

# Exploring the Means of Asking Questions that Empower and Deepen the Experience of the Directee with Themselves and God



by Maree Shepherd, 2023

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries

2023

**My intention for this special project is to explore the means of asking questions that empower and deepen the experience of the directee with themselves and God.**

*‘Good questions create doorways into new levels of understanding: they are invitations to travel where one has not been before and see things in new eyes.’<sup>1</sup>*

The art of asking good questions has lingered in the back of my mind since starting my spiritual direction training. Having the opportunity to give it some attention in this essay seems fitting.

I explore questions from several perspectives. I circulated a questionnaire to a group of spiritual directors and I have included their responses throughout the essay. I consider the intention of those asking the questions, reflect on what spiritual directors found most helpful in their journey, consider Jesus’ examples as the questioner, reflect on my own experience of framing questions as a trainee spiritual director, and explore an inquiry approach called *‘Clean Language’*.

**Questionnaire to spiritual directors**

I circulated a questionnaire to fifteen spiritual directors and received responses from twelve. I have drawn from some of their responses throughout this essay and a copy of all responses to the five questions is appended.<sup>2</sup>

**What is a good question and what is our intention?**

How do we know we are asking a good question? One source states that ‘It does not have a single answer, invites deepening or broadening reflection, and triggers a change in energy or rhythm of conversation’.<sup>3</sup> This speaks to me of a flow and offering open questions.

Parker J. Palmer, from the Center for Courage and Renewal coined the term ‘open honest questions’ which reminds us to remain curious, and free from agendas, fixing, changing, and judging. And ‘the best single mark of an honest, open question, is that the questioner could not possibly know the answer to it’.<sup>4</sup> In keeping our questions open and starting with the basics of what, where, why, who, when and how remains for me a touchstone to asking good questions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Spiritual Director (anonymous)

<sup>2</sup> My questions were: If you were creating a resource for SD on the art of developing the use of good questions, what would be the three most important points you would include? What have you found most helpful in your journey of developing good questions? If we are holding a contemplative stance, what difference does it make to the questions we ask? What is different in the way you ask questions when your directee is holding an object, or something? Is there anything else about good questions?

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thecoachingplayground.com/post/a-question-of-intention>

<sup>4</sup> Guidelines for asking open and honest questions provided by a Spiritual director and sourced from the Center of Courage and Renewal.

David Benner describes spiritual direction as ‘the facilitation of attunement with God...it is one accompanying another as he or she seeks to increase attentiveness to the presence and direction of the Spirit of God<sup>5</sup>’. This facilitation involves deep listening and dialogue moves between the director, directee and God. The director uses questions to explore not only the outward expression but the inward movements. Therefore, asking questions is central in spiritual direction and below are some outcomes from the use of good questions. I have compiled this list from SGM participant responses, material from the Center of Courage and Renewal, and my own learnings. Good questions:

- Help the person feel heard as you faithfully reflect their language.
- Support the person to listen to his or her own inner teacher.
- Go to the person as well as to the problem, questions about inner realities of the situation as well as the outward facts.
- Unlock things in the person that were already there, but in ways they had not put together before.<sup>6</sup>
- Bring forth new identity descriptions.
- Deepen their understanding of self and God.
- Encourage the person to notice where the light is.
- Help them connect the dots of their story.
- Bring clarity.
- Invite reflection on all of life, not just the spiritual.
- Strengthen their story.
- Bring awareness of the here and now.
- Consider alternative outcomes.
- Allow for their imagination.
- Help the person feel respected because paying attention to the language you use considers their background, culture, life experience, and personality preferences.

‘Open questions are never in the control of the questioner. The question is ‘placed’ in the centre – a bounded, sacred space that we all protect. From there the one responding can receive the experience offered by the question and open to whatever the inner teacher reveals in response to it’.<sup>7</sup>

### **What spiritual directors found most helpful in their journey**

I have compiled below some of the responses from spiritual directors to the question ‘What have you found most helpful in your journey of developing good questions?’ I have

---

<sup>5</sup> David Benner, *Sacred Companions: The gift of spiritual friendship and direction*. p.90

<sup>6</sup> Spiritual director (anonymous)

<sup>7</sup> <https://couragerenewal.org/practicum-participant-portfolio-april-may-2023/wp> p.1

categorised their responses into five themes (and have retained the responses in the first person).

