

RECEIVING AND REJECTING

On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction

Robert R. Marsh

I WAS SITTING WITH MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR a while back, bemoaning the recent drabness of my spiritual landscape, when she asked a question that split me in two: ‘If God were here now, what would you say?’

Two spontaneous responses rose to the surface more or less together. One was ‘Pull your socks up!’—a slightly irritated demand to God to tidy up my life and fix some of the health problems that have been besetting me. The second was ‘Hey, buddy!’ Now, I’ve called God many things in my life, including *friend* and *lover*, but this was the first time I’d used *buddy*, and I felt rather embarrassed by it.

I narrate this because it illustrates a question that is both practical and theological: to which of two spontaneous movements should a spiritual director give more attention? Which thread should they follow?

The issue often surfaces for directors once they have mastered the art of attentive listening. So much arises in a spiritual direction session and offers itself for exploration. The knack that we all struggle to acquire is that of winnowing the wheat from the chaff. How do we, during a session, encourage and develop those strands of a directee’s experience that are leading somewhere good, and how do we let go of those that aren’t? In this case, which way to go: *socks* or *buddy*? Do we have a rule of thumb? And do we have a rationale for our instruction and practice?

Spiritual direction, if it is to be more than passive listening, is full of such dividing paths. As directors, we are constantly deciding to go along one and not another. What is our strategy?

We might decide to pursue the opening that we find more *interesting*. We might follow the path we think is *heading* somewhere we would like the directee to go. We might prefer to walk with the directee into the heart of *issues* they seem to need to address. We might

just go where the *directee* takes us. How we make these decisions that are constantly coming at us says a lot about what we consider spiritual direction to be.

Twenty-five years ago William Barry and William Connolly argued convincingly that the proper focus of spiritual direction is on fostering a person's *experience of and relationship with God*.¹ If we were to accept that focus and put it into effect how would we make the many decisions that arise in direction? Which avenues would we explore? Barry and Connolly speak of *religious* experience being the preferred focus of direction. On that basis, the principle of choice we are trying to articulate could simply be expressed as follows: seek out experiences where God is, at least implicitly, present, and let them develop in a way that fosters the person's relationship with God.

This rule of thumb, though easy to state, can be tricky to grasp and put into practice. The challenge lies in being able to tell which strands of experience are more 'God-rich' than others (and this we shall have to pursue at length below). But already the proposed focus on experience of God makes each of the methods of navigation proposed above inappropriate.

The focus on experience of God means that we do not choose our path according to outcome or destination at all, either where we as directors think the conversation should go, or where the *directee* wants to end up. Navigation by destination has to give way to something more subtle: finding our way by finding God's way. Our compass should be what tradition calls the discernment of spirits: sifting experience for its orientation to God.

This transforms the art of spiritual direction, making it both so much easier and so much harder. To persist with the metaphor of navigation: the task is made easier because a spiritual director does not need to have a detailed and deep knowledge of the spiritual terrain in order to chart a course. The director needs neither a bundle of maps nor personal familiarity, but something more like a compass: a guide to the way for here and now, even if the terrain ahead is unknown.

Whatever metaphor we use here has limitations. The compass metaphor may be unhelpful if it suggests a fixed pole to steer by. Maybe

¹ William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury, 1982).



what we are describing is more like a ‘nose’ for the things of God: a sense that in this contingent moment *this* is the way to go rather than *that*. Maybe we need to drop the navigation metaphor altogether and think of spiritual direction as akin to *tracking*: looking, sniffing, feeling for the spoor and signs of God’s passage. But one point is clear. If the focus of spiritual direction is the encounter with God, then mastery of intricate theories of spiritual or psychological progress fades into the background, and the whole business becomes simpler.

But in other ways, having discernment at the heart of the process makes spiritual direction much harder. Discernment is a skill that cannot be faked, or simulated by algorithm, and it is a practice that demands continual vulnerability and personal transformation in the director. To discern with another person is to open one’s heart to the spiritual influences they experience: it cannot be done dispassionately or at a distance.

But how exactly does discernment help with the minute-to-minute decisions we have been exploring? ‘Discernment’ (*discreción*), as Ignatius uses the term, refers not to the making of major decisions—which he terms ‘election’—but to the continual process of deciding

which threads of our experience we should encourage and which we should not. His Rules for Discernment (Exx 313-336) are thus not about abstract and absolute classification but rather, as his subtitle says,

... 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).²

This is exactly the skill I see as central to spiritual direction.

