

Professionalization

Spiritual directors at the edge

Lucy Abbott Tucker

At the Edge

*It's scary and breathtaking living at the edge
of your life,
just you, the edge and the vast unknown
and echoing down the valley of your heart
the constant call to trust.*

*Yet how quickly that edge becomes a settled place
without an echo,
a niche to line and realign till you feel satisfied,
lulled into complacency by the now safe edge
till your peace is undermined by a new awareness
out beyond the edge of who you have become.¹*

Spiritual direction as charism

WHEN ONE TALKS AND LISTENS to spiritual directors² it quickly becomes evident that the work of spiritual direction was not chosen by these individuals but rather they were chosen for the ministry. Many men and women who currently find themselves working in the ministry of spiritual direction describe how the conversations they found themselves having with people were oftentimes centred around the issues of life within the context of a faith perspective. Often, this began to happen in casual settings, a few moments of quiet conversation during the church social or sitting on the sidelines of a child's soccer game. Gradually, people began to ask, 'Can I come and talk with you more about this?' Slowly, it became evident that these conversations were mostly about one person listening deeply to the stories and faith journeys of another. Most directors were 'surprised' when someone asked them for spiritual direction or described them as a spiritual director. What for them was a genuine interest in the life of another together with a deep sense of the reality of God present in the world began deepening towards a call to ministry. The sense of prayer in these 'listeners' usually deepened

and intensified as they received the sacred stories of others and experienced their own faith and vulnerability. Gradually, it becomes evident that the listening and sharing that is occurring has traditionally been called spiritual direction.

In 1990 when a group of spiritual directors met at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California to talk about the ministry of spiritual direction they asked Lowell Glendon to act as a listener and scribe to the conversation. At the end of the meeting, part of his comments read, 'A spiritual director is called by God, has an inner sense of that call confirmed by an outer manifestation – being sought out by others'.

It seems generally accepted that this wonderful ministry called spiritual direction begins with a gift. Writers who address this gift use metaphors like artist, midwife and amateurs.³ The activity of God in relation to the call to the ministry of spiritual direction is a source of strength and courage to directors as they stand poised on the edge of their work. It is when the issues of professionalization, accreditation and certification begin to be uttered that the edge becomes much noisier and controversial.

Spiritual direction as profession

In the book of Amos we read, 'Yes, days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send famine upon the land: not a famine of bread or thirst for water, but for hearing the Word of the Lord' (Amos 8:11). In the last thirty years the 'thirst for hearing the Word of the Lord' has contributed to the emergence of the ministry of spiritual direction. As more people become aware of the 'Word of the Lord' being spoken within their hearts and lives, a great desire to share this experience with another emerges. The small number of people adequately prepared for the deep, careful, faithful listening that spiritual direction requires inspired the founding of training programmes and centres for spiritual direction. Clergy, religious and lay people who feel called to the ministry, seeking to deepen and develop the knowledge and skills which will support their ministry, have supported training programmes for over thirty years. Directors working within the ministry are seeking supervision. A professional journal devoted to the ministry of spiritual direction, *Presence*, is published by Spiritual Directors International. The development of a code of ethics is being undertaken by the same organization. The signs that mark out a work as professional are clear.⁴ The questions related to the 'professionalization' are multiple. I would like to address five of them:

- Who develops the criteria for training programmes?
- Can you really train someone as a spiritual director?
- What is the value and purpose of supervision?
- What happens when people begin to pay spiritual directors?
- Is there such a thing as a ‘certified’ spiritual director?

Who develops the criteria for training programmes?

Curricula in learning programmes of any type are developed around three areas:

- the expertise of those already involved in the task;
- the learning needs of those coming for training;
- the skills necessary for a basic level of competence adequately to complete the task for which you are being trained.

In the United States, training programmes were originally developed by men and women who were gifted in the ministry of spiritual direction and saw the desire and need of others who were just beginning to be available for this work. In 1989 directors who had participated in the programmes of training begun by these charismatic men and women began to meet together. One thrust of their conversation was to have creative dialogue about the various approaches to spiritual direction and the material that was presented as essential to training. Out of this continued dialogue a set of Guiding Principles was developed to help trainers formulate and evaluate programmes. In time, the Guiding Principles came to centre around six themes: discernment, theology, psychology, practicum work, supervision and justice.⁵

Once a list of elements deemed essential for competence in any field is developed, the danger of minimalizing the task to a checklist of attainable skills is present. Equally dangerous is the process of maximizing the list so that inclusion as a competent member becomes exclusive. As spiritual directors we need to be aware of these two tendencies and stay firmly in touch with the middle ground and with the reality that each of us has unfinished and developing edges. There are no finished or perfected spiritual directors. Indeed, the sense of being complete is probably a clear warning sign to look more honestly and gently at one's self. Perhaps it is a call to step away for a time from work with others until better balance with both the brokenness and the wholeness of life is experienced. On the other side, we must also recognize that we are entrusted with sacred stories and vulnerable hearts when we sit with others in spiritual direction. To undertake such a task without adequate preparation

is foolhardy and vain. What each director needs to take to a direction session is both competence and a profound sense of the reality of a God who is oftentimes mysterious but always active.