- **Noticing:** the questions that have opened me up and taken me to places, as well as those that have had this effect for directees; that by repeating their words often prompted something in them without me asking a question; the wisdom of my supervisor.
- **Examining:** the questions I use, and reformulating them, to be more effective and to keep them brief.
- **Allowing:** for my mistakes; the directee to interpret the question and answer as they wish to; to work at a slower pace to formulate questions.
- **Developing:** my own interior journey of self and experience of God which must be continually deepening if I am to make room for the other and their story; relationships of trust, listening and following; lists of questions from observations of others including written examples; my own questions; a practice of review - reflect-more practice.
- **Letting go:** of my repertoire of questions; of the need to fill the space; of the need for lots of questions.

Some spiritual directors indicated they had further developed their questioning skills by becoming a facilitator through the Center of Courage and Renewal (Parker J. Palmer); becoming a student of the Diamond approach (inquiry methodology); and studying narrative therapy.

I noticed from the responses given that there is no rigid pattern of development. Rather, each person discovers their own way in the journey of developing good questions.

### Questions Jesus asked

In the Gospels, Jesus asked 135 questions. These include curious questions, open-ended and challenging questions. Jesus used these to engage people (relationally) and draw them in, reveal the essence of what they were looking for, to consider what is truly essential, to instil faith, to uncover who they knew him to be, to explore their true identity, to talk about their most important issues, and he often gave a challenge or a rhetorical question that required no response. Jesus also encouraged others to question and to seek for answers. To his disciples he invited them to 'ask and you will receive, seek, and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you... (Matt.7:7-8).

I have selected a few of the questions Jesus asked in order to point out regular topics we observe in our sessions with directees. You will notice they are brief, curious, and specific.

- 'Who do you say I am?' Matthew 16:15. An identity question in uncovering perceptions about God and self.

- ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Mark 10:51. An invitation to name what we are longing for.
- ‘Why are you so afraid?’ Mark 4:40. A curious question regarding emotion and beliefs.
- ‘What are you looking for?’ John 1:38. An invitation to reveal the essence of what they are seeking and pursuing. Does their present life offer what they want?
- ‘Where are you?’ Genesis 3:9. Asking them to locate themselves in their landscape and with God. (Not asked by Jesus, but of the same character).

These questions aim to get underneath the presenting story, and we may need to be ‘prepared to challenge to the extent the directee is willing to be challenged’.<sup>8</sup>

### Reflecting on asking questions with my directees

I notice in my work as a soul companion that my directees come to the session talking about life in general. Scattered thoughts, or an issue has arisen, a sadness or disappointment has emerged and so on. We start where they are at. We offer different types of questions as we follow and remain with their story. As John Mabry suggests, the usual approach in a session is to use questions to clarify, to invite to go back and look at something, process questions, feeling questions, noticing what happens when you pray questions, and awareness of where the divine is.<sup>9</sup> Our work requires listening, noticing, and attending to. MaryKate Morse uses the metaphor to *notice the duck*, this is likened to looking over the bookshelves of someone’s life, searching for the *duck*<sup>10</sup> and identifying where God is moving in someone’s life.

Questions used by spiritual directors are formed by what they are hearing and noticing. For example, if a directee is using language that includes metaphors and images, or if they are skimming over something that is possibly more significant than they would think, or if there are glimpses of something extraordinary, these give clues to the director as to what to explore further. What the director is hoping will emerge is experiences of God for the directee, honesty with self and God, acceptance, grace, transformation ... A useful resource is cited in Appendix 1: ‘What are you attuned to and what is the gold?’<sup>11</sup>

Ruffing uses the term *panning for gold*: ‘A directee comes and together we dip into the stream of their life and pull up all kinds of things. Rocks of all sizes - I can never guess what’s coming next - all kinds of conflicts and problems, then all of a sudden, some fleck or nugget

---

<sup>8</sup> Spiritual director (anonymous)

<sup>9</sup> John Mabry, *Starting Spiritual Direction: a guide to getting ready, feeling safe, and getting the most out of your sessions* (Berkeley CA, Apocryphile Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> MaryKate Morse, ‘The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions, “Noticing the duck”.’ *Presence – An international Journal of Spiritual Directors*. Volume 15, No3 Sept 2009, p. 51. The term evolved from the author’s experience of having a client who noticed a wooden duck on her bookshelf for the first time ever, even though it had been in place for as long as they had been meeting. All of a sudden, it had been seen.

<sup>11</sup> From the Spiritual Growth Ministries Spiritual Directors Formation Programme.

of pure gold emerges into view in the bottom of the pan as we swirl the water around, emptying out the rocks.’<sup>12</sup> This directs our questions.

Mabry offers some deepening questions that reflect open questions where one could not possibly predict an answer. I find these helpful to ponder as possibilities to inform ways to ask a question.