Ignatius' term *motions* covers (in George Ganss' words),

... acts of the intellect (e.g. thoughts, lines of reasoning, imaginings, etc.); or of the will (such as love, hate, desire, fear, etc.); or of affective feelings, impulses, inclinations, or urges (such as peace, warmth, coldness, consolation, desolation, etc.) ...³

It refers to the whole wealth of our experience as we receive it, interpret it, and follow it into action. For Ignatius, our experience is never static, and rarely spiritually neutral; it has, rather, both a spiritual origin and a spiritual end. Our experience is in motion, and the 'motions' we experience have a significance.

We are accustomed to the idea that our thoughts and feelings and so on spring naturally from conscious and unconscious sources. But the pre-modern part of Ignatius' mind also saw our experience as influenced by spirits and angels. Discomfort with an apparently outdated world-view should not make us too hasty to pass over the wisdom it hides. Ignatius' spirits have a dual nature that makes them very interesting. They are inescapably entwined with our inner experience, yet they are also somehow more than purely mental or psychological realities, or placeholders for God's own Spirit. Ignatius' spirits are natural but spiritual elements of the created world. They introduce a cosmic or ecological aspect to his world-view. The 'other things on the face of the earth' may indeed, as the Principle and Foundation explicitly says, have a significance for human beings; but they also have a prior significance in their own right.

² I use the translation of George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).

³ Ganss translation, p. 191.

Both the wider world and our experience of it demand discernment, the interpretation of their significance. The world is neither a neutral place, nor one marked by a smooth and untroubled progress to some goal. To some degree it is a battlefield—out there in the external world, as well as within the self.

The spirits which influence our experience do so towards an end. Good spirits move us to God, and bad spirits oppose that movement. Discernment, then, is about discovering where our embodied experience comes from and where it is going. This is what puts the *direction* into spiritual direction. Discernment is not simply abstract classification; discernment is a matter of asking the dynamic and practical question about which aspects of experience to encourage and which to set aside or resist. It is about how to live and act in the cosmos. This is why Ignatius' subtitle to the Rules in Exx 313 is so important: discernment tells us what to *do* with our perception and understanding of our experience. If we are spiritual directors, it is discernment that will tell us how to navigate. Which of the many threads of a directee's experience do we encourage? In my case, should my director go with 'Pull your socks up!' or 'Hey, buddy!'?

***Discernment
tells us what
to do with our
experience***

Ignatius' primary rule is so simple as to be challenging: go with the consolation and avoid the desolation. But a lot rests on the understanding of these two technical terms. Consolation and desolation are the present-tense symptoms of an underlying *movement* of experience. The movement comes from somewhere and is heading somewhere; and right now, in the middle of the dynamic, we have both the symptoms and the trajectory to go on as we set about discerning.

At first glance, 'following consolation' sounds like pursuing pleasant or positive or encouraging aspects of experience. Indeed, Ignatius' first handling of the matter leans in this direction. Consolation is,

... every increase in hope, faith and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one towards heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing it tranquillity and peace in its Creator and Lord (Exx 316).

His description of desolation makes this even clearer: desolation is,

... obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion towards low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. ... One is completely listless, tepid and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord (Exx 317).

Ignatius, however, always sets the present symptom in the context of its origin and end, of where it comes from and where it is going. The bad spirit causes anxiety, sadness, a sense of difficulty, and spurious trains of thought which paralyze and unsettle. The good spirit inspires the opposite. Ultimately the criterion for evaluating consolation and desolation is their *end-point*. Which experiences are leading towards faith, hope and love? Which are leading towards God? Nevertheless, the present symptoms never lose their importance. Even though the Second Week Rules envisage an apparent consolation arising from the bad spirit, the true nature of this experience can be recognised precisely through the felt desolation to which it leads.

The director's task is to discern the 'motions' of the directee's experience—including both present symptoms and dynamic tendencies—and to help them 'receive' the good motions and reject the bad. This is more than simply going with the good stuff or staying with the positive—it is about staying where the signs are best that God



is being revealed and waiting to be encountered more deeply. Stated abstractly this might sound a daunting or impossible task—to tell what God is doing!—but practice bears out its possibility and effectiveness.

Ignatius describes how the signs we work with have to be interpreted differently in the different ‘Weeks’ of a person’s journey with God. In a purgative phase (whether in the First Week of the Exercises or in ordinary life), consolation and desolation may be starkly delineated (Exx 315-327). When the directee is being illuminated in the ways of God in the world, consolation and desolation have to be set in the context of their longer-term trajectory (Exx 328-336). Again, in times of ‘unitive’ experience, consolation and desolation may be very hard to grasp, and discernment then relies on an often obscure sense of presence. Someone praying the passion, for example, may experience intense and uncomfortable aridity, and yet remain with the experience because they do not wish to leave Jesus alone.

