

Spiritual Direction with Directees Who Struggle to “Think in Colour”

By Lindy Nevill

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Introduction

This project comes out of conversations I have had over the years with a friend whom I will call Jane. We started by talking about Donald Miller’s book *Blue like Jazz*.¹ I found the reflective, metaphorical style refreshing and thought provoking. Jane found it inaccessible. “I don’t think in blue!” she exclaimed. In our conversations we now often talk about thinking in colour or black-and-white. We discovered we each had times when we engaged more, or less, “colourfully”. While I may think more colourfully when it comes to reading material, Jane is more attracted to craft activities than me. We have each had both good and bad experiences of spiritual direction and the like, where creativity, reflection and metaphor are often used.

Jane and I are not unusual in sometimes struggling to engage with what has often been called right-brain thinking. This project looks at the implications of this for spiritual direction and suggests some ways of working with directees who, like us, find this way of working difficult. I suggest that, while encouraging colourful thinking is important to spiritual direction, many directees will be put off if this is not done in a sensitive way. Initially I will look at definitions; what do I mean by colourful thinking? I will consider the cultural and spiritual significance of colourful thinking and why some people struggle with it. Finally, I will look at the issues that difficulty with colourful thinking causes and suggest some strategies that spiritual directors might use.

While based largely on my conversations with Jane, this project also draws on my experience, first in education and now spiritual direction. Conversations with other spiritual directors and directees have also influenced my thinking, as have a large number of authors. This project is qualitative rather than quantitative, focusing on raising issues rather than defining them or considering them in a scientific way. It is a starting point from which future researchers may bring more scientific rigour to bear.

Definitions

I have chosen to use the term “colourful,” rather than right-brain thinking, for two reasons. Firstly, to provide distance from the now disputed idea that different types of thinking originate in particular parts of the brain, and secondly to allow for a more fluid definition. In the appendix I have provided a list of possible terms that might be included in my definition of colourful thinking. Also included is a counterpart for attributes that might be thought of as being at the opposite end of a spectrum. This is an indicative rather than exhaustive list. It is very possible to be more at the colourful end of the spectrum when looking at some pairs and the opposite with others. For

¹ Donald Miller, *Blue like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 2003).

example, I am very good at abstract thinking, but often struggle with creative expression. Future research may separate components of the list into different categories, but for now they are intended to represent a wide range.

The logical opposite to colourful is black-and-white but, while the idea of binary thinking is relevant, that phrase tends to have pejorative connotations. I have therefore chosen the term bi-level to contrast with colourful. This term is used in computer science to describe an image created using just two colours of pixel, often black and white. This term reflects not only the binary nature of such thinking, but also the more positive way a complicated concept, such as a full colour picture, can be effectively simplified when required.

Cultural and spiritual relevance

Both bi-level and colourful thinking are important. The ability to work with complexity, nuance and metaphor is valuable. But sometimes we need to be able to simplify complex ideas so that others can easily understand, and at times we need to be able to follow clear instructions without question. Ideally, we need to be able to balance bi-level and colourful thinking both individually and as a society. However, it has been argued that Western society gives preference to bi-level thinking, leading to a difficulty with non-explicit communication and the need for complex sets of rules. Bi-level thinking can lead to such a faith in rules that we fail to challenge them even when they fail us. It can lead to siloing of information and a lack of ability to make connections. If our society favours bi-level thinking, this will influence many of our churches and many of our directees. Iain McGilchrist presents an image of bi-level spirituality as follows:

“(It is) less congenial to the mystical, more to the systematic. It would prize the written word over the visual image or music, and would tend to take the written word literally. It would be relatively uneasy with un-knowing and would claim certainty. It would lack an understanding of embodied worship, including the metaphorical nature of icons and statues. It would not see religion as a historical and cultural phenomenon, with its own context, but would see religion as timeless and universal. It would believe that religion could be used to control the uncertainties of the future, perhaps through the power of prayer, and that it would bring its true believers power and material wealth. It would be unable to accept the creativity of negation, or active passivity, and would have a belief in its own capacity to “make things happen.” It would see the dark side as simply to be rejected, suffering as purely negative. Its tone would be optimistic.”²

While acknowledging that both bi-level and colourful thinking are important, it does seem that colourful thinking is particularly useful in offering a depth to spirituality. As Sue Pickering points

² Iain McGilchrist, “Cerebral Lateralization and Religion: A Phenomenological Approach,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 9, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 335.

out, “All human attempts to describe God are partial, but the metaphorical language of scripture helps us to understand a little more about who God is and about God's way of being in the world.”³ Colourful thinking helps us to recognize and attend to that which is beyond our comprehension and to see the divine in the ordinary.⁴

Why do some people struggle to think in colour?