- If you were the divine, how would you have handled X (this or that event) differently?
- What kind of life is worth living? (Perhaps in response to a directee talking about their life not worth living).
- If you could go back in time and say anything to the God of your childhood, what would you say?<sup>13</sup>

### Using the ‘why’ question for the stuck places

Morse highlights the deepening process using the ‘why’ question. Our natural response might be to avoid using ‘why’, as it can sound judgemental on delivery, or it may be interpreted as taking the directee away from feeling to thinking. However, Morse uses ‘why’ to explore underlying feelings (when used with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit). I recall a ‘why’ question being asked of me by my supervisor. Her tone wasn’t judgemental in any way, and the question arrived in the flow of the conversation. It made me pause to search as to what was underlying my thoughts, it was a revealing question and brought unexpected insight. She didn’t need to keep repeating the ‘why’ to me for further unpacking. (See Appendix 2: Asking the ‘why’ question).

### Different types of questions that I have observed, experienced, and collected

I have started to collect questions under themes to draw attention to a specific aspect of a person’s life and stage and I give a sample of these. These questions focus on:

**Feeling questions** e.g. How do you feel now about the experience you just described? Where do you feel that? How does that make you feel when you...?

**Meaning** e.g. Could you say more about what this means to you? How do the pictures you have collected connect with your story right now? What is your sense of God in this?

**Experience** e.g. What, if anything, did you learn from that prior experience that feels useful to you now? What activities make you feel blocked from God’s presence; or opened to God’s presence? What are you experiencing now, as you sit with that?

---

<sup>12</sup> Janet Ruffing RSM. *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000) p.57.

<sup>13</sup>Mabry, *Starting Spiritual Direction*, pp.48-54.

**Imagination** e.g. If you looked at the situation from Jesus' perspective, what might you see or know now? What would you say to someone facing the same situation as you?

**Curiosity** – e.g. What happens when you make time (referring to making time for silence)? What is the hardest aspect of this situation? What is the easiest aspect?

**Noticing** (outside and inside of self) e.g. What does this space speak of to you? What is drawing your attention as you adjust to....?

**Relationship/longings/needs** e.g. What would it be like to ask God how he/she sees you? How would God like to be seen by you? How would you like God to touch your soul? How is the divine present in that desire? How would you like God to help you in this? What would you like God's invitation to be?

**What if/comparison** e.g. In the presence of no anxiety, how would you find yourself living?

**Their response** e.g. How would you like to respond to what has just happened?

**Using or exploring metaphor/image** e.g. If you were writing a book about this experience, how would you name this chapter?<sup>14</sup> And that X is like what?

## Head versus heart questions

'To emphasize either thoughts or feelings at the expense of the other is to look at human experience as flat rather than multidimensional'.<sup>15</sup> The word *heart* means 'the intellect, memory, emotions, desires and will.' When we consider our work with directees we often speak of 'moving from the head down to the heart,' but this does not necessarily mean to move from thinking to feeling. It means to move from theoretical knowledge to actual experience. It means to move from believing a truth to living a truth. To speak from the heart, in the truest biblical sense, is to 'speak from the depths of our being, including both our thoughts and our feelings'.<sup>16</sup> We can't separate these, rather our feelings give us information (event, relationships) about how we think. Therefore, our questions should explore both of these areas. And it's in this we hope to help others to discover if those feelings are a 'responses to truth or to falsehood'.<sup>17</sup>

For example, a person's feelings of inadequacy could be explored to identify its source. Be it reality, fear, or something else. The feeling questions bring forward information and are a compass but not the end point.

---

<sup>14</sup> <https://couragerenewal.org/practicum-participant-portfolio-april-may-2023/wp-p.2>.

<sup>15</sup> Fryling, Alice. Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p.56.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 56-57.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.57.

## Asking questions from a contemplative stance

‘The word contemplative refers to more than just being attentive to the divine. It also means to view (a person or object) with continued attention, to observe thoughtfully, to consider thoroughly and to think deeply’.<sup>18</sup>

Marica Eames-Sheavly<sup>19</sup> describes a bubbling up of a question within her, letting it simmer before she offers it. Marica refers to her inner teacher responding to the inner teacher in the other. When she finds herself thinking her way into a question, she returns to a contemplative practice of listening with the whole of herself. She writes of ‘trusting that the question will come without working, forcing, or thinking too hard.’<sup>20</sup> I noticed that many in the spiritual direction community spoke this way. In their responses to the questionnaire, they talked of: inviting silence; questions being invitational; coming from a still place; allowing for a slower pace; focusing in the present; asking about feelings as well as thoughts; having a posture of openness; and allowing for wonder.

One spiritual director mentioned that ‘there is a subtle distinction requiring spiritual sensitivity and discernment and submission of our agenda to the leading and guiding of God’.