Yet, whatever the subtlety, Ignatius’ subtitle to his rules makes plain the basic strategy we should follow: develop and explore the strands of experience which seem to be moving Godward and set aside or reject those that hinder Godward movement. Because the ideas of consolation and desolation are complex, and also because of the uneasiness sometimes inspired by talk of spirits and angels, I find it convenient and precise to speak instead of *movement* and *counter-movement*.⁴ If we use ‘movement’ as shorthand for those Godward strands and ‘counter-movement’⁵ for their opposite we can express a strategy for spiritual direction succinctly: ‘Stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement’.

Therapeutic Seductions

When I’ve put the point as starkly as this, other directors have voiced objections. These are of two kinds.

The first kind of objection reflects the therapeutic prejudice of our culture. The pop-psychology we are immersed in wants us to explore and own the shadow-side of our experience as a means of psychological

⁴ I learnt the usage from Jane Ferdon OP and George Murphy SJ, who introduced me to this approach to spiritual direction.

⁵ ‘Counter-movement’ is an appropriate designation, since such pulls are often not experienced as independent from the movement, but rather as thematically opposed to it, and logically (and often temporally) as consequent to it.

growth. Now, it cannot be denied that our emotional growth often means facing hard and difficult aspects of our history and experience, and that skilled interventions ‘getting to the bottom’ of a problem can be powerfully healing. But spiritual direction, however much our practice is informed by psychology, is not therapy. The proper purpose of spiritual direction is to develop a person’s relationship with God.

***A therapeutic
focus in direction
betrays a
misunderstanding***

Therapy might well be a helpful, or even vital, adjunct to direction in enhancing a person’s capacity for relationship, or in dealing with particular blocks along the way. But a therapeutic focus in direction betrays a misunderstanding.

Directors can find it hard to wean themselves off problem-solving approaches and to hold back from interventions that follow a counter-movement in the name of ‘getting to the roots’ of an ‘issue’. Spiritual direction is not primarily about exploring or solving issues, but rather about deepening the experience of God as mediated through the experience of life.

The powerful concept of unconscious motivation has tended to make us a suspicious people. We are only too aware of the hidden sources of our experience and action. Intellectually we have been trained in a hermeneutics of suspicion. But the spiritual discernment we are speaking of here demands an entirely different mindset: discernment demands a peculiar and contemplative attitude. You have to trust the experience enough to let it breathe and show its colours, but you must also doubt it enough to hold it as provisional. You have to be neither suspicious nor credulous.⁶

The pop-psychological preference for counter-movement is often exacerbated by the natural fascination that counter-movement holds. A person coming for direction is often embarrassed by the Godward strands of their experience—they are usually new and unfamiliar, often seen as ‘too good to be true’. Instead, therefore, they report at length aspects of counter-movement which, though often unpleasant, have the attraction of familiarity. The director’s own fascination for counter-movement often leads them to collude with the directee in avoiding the exploration of possible movement.

⁶ See, for example, William A. Barry, ‘Missing the Meaning of Religious Experience: Hermeneutic of Suspicion Is an Enticing Trap’, *Human Development*, 8/1 (Spring 1987), 37-42.

Nevertheless, I stand by the maxim: ‘stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement’. Often enough I have seen a powerful moment of revelation occur once a director stops plugging away at a counter-movement that has led round and round and gone nowhere, and turns in defeat to the less obvious trace of a movement—only to find it a place where God does something unexpected and truly creative. Such moments can be transformative for both directee *and* director.

This unexpected or creative work of God can be as challenging as it can be delightful. Sometimes a director will pursue a counter-movement in the belief that a directee needs to be confronted in some way, but then discover that the work God does when the movement is allowed to emerge and develop is far more challenging than they could ever have imagined.

What about Repetition?

The second kind of objection to ‘avoid the counter-movement’ is more interesting. It could be put in the form of a question: what about repetition? Ignatius’ instructions for repetition seem to go against our maxim for choice within a direction session:

I should notice and dwell on those points where I felt greater consolation or *desolation*, or had greater spiritual experience. (Exx 62)

The Exercises are an organic programme of transformation, within which repetition is one of the key technologies. Along with spiritual direction itself, repetition guides the person making the Exercises to deeper and deeper experiences of prayer. Repetition, as we know, is about returning in prayer to those places where something is going on, where some business is unfinished.