Criteria for training people for the ministry of spiritual direction need to continue to be developed and refined by those men and women involved in the ministry. Individuals working within training programmes need to use developed criteria to assist them in developing programme elements. People moving into the ministry of spiritual direction through means other than organized training programmes can use them as guidelines for self-organized reading and education. Primarily, however, we must remember that this work is about more than an organized body of knowledge. Appropriate information and knowledge are important, but not sufficient, for the spiritual direction relationship.

Can you really train someone as a spiritual director?

Several years ago my mother was hospitalized for an extensive period of time. Twice each day a technician would come in to draw blood. It quickly became evident that each person who came into the room for this task was trained. The individual would check for an appropriate vein, cleanse the area, and plunge in the needle. It also quickly became evident that some technicians had what my mother called 'the right touch'. For these technicians the needle went in gently and quickly, the vein never skittered away leaving the technician the task of trying yet again, and seldom did a bruise mark the spot where the needle had been. Other qualities were evident in these technicians also. They were quick yet unhurried about their work. My mother sensed they had as much time as she needed. They talked to her, first about what they were going to do, how many vials of blood they would be taking, and then always stopped to ask how she was feeling and if it was okay for them to begin. As her veins became more scarred and less accessible, sometimes even these good technicians would hurt her. When they did, they always stopped to say how sorry they were and to spend a few minutes holding the place where the needle had just been.

I learned a lot from those technicians. Mostly I learned that while I could teach someone skills that are helpful to the direction relationship, I could not make a spiritual director. It is a bit like teaching someone to dance. I can teach the steps but the rhythm needs to come from within. The training is important, and I would hope that as spiritual directors we are always desirous of learning

more about what we are doing and how we are doing. Mostly, we need to listen inside of ourselves.

Training centres need to be keenly aware of the limitations of training and skill development. Trainers need to help the participants in their programmes look with discerning hearts to their call to the ministry of spiritual direction. This takes more courage than might immediately be evident. When an individual gives time, money and energy to a training programme that person expects to come out 'successful'. In this instance success can easily mean that after completing this programme they expect to be a competent spiritual director. Can trainers be courageous enough to say, 'We've taught you skills and given you information and we don't perceive within you a call to the ministry of spiritual direction'? Can trainers do this in a way that preserves the integrity, the self-worth and the dignity of the programme participant? Unless this responsibility is taken seriously, I wonder if a training centre is being conscientious about its own discernment regarding its competence to train others.

What is the value and purpose of supervision?

Supervision provides spiritual directors with the opportunity to look closely at the interactions they have had with directees. As they look at their own stance and responses to the individuals with whom they meet, the areas of giftedness and growth within their own lives becomes evident. Effective supervision both challenges and supports our lives and our ministry.

What we do and how we respond to life situations is intimately connected with who we are. This is true for spiritual directors as well as for directees. Often these actions and responses are so subtle that we can miss them in ourselves. Taking the time for supervision, either in an individual or a group setting, provides each director with the opportunity to attend to the meaning and consequences of direction interactions.

Supervision is not a forum that polices spiritual directors or decides who is in and who is out. At the same time, without supervision we are much more likely to neglect or ignore our own blind spots, how we are subtly pushing and pulling our directees. When the same type of trust that enables spiritual direction sessions to be safe places is present in supervision sessions a great deal of growth can happen.

A recent article by Robert C. Berger FSC entitled 'Spiritual direction: relationships in the presence of God'⁶ describes the three

relationships active during direction sessions: the relation between the director and God, the relation between the director and the directee, and the relation between the directee and God. In the conclusion of his article he writes:

Given the centrality of these three relationships, the process of spiritual direction might appear to be overly complex. How is one able to keep in mind all the points discussed when actually directing another? Even more, are there not inherent contradictions? The relationship between guide and seeker demands a deep bonding and a transformation of both persons; but at the same time the guide is asked to remain on the side and to let the relationship between the seeker and God develop with little personal interference. Other contradictions could be noted. But these contrasting elements need to be held in tension with one another for completeness and fullness. The three relationships must all be operative and complementary for the direction process to be truly effective.