I found the following responses focused usefully on building trust in God in the process:

- Not being anxious about what may happen when something arises that is new to us.
- Willingness to ask questions and explore subjects without the pressure to provide answers, or even knowing there won’t be answers.
- We are in the present and trust in the gifts that are there, whatever they may be.

## Use of Clean Language as a questioning tool

I am drawn to the work of New Zealander David Grove (1950-2008), a counselling psychologist who developed an inquiry approach known as *Clean Language*. Its purpose was to harvest information on what people think, feel, know, and help them discover the deeper things within that they didn’t realise they knew. I find this a useful tool to help a directee to go deeper.

This *Clean Language* approach came about from Grove’s work with trauma patients. He noticed they would often describe trauma using internal metaphor without revisiting the trauma. In studying transcripts of other therapists, he saw how the patient was influenced by the therapist in interpreting their metaphors. This concerned Grove and he decided to seek a solution to his question, ‘what if we only asked questions that had no content in

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> <https://couragere renewal.org/library/honest-and-open-questions-as-a-spiritual-practice/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid



them?’ He went on to achieve this by developing some simple questions with a particular syntax and unique delivery method.

Some key features of Grove’s clean language approach:

- Based on 12 questions. The first 9 reflect on ‘what is’, a person’s current perception, while the other 3 invite desired outcomes.
- Uses curious and simple (less is more) questions that are flexible in use and frequency.
- Stays with the person’s story and eliminates the questioner’s preferences or interpretation.
- Used to create metaphor, uncover ones thinking, clarify desired outcomes, give greater clarity, motivate action.

I have tabled these 12 questions below and illustrate their possible sequence.

Using the client’s metaphorical words/ phrases/ and or nonverbal in place of X and Y:

<b>Developing questions</b>	
Attributes (name)	(and) what kind of X is that X?
	(and) is there anything else about X?
Location (address)	(and) where is X? or (and) whereabouts is X?
Metaphor	(and) that is X like what?
Relationship	(and) is there a relationship between X and Y?
	(and) when X what happens to Y?
<b>Sequence and source</b>	
	(and) then what happens or (and) what happens next?
	(and) what happens just before X?
	(and) where could X come from?
<b>Intention</b> (desired outcome)	(and) what would <b>you</b> like to happen?
Necessary conditions	(and) what needs to happen for X?
	(and) can X happen?

A question comes after the reflection (of the person’s exact words) that attends to a particular aspect of the person’s experience. See Appendix 3: ‘Explanation for using the twelve questions’; Appendix 4: A ‘Quick reference to the twelve questions for easy use,’ and Appendix 5: ‘When you’re listening at your best’ – a partial script.

### **Additional thoughts when using *Clean Language***

- Questions may feel mechanical when using them and you will have noticed they are grammatically incorrect. However, when you're on the other end receiving the questions, they make perfect sense. I know this because I've been on that other end and others report the same.
- Use of voice – it is suggested to slow the speed of delivery (half the normal pace), use a deeper tone, and an applied sense of curiosity and wonder.
- As a beginner with using *Clean Language*, it is best to practise first with the developing questions until you become familiar with the flow. Try asking the questions predominantly about the positive aspects of a person's experience, their hopes for the future and their metaphors.
- You might want to jot down their key words/phrases, so you repeat them back accurately to retain their focus when used in the next question.
- When a directee says 'I don't know' - just pause before responding to their 'don't know' by giving them more time. Or simply repeat back their words as normal, before backtracking to some other aspect of the metaphor landscape which has been mentioned. For example, you could say, '*And you don't know. And trees, and lake, and sky. And when sky, is there anything else about that sky?*'<sup>21</sup>
- In 1998 two further questions were developed that relate to size and shape, by research colleagues Penny Tompkins and James Lawley<sup>22</sup> who worked with Grove. These questions are used only when the client may have referred to a part of their experience, e.g. if they wanted to let go of striving (their metaphor), then it would be a clean question to ask about size and/or shape of the striving.
- Regarding accessing further *Clean Language* material, I have referenced further resources in the bibliography. Wendy Sullivan gives an easy guide to understanding the use of the questions and Tompkins and Lawley provide depth behind Grove in their ongoing work on [Cleanlanguage.com](http://Cleanlanguage.com).

### **How to use *Clean Language* in spiritual direction**

This form of exploration is quite effective in digging down to the subconscious, for example by discovering a directee's metaphor for that which is presenting. Use the questions that fit the moment and the first two questions are the most asked and can be repeated several times within a session. There is flexibility in what order you might choose to use them.

