
Surprised by God

Jan Johnson

Several years ago, a woman came to me after I finished teaching a series of writing workshops. She took a deep breath and explained that she had wanted to come to the first workshop, but refrained because she'd attended one I led ten years earlier. She had sensed back then that I was angry with the students (and with the world), and this upset her.

As soon as she began talking, I felt my mind and body slip into spiritual direction mode. I turned directly toward her, let my arms hang to my side, and fixed an attentive, steady gaze on her. I didn't try to do this—my body automatically moved into this space when I heard the intensity of her words. It did not occur to me to ask questions or defend myself. Her words and feelings poured forth in the midst of a crowd that quietly gathered. She then said that she'd decided to come the second day and sensed that I had changed a great deal. I knew I was to remain quiet.

She continued, "Now I realize that I resented you before because I was as angry as you were. I saw myself in you. I hated you. I hated me." At this point she started crying, and people began handing her tissues. But I stayed with her gaze as she went on to say more: "I see that your anger is gone now—I want that too." Finally, she became quiet, and I waited a little longer to make sure she was done. She fell into my arms and I held her for a while.

Later, I reflected on how my body instinctively changed as I saw that she was attempting to share her real self. After just four years of being a spiritual director at that time, I'd understood that my job was to quiet my thoughts and receive whatever she had to say.

I never would have guessed that being a spiritual director would form not only my habits but also, even more deeply, my soul—my way of being. People become spiritual directors for

a variety of reasons: many feel a call; some want to exercise spiritual gifts; others stumble into it and don't sense any sort of call until they're immersed in it (like me), but almost no one pursues this ministry to have his soul formed. Nor should he. This is the surprise of the Holy Spirit to those who, in an immense attraction to Jesus and a willingness to submit to discipline, become more like Jesus almost unconsciously.

The "Schoolroom" of Spiritual Direction

Doing the work of a spiritual director creates a situation in which you expand your interaction with God. That happens partly because you intentionally set aside space for you and another person to listen together to God. It also happens because

in doing spiritual direction, you diligently practice the spiritual disciplines of silence, listening, and the many others that make for community. Here are some of the changes I've noticed in myself (other directors have verified these) as I've responded to this call to be a spiritual director.

Focusing the mind and heart

To be entrenched in a rigorous practice of silencing the mind, letting go of interrupting thoughts, and listening intently is radical. At all costs, I cannot let my mind wander. I dismiss the odd noise my air conditioner makes. I discard the memory that I must call someone. As my directee talks about her mother's death, I set aside my own mother's death of the previous year to ponder later. For now, I am present to this directee in front of me, to the tears forming in her eyes, to the lift of her eyebrow in delight.

This practice of silencing the mind is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls the "ministry of listening." He wrote, "There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person."¹ This half-listening is the opposite of the steady gaze of Jesus of the Gospels as he listened to the woman with the issue of blood tell him the "whole truth" (which may have taken a while and included some embarrassing details), to the father of the demon-possessed boy answer his question about how long his son had been tortured, and to the woman at the well move through her percep-

tions of who he really was (Mark 5:33; 9:21–23; John 4:4–39).

This silencing of the mind results in silencing the mouth as well. (This is not automatic—many times, mouths move when minds are empty.) When my directee finishes speaking, I wait in silence. I may not barge in. In fact, I can't because my mind has been so quiet that I have to ponder what, if anything, I should say. This is different from my normal life of years ago when I planned what to say while the other person talked. Or I made quick analyses, such as, "You must have been angry when your father said that." Lengthy pauses create space for me to let go of any old tendencies to rescue, offer tissues, teach and preach, recommend the perfect book, lighten up the moment with humor, or offer a story. None of these thoughts is allowed in the sacred space with my directee and me.

This careful sort of listening has been compared to practicing *lectio divina* on a directee. We slowly, attentively "read" directees the way we read Scripture. We read directees by listening for tone and cadences of words, picking up feelings, and noticing pauses, body language, and facial expressions. We "meditate" on them by pondering what's going on behind the words, by recalling what they've said in past sessions (I even consult the notes I've taken). We "pray" for them not only aloud in conclusion, but also as we practice God's presence throughout the session. We "contemplate" them between sessions by offering them to God, noting what God may be saying to us about them, and asking for guidance about future sessions, making notes as needed. Does it sound too far-fetched to compare spiritual

direction to *lectio divina*? Simone Weil put it this way: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer."²

Alertness, openness, and hope

Attentive listening trains you to be a "spotter." I'm learning to detect what my directees miss: how they behaved with exceptional maturity in an area they'd been failing in, how they showed incredible hope when they'd been so full of despair, how what they did last week was exactly what they said they wanted to do two years ago. (I check my notes and then show them.) They look at me in amazement and say, "I said that?" I respond, "Now you've done that!"

In describing the benefits of spiritual direction, Jeannette Bakke describes the "increasing

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awareness” of directees, but directors grow in this as well. The growth in consciousness of closeness to God, of God’s invitations, and of discomfort and comfort in self and in others³ is something directors also experience. Part of why this happens is that we open ourselves to what God might do because every session with a directee is a surprise. Directees are often led by God to do things we directors would never have recommended; yet they turn out to be exactly right. I may begin a session a little droopy, but as the directee’s presence invites me to be alert, the caffeine I thought I needed is no longer necessary.

