not to look at people directly will have problems until the director realizes that her or his cultural norms in this area are not shared. To refrain from looking at one's director, to speak softly, are not always indications of shyness but may also show respect for the director.

Different cultures measure and value time differently. Western cultures are of course utterly dependent on the measuring of time, trying to cram as much as possible into each day. Other cultures are more relaxed about the measurement of time and more present to what is happening at each moment. An experience I had in directing a young Ghanaian woman religious in an eight-day retreat remains a powerful witness to this cultural fact.

I had scheduled a 45-minute appointment each day during the retreat. From experience I had learned that this was usually an adequate amount of time for the retreatant to share her experience of the previous day and for both of us to discuss the next step in the retreat. But with this young woman I found that each day's meeting became longer: an hour, ninety minutes, one day almost two hours. Since I had other retreatants to direct in addition to a number of responsibilities at the retreat centre where I lived and worked, I was at first impatient with the prolongation of the interviews. I tried to find ways to help her to summarize her experience of prayer, but to no avail. By the fourth day I just relaxed and let her talk as long as she wanted. Towards the end of the retreat the sessions began to shorten down to an hour. On the last day when she thanked me for

the retreat she said, 'Thank you for listening; no one has ever listened to me before'. What a shock to me to realize that I had almost destroyed the retreat dynamic for her by my mental attitude that we had to keep to a certain time frame. I directed her in a retreat several times after that and our sessions together were generally around an hour or so. Why is this instance a cross-cultural learning and not simply the result of a set of personal experiences? African culture is focused on community, not on the individual.[9] Thus it was likely that in her family and now in religious life she was simply one in the midst of many, and not listened to as a person in her own right.

The 'authority' of the director is another factor that can be interpreted differently in different cultures. Until recently, the classical understanding of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition had given a high level of authority to the director. One came to the director to be told how to live the Christian life. Since Vatican II the focus has shifted, as we have seen, to a situation of more equality, of 'co-discernment'. But cultural values towards authority remain strong. Cultures that are more hierarchical, such as some of the African cultures I am familiar with, lead persons to expect that the director 'knows all' and thus can and should make a decision for them. It is not unusual to be asked, 'Tell me what I should do'. This is both poor psychology and poor theology in spiritual direction. If a person gives over adult responsibility for their lives to another person, they can never own the decision. And theologically it is unwise to decide for another what the leading of the Spirit is for them. How can one deal with such tensions in a situation of cross-cultural direction without denigrating the directee's cultural experience?[10]

The nature of authority provides a path towards the answer. In spiritual direction there is a certain authority since the directee comes with at least an initial level of trust that this person can assist me in my journey in/with God. This is true of all situations of direction. When the cultural understanding of authority is different, the director must first be aware of the differences. If the expectations are too strong, he or she faces the challenge of helping the person begin to take responsibility for their choices. There is a significant difference between telling people what to do and making suggestions for the directee to reflect on, between 'advice-giving' and co-discernment. If the expectations of the directee are too nearly autonomous, the director can work towards helping the person see that

the director stands within the community as a helper, and so broaden the directee's community focus.

Images of God are another crucial dimension of religious experience in cross-cultural settings. As in every direction experience, we tread lightly here. I have heard persons speak of God in ways I would never have imagined: God is a lion, the breeze, the sun, Grandmother, a spark. God is like a school mate and stands by me always. God is music, dance, the wind in the trees. Expect to be surprised and delighted by the multitude of new images of God which one hears in cross-cultural experiences. Of course, one hears traditional names too: God as Father, Mother, darkness, silence.

In this era of inclusive language, I was very happy to learn that since many African languages do not have personal pronouns, e.g. he or she, the words for God are both masculine and feminine. Persons spoke in the same breath of 'God is my helper and He will never leave me' and 'God said to me that She loves me'. Since the English language has used predominantly male images for God until recently, to listen to a person using both genders as alternatives is a new experience.

Many directors and directees have found that reflection on one's dreams yields another area of rich understandings of themselves and God. Dream interpretation can take many forms, with many western-trained directors having some familiarity with Jungian dream symbols. But other cultures deal with dreams in different ways.[11] In African cultures, dreams can serve as warnings from the ancestors (deceased persons from one's family who have lived good lives and are regarded as continuing to have an influence in the families still on earth) and cause fear and anxiety in people. A woman I accompanied in direction described repeated dreams of her father who had died recently. He seemed to be asking her for something. She became increasingly frightened with each dream. Finally she realized that she had not forgiven him for the ways he had hurt her. When she prayed a prayer of forgiveness, the dream pattern ended.

Sometimes people will interpret their dreams literally and state that they must do something because the ancestors demand it. I have found it helpful to assist the person in placing the dream message within the context of their whole life, against the broader expanse of faith. One student preparing for priestly ministry was ready to leave his religious congregation since his grandfather had come to him in a dream and was warning him about being a priest. In our discussion he said that his grandfather had not been Christian and was

very sceptical of Christian belief. In reflecting on his own sense of faith and call, he stated that perhaps his grandfather also stood for his worries and questions about his own vocation.