Using specific *Clean Language* questions means you have another inquiry tool to draw upon, if it fits the moment. I see it would be easy to dovetail the God questions in. By bringing attention to where God may be in this, inviting silence, and asking how they might bring this

---

<sup>21</sup> Sullivan, Wendy. *Clean Language*. Crown House Publishing. Kindle, p. 168

<sup>22</sup> <https://cleanlanguage.com/clean-language-revisited/>, p.4.

to God. We wait, hopeful that a feeling, thought, picture may come, and if not, remind them they are held and loved by God.

Often near the end of a SD session I may invite the directee to reflect on what might have been revealed. Therefore, after working with this method of metaphor, and possibly them developing a new metaphor, I might ask how they would like to remember this in some way. A possible suggestion would be for them to draw their new metaphor/image of God/ new insights about self and take it with them. Tamsin Hartley, to whom I refer below, suggests this approach.

### **Using clean language questions in a contemplative /meditative way**

Hartley<sup>23</sup> draws from *Clean Language* and develops this with mindful listening to support development of metaphors and meditative practices. I have adapted the script below from her website for the purposes of sharing a contemplative/meditative approach.

Thinking about what **rest** means to you...

- What kind of rest is that?
- Is there anything else about rest?
- Is rest on the inside or outside?
- Does rest have a size or shape?
- Does rest have a sound?
- And is there anything else about rest?

If the person has been in a deep contemplative space, allow them to come back to the present. Then, invite them to represent on paper what arose for them. It might be an image, words or both representing rest.

Invite them to become aware of 'what they are noticing' as they are drawing or writing.

- Is there anything else about what you have noticed as you look at what you have put down?
- What do you know about rest now?

In spiritual direction, I would imagine using this approach with a specific word (or sacred word) that the client has used in the present or past sessions, or it could be something new to explore (stillness, peace, hope). This short contemplative/space approach could fit anywhere in a session (at start, during, or ending). I like the way this questioning is tight, can be slowed down, allows for pauses between questions, allows for silence and there is an invitation to express what has arisen for the person in a creative form but not limited to that. The process may be sufficient without them needing to share. As a director I regularly ask my directees, 'What is it that you are going away with today?' I may suggest they might like

---

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.thelisteningspace.co.uk/tamsin>

to recognise the gift they received today in some way to remind them of it. And if there is an interest, ask them how they might express this.

## Concluding thoughts

This inquiry into the means of asking questions that empower and deepen the experience of the directee with themselves and God has proved more challenging than I anticipated. The topic of questions has led to other topics, for example, how we listen influences greatly how we frame questions, but I have not had the space to explore the topic of listening. However, I will share three points provided by one director, which I find very poignant:

- The way we listen is more important than the questions we ask.
- Attuning to what is being said points the way to the next question.
- Waiting for the person to speak may be more important than any question.

I am grateful for the responses from fellow spiritual directors. They remind me that we are on a journey of development together and there is a kindness amongst us to share and support each other's growth. Questioning is part of that growth. Their practical input has been helpful to me, and, I trust, to you the reader.

I have given a relatively large amount of space in this essay to *Clean Language*. This is an inquiry approach I particularly wanted to explore and to use in my own practice. I discovered that once I started digging, there is a large body of information out there. Grove was generous in making his research available to others and for them to use it and develop it as they wish. I can imagine myself using the developing questions (name, address, relationship and developing and exploring metaphor) and the intention question (what would you like to happen?) I expect I will use the other questions less frequently but acknowledge they have a place.

This research has been a wonderful opportunity to look at many different resources to explore questions.

*In spiritual direction the goal is not to answer life's questions. The goal is to draw closer to God in the midst of the questions. It is in embracing our questions that we move more deeply into God's love.*<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Fryling, Alice. *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. (InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition) p.45.

## Bibliography

I wish to acknowledge Grant Snider of incidentalcomics.com for the illustration on the title page; this illustration is part of his poster called 'Asking Questions'.

<https://www.biblekeeper.com/questions-jesus-asked/>

<https://cleanlanguage.com/category/cl/>

<https://cleanlanguage.com/less-is-more-the-art-of-clean-language/>

<https://cleanlanguage.com/clean-language-revisited/>

<https://couragerenewal.org/courage-renewal-approach/>

<https://couragerenewal.org/>

<https://couragerenewal.org/practicum-participant-portfolio-april-may-2023/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2023/04/Open-Honest-Questions-2022.docx.pdf>

<https://couragerenewal.org/library/honest-and-open-questions-as-a-spiritual-practice/>

<http://www.incidentalcomics.com/>

<https://www.thelisteningspace.co.uk/the-listening-space>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVvcU5gG4KU> (Caitlin Walker - Clean Questions and Metaphor Model)

<https://leadingwithquestions.com/leadership/would-you-like-a-complimentary-printed-version-of-now-thats-a-great-question/>

Benner, David. *Sacred Companions: The gift of spiritual friendship and direction*. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Blythe, Teresa. *Spiritual Direction 101: The Basics of Spiritual Guidance* (Berkley CA, Apocryphile Press, Kindle Edition, 2018).