Ignatius seems to be suggesting that we should return for further prayer not only to places of consolation but also to places of desolation. Why would Ignatius want someone to return to an aspect of their experience that is, by definition, leading them away from God? If we just say that an experience of darkness can be worked through and can lead eventually to the light, this only makes sense if the terms ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’ are being used loosely to refer to pleasant and unpleasant states. Taken strictly, what would be the point of returning to a place of *true* spiritual desolation if a place of true

spiritual consolation were also available? Bluntly: why turn away from where God is to where God isn't? Or, more subtly, why spend time considering my turning away from God, and its many reasons and influences, when God is available simply elsewhere?

Ignatius touches on these issues himself when discussing the causes of desolation (Exx 322). Ignatius' instinct is that human beings are made for consolation—made to *find* God in all things—but that desolation, though never caused by God, can serve a divine purpose. Desolation can teach us humility and perseverance. Desolation can underline our reliance on grace. And, though Ignatius only hints at this, an experience of desolation, in so far as it is 'the contrary' of consolation, can show us where to look for consolation, or throw into stark contrast the work God is doing there. At the simplest level, Ignatius' instructions for repetition can therefore be taken as highlighting those areas of our experience where something of spiritual significance is happening, rather than as inviting us to 'follow the bad spirit'.

But other things are at stake too. What Ignatius says about repetition also highlights an important element in the process of discernment of spirits.⁷ When I, as one making the Exercises, pause to review my experience, searching for somewhere to return in repetition, the very act of discovering some particular place's significance and naming it tentatively as consolation or desolation begins to effect a transformation. What perhaps I had previously been experiencing as merely unpleasant, I now name as unwanted in a deeper sense. The recognition that a state of heart is not only disagreeable but contrary to my deepening desire for God starts to transform my experience of that state. The desolation I return to in repetition is already being transformed into consolation by its recognition and naming—its discernment.

But we must go further still. There is another distinction to be made concerning the roles of consolation and desolation in repetition: one of *scale*, in the sense in which a scientist might use the word to describe levels of approximation. Ignatius introduces the terms 'consolation' and 'desolation' (Exx 316-317) in the context of his

⁷ Thanks to Ruth Holgate for underlining this, and thanks to Ruth, Paul Nicholson and Mags Blackie for many helpful conversations about this paper.



description of the kind of motions brought about by the good and bad spirits (Exx 315). He is focusing on the fine-scale felt experiences stirred in the human heart: the threads of movement and counter-movement between which we wish to choose. In this context, desolation seems virtually synonymous with ‘caused by the bad spirit’ and consolation with ‘caused by the good spirit’. But Ignatius also sometimes works on a coarser scale, speaking of consolation and desolation as more or less persistent moods, or even in the context of the overall direction of the person’s life.

Ignatius’ most obviously coarse-scale comment is his observation that consolation can be false, a product of ‘the evil angel, who takes on the appearance of an angel of light’ (Exx 331-332). The fine- and coarse-scale senses of consolation can conflict. The key point is that ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’, in Ignatius’ language, refer not only to the ‘individual’ motions but also to more general and extended trajectories of soul: consolation to times when the dominant mood seems to be both pleasant and Godward, and desolation to contrary times.

In my experience, however, no state of consolation or desolation in this broader sense is monotonic. Every period of consolation has, at a micro-level, currents of both movement and counter-movement; and

every time of desolation is, at a finer scale, made up of both kinds of motions. The general mood may lean in one direction, but both movement and counter-movement are always present and needing to be discerned.⁸ It is at this level that the maxim ‘stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement’ is applicable, and it is as apt when the general mood leans towards desolation as it is in states of consolation.

When the instructions for repetition suggest we return to a place of desolation, they are operating at a coarser, more general level, suggesting that we stay in touch with the maelstrom of good and bad motions, and through prayer and discernment let something happen. Indeed it is in such places that we *learn* discernment. Repetition puts us in the place where we can discern the various motions of our experience: ‘the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected’.

The Case of Ken

Perhaps it might help to offer a thought-experiment to highlight the practical differences between these two approaches. Imagine you are giving the Exercises to someone:

Ken has been having a powerfully illuminating time praying with Jesus going about his ministry. Since you last saw him, he has been praying with the last verses of Luke 9, where the cost of discipleship is sharply underlined. Ken arrives in some distress. He has been shaken by his prayer. He doesn't think he has the strength to follow Jesus. He has been imagining ways in which he might be put to the test in his own experience and fail. For repetition during the day he has returned to the words, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head'. The Jesus of his prayer also seems to have changed—he seems darker, almost bitter.

Obviously Ken is in desolation, and your first task as his director is to follow the seventh Annotation and be gentle and encouraging, laying the way open for a return of consolation. But to do that effectively, you need to answer two questions. What aspects of Ken's

⁸ It is perhaps possible that in clinical depression movement is so suppressed as to be impossible to notice or develop.

experience will you linger on and seek to develop in the session that has just begun? And what will you offer for prayer for the coming day?