Dealing with fears also has cross-cultural dimensions. What are the fears transmitted in cultural learnings? How do people deal with their fears? Again in the African context as I have experienced it people can become very frightened about the presence of evil spirits. A director might erroneously dismiss this fear as groundless since he or she does not believe in 'evil spirits'. But the fear is real. The challenge is to deal with the fear while not upsetting the belief system. An African priest I once worked with said very movingly that 'he thanked God that his faith in Christ had *freed him* [italics mine] from the fear of evil spirits'. He still believed that there were evil spirits but now he was no longer afraid of them. The director can assist the fearful person by encouraging them to bring their fears to Christ, who healed fearful people in the gospels and can heal them now. Since the peace of Christ is also real, the director can invite the person to ask for a deeper measure of Christ's peace.

Moving towards interpathy

How can the director learn the perspective of interpathy? If one is living in a situation of one or more cultures other than one's 'home' culture, it is vitally important to learn to listen to that culture. Learning the language, even if not fluently, provides an entry-way into the thought patterns of the other culture. Listen to the songs, poetry, myths of the culture as they are sung, danced or found in written form. Participate in the rituals of the culture, especially those involving birth, marriage, death. Attend sporting events to experience how crowds cheer for their favourite team. All these experiences help in suspending one's cultural 'frame and picture' and entering into that of the directee, thus growing in interpathy.

'Drawing one's culture' is another method of recognizing one's own culture in the context of meeting another.[12] In getting to know a person of another culture, Gallares suggests asking the directee to spend from five to twenty minutes drawing pictures, events, peoples and symbols which are important to the person. *No* words are to be put on the paper. Then the person is invited to explain these symbols. Since a person's cultural identity contains much that is symbolic and non-verbal, drawing some of these elements will help both parties to be aware of the impact of cultural identity in the direction experience.

A director in a cross-cultural situation can expect some very important things to happen as the relationship grows and develops:

- *Expect to learn*: about yourself, about another culture, about the richness of human experience.
- *Expect to be uncomfortable sometimes*: persons of different cultures will and can challenge your cultural presuppositions, habits, values. When you recognize that you are not comfortable, ask yourself why. What is happening that makes you uneasy? Is it justified or not?
- *Expect to be amazed*: learning increases our capacity for wonder. As the riches of another culture unfold in the person you are accompanying, expect to be filled with awe and wonder for the diversity of human experience.
- *Expect to be challenged*: There is always more to learn about the ways of God in human experience. What we know now can always be expanded and persons of other cultures are often our very best teachers.

When interpathy is real

When do the director and directee experience interpathy? When does the attempt to allow the directee to be both 'frame and picture' become real? I find it especially in two experiences: laughter and shared silence. Laughter as the expression of a shared sense of what is humorous or incongruous is a good sign that both persons are now hearing the real human language of life. And when both stop in awe at the presence of God, unseen and yet real, then the shared silence voices the truth that in our attempts to communicate well across the barrier of difference, the one God is our common bond. And so words become silence and the silence speaks.

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NOTES

1 See Susan Rakoczy IHM, 'Unity, diversity and uniqueness: foundation of cross-cultural spiritual direction' in Susan Rakoczy (ed), *Common journey, different paths: spiritual direction in cross-cultural perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), pp 9–23. This *Way* article is based on some of the central ideas of the earlier article.

2 Cf Margaret Guenther, *Holy listening: the art of spiritual direction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1992).

3 While the context of this article is of the one-on-one direction experience, it is also applicable to group direction contexts. This is especially significant for many cultures in which group experience is central.

4 Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry A. Murray, *Personality in nature, society and culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p 53.

5 Cf David W. Augsburger, *Pastoral counseling across cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp 27–37.

6 Dunne writes: 'Passing over is a shifting of viewpoint, a going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion. It is followed by an equal and opposite process we might call "coming back", coming back with new insight into one's culture, one's way of life, one's own religion.' Cf *The way of all the earth: experiments in truth and religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1972), p ix.

7 Louis J. Luzbetak describes culture as 'society's design for living' and lists these elements as central:'1) a plan 2) consisting of a set of norms, standards, and associated notions and beliefs 3) for coping with the various demands of life 4) shared by a social group, 5) learned by the individual from the society, and 6) organized into a dynamic 7) system of control'. Cf *The Church and cultures* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p 157.

8 For an example of what can occur when cultural differences are not recognized, see Leonard Blahut, 'The spiritual director as guest: spiritual direction in a cross-cultural situation', *Presence* 3 (May 1997), pp 57–61.

9 Many African cultures have a saying that stresses this, e.g. 'a person is a person through others'.

10 The dynamics in a direction experience could be the opposite, of course: a director whose culture leads them to make decisions for others and a directee who is determined to be self-empowering.

11 Cf 'An African perspective on spiritual direction: an interview with Sr Michael Mdluli OP', *Presence* 1 (September 1995), pp 25-28. She points out that certain African cultures have distinct referents for dream symbols, e.g. 'a river to be crossed means difficulty in reaching out to others . . . A locked house shows a problem with relationships. A special kind of green snake is a symbol of the ancestors and means that good fortune is coming' (p 27).

12 Cf Judette A. Gallares rc, 'Toward a multi-cultural approach to spiritual direction' in Susan Rakoczy (ed), *Common journey, different paths,* pp 156–171.