Crockett, Marsha. *Sacred Conversation: Exploring the Seven Gifts of Spiritual Direction* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2021).

Fowke, Ruth. *Personality and Prayer* (Guildford, UK: Eagle IPS, 1997).

Fryling, Alice. *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. (InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition).

Jackson, Cari. *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Hear*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2003).

Mabry, John R, *Starting Spiritual Direction: a guide to getting ready, feeling safe, and getting the most out of your sessions* (Berkley CA, Apocryphile Press, 2017).

Morse, MaryKate. "The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions, 'Noticing the duck.'" *Presence: An international Journal of Spiritual Directors*. Volume 15, No3 Sept 2009.

Sullivan, Wendy. *Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds*. (Crown House Publishing. Kindle Edition).

Exploring the Means of Asking Questions that Empower and Deepen the Experience of the Directee  
with Themselves and God – Maree Shepherd

## Appendix 1: What are you attuned to and what is the gold?<sup>25</sup>



### Spiritual Growth Ministries

Aotearoa New Zealand

Spiritual Directors Formation Programme

What is it you're attuned to?

What is the "gold"?

What do you find yourself attuned to in a spiritual direction session, as the director?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potent language, images, metaphors ... e.g. "can of worms"</li> <li>• Evidences of emotion or lack of it</li> <li>• Body language, silences, patterns, connections, expressed desires, incongruencies</li> <li>• Recognising shifts, nuances, inner process</li> <li>• Where the energy is (or isn't) in the conversation</li> <li>• Areas of dryness, struggle, resistance, stuckness, boredom, frustration</li> <li>• Half-formed or emerging awareness</li> <li>• Ways of seeing God</li> <li>• Important relationships, experience of community</li> <li>• Glimpses of the extraordinary in the ordinary</li> <li>• Aha! moments</li> <li>• The influence of temperament</li> <li>• My own bodily awareness, feelings, counter-transference, boredom, clock-watching, frustration, stuckness</li> </ul>
What is the "gold" we hope may emerge for the directee through such noticing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grace</li> <li>• God-awareness</li> <li>• Insight</li> <li>• Soul/God-connections</li> <li>• Response to God, e.g. gratitude, trust</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Honesty with self and God</li> <li>• Acceptance of and/or</li> <li>• Embracing mystery</li> <li>• Childlikeness</li> <li>• Freedom</li> <li>• Life-giving paths</li> <li>• Fruits of the Spirit</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Transformation</li> <li>• Experiences of the Spirit</li> <li>• "Isness", "being"</li> </ul>

<sup>25</sup> Sourced from SGM, Spiritual Directors Formation Programme, Workshop 10 – Deepening your work.

## Appendix 2: Using the ‘why’ question

An example<sup>26</sup>

Director	Directee
<b>Why do you think you are unmotivated and tired right now?</b>	Maybe I just need a vocation or sabbatical. I’ve been doing this for twelve years and I’m not <b>getting anywhere with the church.</b>
<b>Why does it matter to you to get somewhere with the church?</b>	.....I feel <b>pressure during my monthly gathering with other areas pastors.</b> They ask me about my church what do I say? We aren’t growing...we’re going nowhere.
<b>Can you tell me why you feel pressure from the pastors?</b>	I feel pressure to succeed. And I’m not. I feel like a <b>complete failure.</b> This just wears me down.
<b>Why do you feel like a complete failure?</b>	When I was accepted God’s call to be a pastor I thought if I prayed, followed Jesus.....that <b>God would bless my work</b> and it hasn’t happened.
<b>Why does it matter to you that God bless your work?</b>	It’s a <b>sign of Gods favour right?</b> If you’re following God and doing everything you’re supposed to do...
<b>Why do you need a sign of Gods favour?</b>	Because when you get one, then you know you matter to God. I feel abandoned and unimportant to God. I feel like God has dumped me here in this town and left me struggling.

Work gently and with humility when asking ‘Why’ and stop if the person shows signs of discomfort.

This work with the client isn’t complete and I would expect a spiritual director might do more work in another session using other question types.

<sup>26</sup> Adapted from MaryKate Morse, “The Art of Asking Spiritual Questions, ‘Noticing the duck’.” *Presence: An international Journal of Spiritual Directors*. Volume 15, No.3, Sept 2009, p 56.



## Appendix 3: Explanation of Using the 12 Questions in Clean Language<sup>27</sup>

### Name (attributes)

1. **(and) what kind of X (is that X)?** e.g. (and) what kind of stuck is that stuck?