So, what is it that makes colourful thinking harder for some people or in some contexts? Presumably there are many possible factors that influence our ability to think colourfully. The following are some that may contribute.

- Many of us have been brought up or trained to think predominantly in a bi-level way. This ranges from the types of thinking we are exposed to through to the effects of abuse. Someone who has experienced negative consequences for mistakes or “different” ideas may (consciously or not) look for the “right” answer and so default to bi-level thinking to avoid the risk of “being wrong”.
- The situation we find ourselves in often affects our ability to think colourfully. Stress, nervousness, and tiredness can get in the way of imaginative thinking.⁵
- Keeping the focus on intellectual discussion rather than feelings or experiences can be a way of avoiding more difficult subject matter.⁶
- Where we are in our Christian journey may make a difference. James Fowler outlines six stages of faith. Stages two and three tend to favour a bi-level view of faith – a transactional understanding at level two and a need to follow the teachings of others at stage three. Stage four is a transition stage where questioning is occurring, but stages five and six tend to involve much more colourful thinking.⁷
- Neurodiversity – people on the autism spectrum in particular tend to struggle with many aspects of colourful thinking.⁸

³ Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014), 45.

⁴ Sarah Coakley, “Concluding Eirenic (and Mostly ‘Unscientific’) Postscript,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 9, no. 4 (November 2019): 426, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599x.2019.1604419>; Patricia O’Donnell, “The Creative Process as a Tool in Spiritual Direction” (Spiritual Growth Ministries, 1999); Daniel B. Klein, “Think Spiral: The Divided Brain and Classical Liberalism.,” *Society* 57, no. 6 (December 2020): 621; McGilchrist, “Cerebral Lateralization and Religion: A Phenomenological Approach.”

⁵ Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 161.

⁶ Pickering, 160.

⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, First HarperCollins paperback edition (New York, NY: Harper One, 1995).

⁸ Quinton Deeley, “Cognitive Style, Spirituality, and Religious Understanding: The Case of Autism.,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 13, no. 1 (January 2009): 77–82; Peter J. Naughtin, “Spiritual Direction for Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome.” (2011).

- Personality factors probably have an impact. It is easy to imagine that those who tend toward P on MBTI will find spontaneity easier, while those who are F will find it easier to connect with feelings. I would imagine that S and N might both be quite capable of colourful thinking, but in different ways. An even more significant factor is doubtless the interaction between the different aspects of our personalities.⁹

A final factor to consider is spiritual style. I want to explore this in more detail as it seemed to be important for both Jane and me. Joyce Bellous and David Csinos suggest four different spiritual styles: emotion-centred, symbol-centred, word-centred, and action-centred. While I suspect each of the styles have their own preferred way of thinking in colour, I think that those of the emotion- and symbol-centred are probably more readily catered for in the creative activities that are typically used in spiritual direction. In contrast, I tend toward word-centred, while Jane is predominantly action-centred. Therefore, while I will explain all four styles below, I will concentrate more on methods that might work for word- and action-centred directee in more depth.¹⁰

For the predominantly emotion-centred person, emotion is at the heart of their spiritual experience. Art and music are likely to be valued in worship for their ability to evoke feeling. They value insights and words of knowledge directly from God and *feeling* close to God. They are likely to talk openly about their feelings. Being aware of their emotions, these people will probably respond well to many of the creative, more colourful, techniques used in spiritual direction, such as guided meditation, art and music.¹¹

Those with a symbol-centred approach are very conscious of the unknowability of God. “In this style, explaining spiritual experience is not possible; if one tries, something precious is lost.”¹² They are likely to prefer to worship in quiet, private ways, often enjoying being outside among God’s creation. Although they might struggle to put their experiences into words, these people too will probably respond well to many of the standard, more contemplative, colourful techniques used in spiritual direction. They will probably particularly enjoy working with metaphor and symbols.¹³

Those with a predominantly word-centred approach tend to value a cognitive knowledge of God. The use of written or spoken word and reasoned discussion is an important way to relate to God. Learning about God allows them to know God. This can lead to concrete or legalistic (bi-level)

⁹ Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. P = perception, F = feeling, S = sensing, N = intuition.

¹⁰ JoyceE. Bellous and DavidM. Csinos, “Spiritual Styles: Creating an Environment to Nurture Spiritual Wholeness.,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 14, no. 3 (August 2009): 213–24.

¹¹ Bellous and Csinos.

¹² Bellous and Csinos, 217.