While the process of spiritual direction is complex, its mode of action can nevertheless be reduced to three basic guidelines for the director. The director must be as grounded in God as possible; love the seeker unconditionally; and respect the seeker's unique freedom by standing aside and letting the relationship between God and the seeker unfold in all its fullness.⁷

Each of the relationships described by Berger and the giftedness present when a director is faithful to these relationships describe the scope and purpose of supervision. While Berger is concentrating in his article on the dynamics inherent within the direction relationship, he also provides us with a clear and succinct outline of how to look at myself as director and at the direction session when preparing for supervision. The challenge to look at how I am 'loving' my directees and allowing them to grow freely in relationship to self, others and God is also an invitation to my own growth in ministry.

What happens when people begin to pay spiritual directors?

At a recent Sunday worship service that I attended three announcements were made before the homily. A drive for blood donors that was being conducted by the local hospital was announced, the chair of the building committee described the progress on the church hall and asked for additional donations, and the bazaar committee had a request for volunteers to staff the white elephant booth. After these announcements the homilist got up and

began, 'I'm not sure what to say next. You have already been asked to give your blood, your money and your time.' After laughter, it struck me as interesting how money fits right in there with the critical life issues of blood and time.

As soon as the issue of money comes into a relationship, particularly a relationship that has not previously involved fees, questions arise. The simplest reason why the charging of fees for spiritual direction has arisen is that individuals who are not supported by church structures have moved into the ministry. They simply need the money in order to continue in the ministry.

There are issues beyond this simple level however. Issues of expectations, justice, availability and social responsibility, to name just a few.⁸ There is some ambivalence about the question of fees. Kenneth Leech writes, 'some spiritual directors charge fees for their services, something which would have horrified the saints in all ages'.⁹ On the other side, the letter with which Bill Creed SJ begins his article 'Dignity and worth: the question of compensation for spiritual direction' reads:

An issue that has arisen strongly for me lately has to do with 'the laborer deserves her pay', not just any kind of pay, but just pay . . . Why, when the Spirit calls me to this incredibly wonderful work of spiritual guidance, do I get penalized for it, in the world's terms?¹⁰

The strong emotions connected with the issue are clear. Answers are neither simple, universal nor clear. I think we need to recognize that the circumstances in which individuals are doing spiritual direction today is quite varied. Some people are supported by church systems while others are operating in more independent structures. The question of compensation has both practical and emotional ramifications. I know of no spiritual director who is in this ministry 'for the money'. I know many spiritual directors who struggle with the desire to remain faithful to their call while maintaining financial viability in the world. Perhaps the most integrated question for spiritual directors today is, 'What stance towards compensation do I need to take in order to preserve my dignity as a human person and to preserve the dignity of my directees?'

Is there such a thing as a 'certified' spiritual director?

We hear the question often, 'Are you a certified spiritual director?' We see the advertisements, 'Certificate in Spiritual Direction'. Academic institutions are offering programmes, sometimes with degrees, in spiritual direction. What then, does it even mean to ask the question, 'Is there such a thing as a certified spiritual director?'

Unless a representative organization of a substantial number of spiritual directors has agreed, first, what criteria are necessary for certification, second, to review the applications of individuals seeking to be certified, third, to assume liability for the responsible conduct of those members who achieve certification, it seems that the expression 'certified spiritual director' is used inappropriately. While individuals attending training programmes in spiritual direction or graduates of schools offering academic qualifications in spiritual direction often have a document labelled 'Certificate', I would offer the position that there is currently no such thing as a 'certified spiritual director'. The written declaration accompanying 'Certificates in Spiritual Direction' appears to be validation of successful academic achievement and/or satisfactory attendance at a programme. Some programmes and academic institutions having a supervised practicum component within their training provide written recommendations to and for their graduates. These are indicators of the advisability and desirability of a particular graduate entering into spiritual direction relationships with others. While these recommendations minimally meet the first two requirements of certification I know of no academic institution or organization that currently considers itself willing or able to assume liability for the responsible conduct of its members. Certainly, responsible behaviour of spiritual directors is taught and valued within programmes. At the same time, because of limitations of oversight and finance no organization is currently willing to guarantee the behaviour of its members. In this instance, I use the term 'guarantee' to mean assuming financial responsibility for any harm done to a directee as a result of the actions of one of its members.

The prior question that this argument raises is whether it would be advisable to offer certification in spiritual direction. The answers to this question are once again quite diverse. The societal demands and expectations surrounding the question are as varied as the cultures and countries in which the ministry is active. While Europeans and Americans are familiar with the myriad lawsuits being initiated against those in religious settings, most Asian and African countries

are not currently dealing with those issues. To seek to impose a certification requirement outside of the cultural norms with which one is familiar appears grandiose. At the same time, the financial constraints of some sponsoring organizations need to be clearly recognized as one of the current impediments to the question of certification in some areas of the world.