Client: I'm stuck with no way out

2. **(and) is there anything else about X?** e.g. (and) is there anything else about stuck with no way out?

'What kind of X?' invites the client to 'zoom in' on the specific details, while 'Anything else about X?' can help them 'zoom out' to the wider context or to focus on other details about 'X'. That second question (And) is there anything more about X can be repeated several times consecutively with a pause between allowing a deepening of insights and gives a thicker description to work with.

### Address (location)

3. **(and) where is X? or (and) whereabouts is X?** e.g. (and) when you are stuck with no way out, where is stuck?

There will always be a location, be it in the mind's eye or a physical space. When working with emotion it can be useful to explore where that feeling is located. This can bring an awareness of other information that the emotion holds. E.g. someone is referring to sadness.

### Asking for metaphor

4. **(and) that's X like what?** (rather than 'that's like what?')
5. **(and) that's X like what?** (rather than 'that's like what?')

When asking for metaphor and a person responded to this question with 'strong and flexible' – your next question would be to redirect them 'and *strong and flexible like what?*'

*Another example: The client may have said 'there's a warm light shining through the door.'*

*The questioner could respond: and, when there's a warm light shining through the open door, **and when** there's a warm light shining, **what** kind of light is that light?*

**Relationship\_** - exploring two different metaphors that may have been presented.

6. **(and) is there a relationship between X and Y**

---

<sup>27</sup> Drawn from several resources:

<https://cleanlanguage.com/less-is-more-the-art-of-clean-language/>  
<https://cleanlanguage.com/clean-language-revisited/>

Sullivan, Wendy, Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds. Crown House Publishing. Kindle Edition.

**7. (and) when X, what happens to Y?**

**8. (and) that's X like what?**

Some of the questions have both an X and a Y in them and that's when we're comparing several different metaphors.

On occasions a person may have provide several metaphors as they have dialogued. Clarity is needed if there is any relationship between them. And in the exploration one metaphor may fall away, and a new one may emerge. Therefore, the process to check for relationship again makes sense.

### **Sequence**

**9. (and) then what happens? or (and) what happens next? – (and) what happens just before X?**

These questions are used less often. However, helpful in exploring outside their current perception. This allows the person to focus on an event and notice what occurs before and after an event (start, middle, end). This way provides opportunity for missing or unconscious insights to emerge and to do something different in the future e.g. exploring anger that makes them boil in a situation.

### **Source**

**10. (and) where could X come from?**

This is the least used of the 12 questions. This invites the client to attend to the origin of the X, cause of the X and where X came from). Exploration may help someone find a source (origin, space/location, people, time, ancestry) or a resource to draw upon. 'Sometimes just the awareness of that resource can be all they need to resolve that issue <sup>28</sup> e.g. peace, calm, rather than going to the event itself.

### **Intention**

**10. (and) what would X like to have happen?** (in this question 'you' can be inserted for X)

**11. (and) what needs to happen for X?**

**12. (and) can X happen?**

These questions can draw out a desire for change and identify a person's hopes and dreams. They can also be used to clarify perceptions of causality and possible obstacles to achieving hopes and dreams. If a person is stuck in a problem this question can often been used as a switch to move them from focusing only on the problem to something they do want (way out). E.g. 'And when your relationship is at the crossroads what would you like to happen?'

## Appendix 4: A quick reference to the 12 questions<sup>29</sup>

Using the client’s metaphorical words/ phrases/ and or nonverbal in place of X and Y

<b>Developing questions</b>	
Attributes (name)	(and) what kind of X is that X?
	(and) is there anything else about X?
Location (address)	(and) where is X? or (and) whereabouts is X?
Metaphor	(and) that is X like what?
Relationship	(and) is there a relationship between X and Y?
	(and) when X what happens to Y?
<b>Sequence and source</b>	
	(and) then what happens or (and) what happens next?
	(and) what happens just before X?
	(and) where could X come from?
<b>Intention (desired outcome)</b>	(and) what would <b>you</b> like to happen?
<b>Necessary conditions</b>	(and) what needs to happen for X?
	(and) can X happen?

The word ‘**And**’ is used at the start of each question. This is so the client words are retained and it creates flow when joined with a clean language question ensuring the client stays with their experience.

The word ‘**that**’ is intended to direct the client to a specific aspect of their inner landscape.

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, Wendy, Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds. Crown House Publishing. Kindle Edition, p.51

## **Appendix 5: ‘When you’re listening at your best’ – a partial transcript.**

**Questioner:** When you are listening at your best, that’s like what?

**Speaker:** It’s like in The Matrix when everything slows down. Where everything goes in super-slow motion.

**Questioner:** And everything goes in super-slow motion. And what kind of super-slow motion is that super-slow motion?

**Speaker:** It’s the kind where it’s impossible to miss anything.

**Questioner:** The kind where it’s impossible to miss anything. And is there anything else about that impossible to miss anything?