I’ve also watched directees make decisions I believed were wrong, yet as their director, I was called to help them walk honorably through those wrong decisions (sometimes for years). When I least expected it, I witnessed their “aha” moment of reversal. This is what it looks like to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (1 Corinthians 12:26). This has taught me to “dare to imagine wild and exciting new possibilities for ourselves and God’s world...to see what is really there,” as Alan Jones says. He explains that direction involves “the recovery of astonishment, and the revitalization of our withered imaginations.”⁴

In all of life I’m now seeing things I used to miss, and this seeing increases my capacity to hope and replaces my lifelong tendency toward cynicism. Even though I get discouraged about the contemporary church, I find hope in my handful of directees who invite me to join them in their journey.

This dynamic creates a sense of partnering with God although, admittedly, I am a minor fig-

ure. As my directee and I listen together to the Holy Spirit, I stay alert to recurring thoughts that are not of me—those thoughts that are uncharacteristic of anything I’d ever think. What could be more interesting in life than all this interaction with Jesus for so many minutes at a time?

Humility.

To be a spiritual director is to give up being a “star.” I’m only a facilitator watching the Holy Spirit work. My directees will know and love God without my expressing my brilliant insights.

In fact, spiritual direction has formed another practice of silence in normal life—not giving my opinion unless asked. One time I wanted to pause and talk theology with a directee who insisted on doing certain things because it was the role of a wife (only) to submit. How I wanted to present the position of mutual submission in marriage! Instead, I was prompted to set aside that idea and ask, “What does love look like in this situation?” As she answered that question on deeper and deeper levels, our differing views didn’t matter. Instead, she focused on speaking the truth in love and doing what was truly best for her husband and herself. At first I was quite shocked by this, but now it seems normal to walk alongside others in normal life without broadcasting what I think about upcoming elections or their Second Coming predictions.

Such routine practice of listening to another forces us out of self-absorption. Diogenes Allen writes, “The task of paying attention...can be performed only as one gains some freedom from *self-importance* and *self-concern* and from our many, often competing desires that prevent us from attending to

others.”⁵ If you’ve ever had inclinations to talk on and on about yourself, it’s riveting to spend so many minutes in a day saying nothing about yourself.

Humility was forced on me because none of my directees had (until recently) heard me speak, read my books, or vis-

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ited my website. This “hiddenness of self” was exactly right for me as a frequent platform speaker; it forced me to be other-centered. It was always clear to me that I was not to “depend on directees for personal satisfaction and security.”⁶

Humility is also imposed on spiritual directors as we fol-

low directees down the rabbit trails of their thoughts. (Nearly all my directees are extroverts who process out loud.) When they stop and ask, “Where was I?” my job is to offer the topic sentence to the paragraph that began ten minutes ago. I used to be annoyed at their veering off, but now I’ve learned to listen for a reason behind the alleged detour. Without my direct intent, this has made a more patient person of me. Now when clients at the drop-in center for the homeless where I volunteer regale me with wild stories, I can stand there and enjoy them instead of thinking of all the tasks I came there to do.

Respect for others

Doing direction is also training me to keep myself out of the holy space that exists between God and each individual.⁷ I picture this as the space between God and the other person, and I must not insert myself there. This is part of respecting others’ spiritual boundaries, not presuming to guess what God is up to in their lives, what spiritual practices they should use, or what their next steps on their journeys are. The Holy Spirit knows these things and reveals them as needed. When I’m led to make suggestions, I’m careful to say they are only suggestions, and God may give them better ideas.

This rigorous practice of staying out of others’ holy space has been helpful to me in my everyday life as a mother of adult children. My daughter’s friend recently asked me, “Why don’t you tell your kids how they should be getting married and giving you grandchildren?” That, I protested, would be invading the holy space between God and each of my kids. To stay out of their holy space means

walking with them through their predicaments without rescuing and managing. I look, listen, and love, but resist offering ideas and resources unless it’s very clear that it’s from God and not me. As in spiritual direction, I ask questions at times, but then my immediate task is truly to listen to these adult children who are now my friends.

Welcoming the stranger

Being a spiritual director has also challenged me in another aspect of community: welcoming the stranger (also called hospitality). In life, the stranger I need to welcome is anyone I’d rather ignore—the guy in the airline seat next to me or my talkative next-door neighbor. I’m sorry to say that the stranger the strangers are, the more difficult it is to welcome them, but doing spiritual direction has schooled me in this practice.

For example, when I reported to my supervisor what I considered the overbearing behavior of a new directee, he said, “It sounds like she’s trying to take off her coat and get comfortable with you. Meanwhile she’s making a lot of commotion, trying to make sure you understand just how wonderful she is, trying to make you love her.” Thus prepared for our next session, I saw her as a “wounded, tentative seeker behind the bravado...[a] person [who] feels unworthy of God’s love.”⁸ Could I let go of my annoyance and embrace this stranger? It’s now years later, and I’m glad I did.

You can imagine how this translates into life. Most people in America are working hard to impress you. It’s difficult to accept and embrace those name-dropping, boasting col-

leagues. Can I walk with them through this awkward phase and give them loving, patient attentiveness? I see Jesus doing this with the rich young ruler, and, slowly, I can do this too. Quite indirectly, this love begins to work itself out in me, moving me (slowly!) toward becoming the kind of safe, receptive person the angels have wondered if I’d ever become.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, 98.
- ² Simone Weil: *An Anthology*, Sian Miles, ed. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986, 212, (from *Gravity and Grace*, Emma Craufurd, trans., New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1952).
- ³ Jeannette Bakke, *Holy Invitations*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000, 263–265.
- ⁴ Alan Jones, *Exploring Spiritual Direction: An Essay on Christian Friendship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982, 86–87.
- ⁵ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Books, 1997, 102 [italics mine].
- ⁶ William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, 129.
- ⁷ This idea is implied in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on how “a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ” in *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954, 21.
- ⁸ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1992, 62.

About the Author



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