The two factors that would help create a valued response to the question of certification seem to be cultural context and a reframing of the concept of certification into one that protects the fiscal responsibility of the sponsoring party. Some attempts in this area are being made through the use of terms like registry or covenant.¹¹

A new paradigm

There is a wonderful retelling of a traditional children's story entitled *The three little wolves and the big bad pig*.¹² The authors invite us to reinterpret a familiar story. As spiritual directors do we not continuously invite directees to open eyes, ears and hearts to deeper insights into familiar situations? To reinterpret familiar stories?

If we reframe the question, 'Is spiritual direction a ministry or a profession?' into 'How can the charism and the responsibility of spiritual direction support and enhance one another?' we open the ministry to a world of possibilities. We become part of what evolves rather than working harder at defining and defending a position.

In *The three little wolves and the big bad pig* the third and final house the wolves built was made of flowers. The big bad pig fully intended to huff and puff and blow this house. Then,

... he took a deep breath, ready to huff and puff, [and] smelled the soft scent of the flowers. It was fantastic. And because the scent was so lovely, the pig took another breath and then another. Instead of huffing and puffing, he began to sniff. He sniffed deeper and deeper until he was quite filled with the fragrant scent. His heart grew tender ...¹³

I suggested at the beginning of this article that the ministry of spiritual direction and we as spiritual directors currently find ourselves living on an edge. We hear the voices that speak of charism and we hear the voices that encourage professionalization. Often, we experience ourselves as needing to choose and defend one or the other position. What if we, like the big bad pig, allowed ourselves

to step deeper and deeper into the position of the other? Is it possible that our hearts would also grow tender to a new reality?

Simply put, that would mean that as spiritual directors we see ourselves called to a ministry with a rich, varied tradition and as ministers having a professional responsibility towards our directees. I would suggest that we do this, not from the perspective of avoiding legal entanglements, but from the commandment of Jesus to love God and our neighbour as we love ourselves. If I contextualize my ministry as a spiritual director within a law of love I will consistently seek to serve my directees in a responsible fashion. That would include being in spiritual direction myself, a commitment to ongoing formation and training in my ministry, obtaining appropriate supervision for my work, and knowing how and when to refer directees to other professionals. It would mean that spiritual directors, through representative organizations, church systems to which they are affiliated, or the training programme in which they participated, would commit themselves to standards and patterns of behaviour towards which they would consistently aspire.

Spiritual direction has been refounded as a ministry many times over the centuries. As spiritual directors we are currently part of a refounding period. As spiritual directors we each seek to be faithful to the rich tradition we have inherited. It appears that the call to us now is to bring 'tender hearts' to the voices that trouble and disturb our edges so we may bravely grow into the vast unknown of possibility within our ministry.

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NOTES

1. Noel Davis, *Heart gone walkabout* (Shekinah Creative Ministry Co-Op, Australia, 1991), p 126.

2 Many people have difficulty with the use of terms such as spiritual director, direction, directee etc., preferring instead to use spiritual guidance, companion, traveller etc. The language choice itself often reflects some of the underlying difficulties and issues connected with dis-

cussions regarding the professional nature of spiritual direction. Since direction has such a long history in the tradition of this ministry I will use it within the article.

3 For an excellent description of the amateur nature of spiritual direction see Margaret Guenther, *Holy listening: the art of spiritual direction* (Cambridge, 1992).

4 For a good description of the professionalization of the ministry of spiritual direction see R. J. Willis, 'Professionalism, legal responsibilities and record keeping: a conversation with Robert J. Willis', *Presence* vol 1, no 1 (January 1995).

5 A more complete description of the Guiding Principles developed by Spiritual Directors International can be obtained by contacting them at 1329 Seventh Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94122.

6 Robert C. Berger FSC, 'Spiritual direction: relationships in the presence of God', *Listening/ Journal of Religion and Culture* vol 32, no 2 (Spring 1997).

7 *Ibid.*, p 128.

8 For an article that raises many of the questions associated with the charging of fees in spiritual direction see Bill Creed SJ, 'Dignity and worth: the question of compensation for spiritual direction', *Presence* vol 1, no 3 (Summer 1995), pp 45-50.

9 Kenneth Leech, 'Is spiritual direction losing its bearing?', *The Tablet* vol 247, (22 May 1993), p 634.

10 Creed, 'Dignity and worth', p 45.

11 For an interesting approach to this question see the draft of the Membership Covenant of the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors Aotearoa-New Zealand.

12 Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury, *The three little wolves and the big bad pig* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

13 *Ibid.*, p 26.