Everyone to whom I have given this case study has the instinct that the challenge Ken is experiencing is an important one, and not to be glossed over. No one wants to explain away his response ('it's natural to feel challenged by this kind of reading') or offer supportive platitudes ('don't worry'), and simply move on to the 'next' day's exercises regardless. Something is happening that needs to be dwelt with. But opinions differ on *how* one should stay there, in ways that make a crucial difference.

If you were inclined to follow Ignatius' advice on repetition *coarsely*, you would listen empathically and actively as Ken reports on his prayer, prompt him for clarification, help him reach the challenging nub of the matter as he experiences it, get him to own and articulate what is going on at the affective level and so on. Then you might suggest that Ken returns to Luke 9 (with or without similar supporting material), and continue to pray for the grace he seeks.

I label this a coarse approach because, while it honours the principle of repetition, it ignores the fine grain of discernment. If, as a director, you were attentive to this finer level you would be looking to identify movement and counter-movement, the one to receive and the other to reject. The counter-movement is written large: Ken is in distress, he doubts himself, he is afraid of difficulty and failure, and Jesus himself sounds bitter to him and less worthy of his love. Where, though, is the movement? What is it that the *counter*-movement is countering? It may be that your memory of previous days supplies a clue, or it may be that the creative moment comes when you ask how the counter-movement began:

'How did the mood get so dark yesterday? When did it change?'

'It started when I said the words, "I will follow you wherever you go". I thought I was being so idealistic, but as I spoke them to Jesus they suddenly sounded so hollow ... and saw that Jesus heard it too ... and I couldn't hold his gaze.'

'So that's when the mood shifted? Do you remember what was happening just before?'

'Oh yes. I'd been gazing at Jesus' face ... there was something there that touched me. Hurt, maybe? There he was looking vulnerable. The Samaritan village had turned him away ... and he looked lost, hurt.'

'That touched you?'

'I felt this enormous compassion for him ... like I knew him inside ... like I wanted to comfort him.'

'Did he look bitter?'

'No. He looked hurt and vulnerable and alone—in need of comfort ... I wanted to comfort him.'

By keeping the focus on the fine grain you have found a movement drawing Ken into closer companionship and discipleship, a movement presaging the Third Week grace of compassion. In comparison with this, the counter-movement seems dull and predictable.

On reflection, Ken finds echoes of that movement throughout his day that he had overlooked: at the Eucharist he had been deeply moved holding the host in his hands, fingering its fragility; waking after a nap, he had been aware of a lonely but determined Jesus 'with his face set toward Jerusalem'. As you encourage Ken to stay with these movements, letting them develop and deepen in the direction session, you can see his desire to be with Jesus growing, and watch him move into felt consolation. You help him begin a conversation with Jesus about that desire and about the fears and doubts he has previously experienced. And this time he doesn't flinch from Jesus' gaze.

At the end of the session you feel able to send Ken away to continue that conversation and to return to Luke 9, seeking out the movement that had challenged him rather than the counter-movement that had distressed him.

Stay with the Movement

How we handle repetition makes all the difference in the world. Whether we stay with movement or counter-movement makes all the difference in the world.

I do not want to deny that God works regularly and creatively when we give the Exercises in a 'coarse-grained' way, or offer spiritual direction which ignores the fine grain of movement and counter-movement; as we have all experienced, God is not entirely thwarted by

our inadequate listening or by our eccentric and inept suggestions for prayer. But I do want to suggest that the primary responsibility of a director is to work with the ‘fine grain’ of experience, helping the retreatant to stay with movement and to avoid counter-movement. Applying Ignatius’ wisdom about repetition bluntly has led to the comparative neglect of his more important instructions to follow the good spirit and reject the bad. We are there to help others co-operate with the transforming work that God is doing in them. Such an approach is in one sense highly directive, and can enable retreatants to move forward in quite unexpected ways. But it remains—in best Ignatian fashion—‘indifferent’, non-directive, with regard to outcomes. It is a matter of saying forcefully, ‘stay here’, and then waiting to see what happens.

And what of my own situation with which we started? There I was sitting with my director, the two answers to her question hanging in the air: ‘Pull your socks up!’ or ‘Hey, buddy!’ Two avenues were opening up and offering themselves for exploration: which one were I and my director to follow? I imagine that by now you will have backed your own winner. But my real point is that there is no way of knowing the answer to such questions in the abstract. We can only find a way when, face to face with someone, we can discern the movements of their experience, ‘the good that they may be received and the bad that they may be rejected’.

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