¹³ Bellous and Csinos, “Spiritual Styles: Creating an Environment to Nurture Spiritual Wholeness.”

thinking. However, it is also possible for these people to use their cognitive gifting to move into more abstract, and thus more colourful, thought.¹⁴

- Basic, talk-orientated spiritual direction is likely to work well for these people. They will find this easier to relate to than focusing on emotion, imagination or creativity.
- Word-centred people may prefer to work from scripture passages and images, particularly if legalistic thinking made them suspicious of more creative way of working.
- Colourful thinking can be encouraged by helping these directees to find words or phrases to make connections, explore meanings and nuances, and describe emotions. These people should be encouraged in abstract rather than literal or legalistic thought.
- These directees are likely to value thinking time and may find it helpful to use patterns of prayer that incorporate this. Likewise, they probably want to talk and write. Journalling, brainstorming and mind-mapping may all be helpful.

As the name suggests, action-centred people experience God by acting out their faith. Rather than merely praying for the world, they seek to transform it. They may have difficulty articulating their faith to others, but they are clear about the call to advance God’s kingdom on earth and their passion for justice. They may be prophetic and visionary.¹⁵

- In their drive for action, these people might see spiritual direction as a waste of time.
- Talking about their activities might be a good starting point, perhaps considering motivations or their feelings about the situation that prompted action, their response, where they see God in what they do, and God’s invitation to them.
- They may prefer action-based ways of praying, such as while exercising or doing a craft activity. It may help them to recognise that all of life can be prayer and encourage them to notice God’s presence in their activities.

While each of these styles will have their own preferred way of thinking in colour, I suspect that emotion- and symbol-centred that are often most valued in spiritual direction, and that the action-centred is least valued.

Issues and suggestions

As stated above, colourful thinking is important in spirituality, and it is our place as spiritual directors to promote this thinking in our directees. For some it will come naturally, others we will need to

¹⁴ Bellous and Csinos.

¹⁵ Bellous and Csinos.

work with gently. The Bible is full of examples of both colourful and bi-level thinking in the forms of poetry and prose, metaphor and direct statement. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well illustrates Jesus’ use of both bi-level and colourful thinking in spiritual conversation. The encounter starts with the concrete concepts of drawing drinking water as rapport is built. Then Jesus throws out some more colourful ideas about God’s gifts and living water. It takes some questions from the woman and further explanation from Jesus before she can move to a more colourful, and life changing understanding. Likewise, as spiritual directors, we would be wise to start our encounters by building rapport in a concrete, or bi-level, way, and proceed gently toward a more colourful view, moving at the directee’s pace and being prepared to explain as we go.

Most of us will resort to bi-level thinking when we are nervous or stressed, and entering a new spiritual direction relationship, with its inevitable power imbalance, is likely to make most of us somewhat nervous. The rapport building we do at this point will provide the foundation from which it will be safe for directees to take a risk with more colourful thinking, and this cannot be rushed. Margaret Guenther suggests that emphasising the ordinary (as opposed to the spiritual) might help, such as using “some judicious self-revelation, connecting the life of prior with the minutiae of the here and now.”¹⁶ Bi-level thinkers will want to give the “right” answer, so it is helpful at this stage focus on questions that the directee will know the answers to, such as their own faith experience, and that don’t require much reflection or interpretation.

Most adults have a learned fear of aspects of colourful thinking, perhaps especially those that require us to expose something of ourselves, such as creative expression. These fears range from fear of criticism or failure, to fear of what might be exposed. Part of the work of spiritual direction is to help the directee overcome these fears at least to the extent that they can be honest before God. Patricia O’Donnell suggests the use of affirmations to counteract the critical voice. Provided it is done in a way that is not seen as patronising, this will be an important aspect of overcoming this fear.¹⁷

Something else that both Jane and I find important is understanding what is being asked of us and why. Not being able to understand an instruction or question is intimidating. Instructions need to be clear. For example, if offering a moment of silence, be sure your directee knows how to end the silence and, initially, at least, it may be helpful to indicate how long you expect the silence to be –

¹⁶ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1992), 61.

¹⁷ O’Donnell, “The Creative Process as a Tool in Spiritual Direction”; Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 60.

“let’s take a moment to ... make eye contact with me when you are ready to continue.” “We can take as long as you like – as short as 20 seconds, or for the 15 min left in the session.”

Some of the terms we typically use in spiritual direction may not be easily understood by others – even questions like “what do you notice?” may be confusing if the directee is not used to noticing things. A colourful thinker will take an unclear question on their own terms and answer in whatever way is helpful to them, which is probably what the director is hoping for. However, a bi-level thinker will want to give a correct or accurate answer so needs to fully understand the question. For these people a more directive approach is needed. It may be necessary to explain, reword, give examples or model. We may need to explicitly teach skills, such as encouraging the directee to listen to the tentative and fleeting thoughts that come to mind, remembering that this may be hard for a bi-level thinker who wants to be sure they have the “right” answer. It may also be helpful to explain why you are asking the question as this helps the directee to understand more abstract or metaphorical meanings. Some concepts may need to be worked on over time if they are foreign to directees experience, and some things may need to wait until a directee is ready for them.¹⁸

Listening to and observing the directee provides the best guide for encouraging them in colourful thinking. What examples of colourful language or actions are they using? Do they use an image or metaphor as they talk? Notice and explore these.¹⁹ As we get to know our directees’ personality and spiritual styles we can recognise and value places where colourful thinking is happening. For me, as a word-centred person, I think colourfully through abstract thought. For Jane, in contrast, it is likely to be in purposeful action. It is important to work to the strengths of our directees, but Jane and I agreed that it is also good to include some questions or activities that are more challenging or use different modes, provided they are used judiciously and we were free to go back to familiar patterns if they don’t work. For a very concrete thinker, this might be a session that is predominately active listening with a few more reflective questions thrown in.

We also noticed that when working outside of our comfort zone our processing slows down. Moving from a preferred style to a less familiar one takes time to translate and requires a level of relaxation not possible when feeling pressured. This includes pressure that the director may inadvertently confer by wording a question to assume that answer will be forthcoming. Asking “is there a significance...” rather than “what is the significance...” or “can you think of an image for that?” rather than “what is your image for that?” allows for the sometimes honest answer of “no”, and can prevent the directee from panicking when they feel that they are not able to meet the directors

¹⁸ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 60.

¹⁹ Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 104.

expectations. It may be helpful for the directee to simply note the question to ponder between sessions when they are more relaxed. Similarly, we find that having a director waiting for us to complete an activity can be daunting. Thoughts arise: “Am I doing it right?” “Am I taking too much time?” “Right or wrong?” “Acceptable or not?” These may become conflated with, “Am I acceptable or not?” in those of us with perfectionistic tendencies. We agreed that a way around this would be to encourage a directee who is willing to work in a more creative way to do this at home and bring what they are willing to share to the next session to discuss. Equally this could work at retreats. In this case, have a good selection of materials available so that the directee can be satisfied with the result and is not forced to work with materials that hold negative connotations.²⁰

It is important to be aware of the difference between a thoughtful and a frozen silence. Jane and I have found that the combination of slowed thinking, feeling out of our depth and pressure to perform within a time frame, or while someone is watching, can lead to panic. Even with the most well-meaning directors, the power imbalance seems inexplicably to escalate in this situation and directees find it difficult to ask for clarification or admit that they are stuck. Silence or “I don’t know” may be the only indication the director gets to indicate discomfort. If an approach or line of questioning doesn’t work, move on! There are a number of ways to do this. Suggesting that the directee think about the question after the session and reverting to more concrete or familiar types of questions may help, but changing to another, more comfortable form of colourful thinking may also be appropriate. For a directee that is struggling with abstract or reflective thought but is willing to engage in creative activities, drawing might help. If the directee has become really stuck it may be necessary to take a break and allow them to go for a walk, or make a cup of tea. Some form of movement may help to restore a sense of equilibrium. The important thing is to notice the discomfort and reduce the pressure.²¹

Conclusion

This project has highlighted not only the benefits of colourful thinking in spiritual growth, but, more importantly, the difficulties that many people encounter in engaging in this type of thinking. It encourages us to recognise colourful thinking in forms that may be less valued, and to recognise that different personalities and spiritual styles will naturally favour different forms. Finally, it encourages spiritual directors to help their directees expand their capacity for colourful thinking in ways that are sensitive and directee led.

²⁰ O’Donnell, “The Creative Process as a Tool in Spiritual Direction,” 6.

²¹ McGilchrist, “Cerebral Lateralization and Religion: A Phenomenological Approach,” 331.

Appendix

The following is a list of possible attributes associated with colourful thinking and their bi-level opposites.

Colourful	←————→	Bi-level
Heart	←————→	Head
Right brain thinking	←————→	Left brain thinking
Abstract	←————→	Concrete
Creative	←————→	Structured
Spontaneous	←————→	Planned
Symbolic	←————→	Literal
Reflective	←————→	Practical
Intuitive	←————→	Methodical
Expansionist	←————→	Reductionist
Holistic	←————→	Compartmentalized
Arts	←————→	Science
Imaginative	←————→	Reality focused
Emotional	←————→	Rational
Simultaneous	←————→	Linear
Random	←————→	Sequential
Imagination	←————→	Recall
Principle based decision making	←————→	Rule based decision making
Exploring an idea	←————→	Having the right answer
Big picture orientated	←————→	Detail orientated
Truth	←————→	Experience
Experience	←————→	Truth
Independent thinking	←————→	Conformity
Abstract	←————→	Analytical
Connecting	←————→	Compartmentalising
Poetic	←————→	Prosaic

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