**Speaker:** It’s just very simple.

**Questioner:** It’s just very simple. And is there anything else about that just very simple?

**Speaker:** I think it’s just that it’s simple and very calming.

**Questioner:** Simple and very calming, and whereabouts is that simple and very calming?

**Speaker:** Just outside of me, just beyond my head.

**Questioner:** And just outside of you, just beyond your head. And whereabouts just beyond your head?

**Speaker:** Just there (gestures about three inches behind the back of head).

**Questioner:** And whereabouts ‘there’?

**Speaker:** It’s just behind my head, about a hand span behind my head.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Wendy Sullivan, *Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds*. (Crown House Publishing. Kindle Edition) pp. 57-58.

**Appendix 6: If you were creating a resource for spiritual directors on the art of developing the use of good questions, what would be the three most important points you would include?<sup>31</sup>**

- Ask 'curious' open questions rather than questions that make assumptions or leading questions.
- Quoting Parker J Palmer , 'An honest open question means the questioner couldn't possibly know the answer to it.'
- Trust the questions that spring to mind in the poignant moments of spiritual direction rather than second guess them and sit on them – losing the moment.
- Listen to the questions you ask and intentionally refine them over time or learn new questions. We can default to certain stock questions or 'bad habits'.
- The way we listen is more important than the questions we ask.
- Attuning to what is being said points the way to the next question. One question at a time.
- Waiting for the person to speak may be more important than any question.
- The importance of wait time once you have asked a question.
- Asking questions that dig down, rather than ranging out. Helping the directee to sink more into an experience reflectively, rather than jumping to a new topic too soon.
- The ability to ask tight, non-repetitive questions that allow the directee to answer the way they want.
- Willingness from the director to leave space and silence so the directee can think, think again and take it deeper.
- Willingness from the director to gently ask deepening questions rather than move on to another area.
- Aim to ask noticing / sensing / feeling questions rather than thinking / head / analysis questions.
- Develop a repertoire of variations on the 'tell me more...' type of question.
- Don't ask a question if you think you know the answer to, even if you have some inkling, ask a question that is related but make it more open.
- Ask questions for the directee's experience but not about fulfilling our own curiosity.
- share questions with others - ie build a database.
- ask questions someone asked you e.g. what is the invitation? Including the questions Jesus asked the disciples and others.
- listen carefully for the hooks / blocks behind the comments the directee makes - hence reflective listening and questions related to that.
- How to listen well – Good questions come from being very present to the directee's story and 'parking' my own stuff.
- Explore and practise the 'God' questions – questions that focus especially on deepening the directee's experience of God. E.g. How are you taking this issue to God (or, how might you take this issue to God? Would you like to take this to God right now?) What might be God's invitation to you in this? How is this affecting your

---

<sup>31</sup> List of responses from spiritual directors

Exploring the Means of Asking Questions that Empower and Deepen the Experience of the Directee with Themselves and God – Maree Shepherd

relationship with God? How do you think God feels about this? As God looks at you right now, what might be the expression on God's face?

- Using the language and terminology of the directee experience when framing a question.
- Ensure that your directee knows that they can halt a line of questions if they want to.
- Consider the nature, type, and purpose of questions.
- Listen for their questions that lie underneath their stories – helps us tune in to how we might later ask questions.
- Metaphor can be particularly helpful. E.g. participant had been speaking about gardens and gardening and found it helpful to be asked “if you were a part of the garden what would you be?”
- Our purpose is not to show what good problem-solvers we are, but simply to support another person in listening to what the Parker J. Palmer refers to as his or her *inner teacher*.
- Listening not only involves the spoken word, but body language, voice tone and sometimes what is not spoken. When trust is established, you'll know when to wonder about this with the directee.

## Appendix 7: What have you found most helpful in your journey of developing good questions?<sup>32</sup>

- Training to become a Courage & Renewal Facilitator.
- Being a student of the Diamond Approach – that uses ‘Inquiry’ as the main methodology. <https://www.diamondapproach.org/method> and <https://www.diamondapproach.org/public-page/inquiry-and-not-knowing>
- Studying Narrative Therapy.
- Reading transcripts of other spiritual directors who ask powerful and good questions that deepen the directee’s understanding.
- Examining my own questioning skills and reformulating my questions to make them more effective and fertile.
- I have found the wisdom of an experienced supervisor to be the most helpful thing in learning how to develop and frame good questions – particularly open questions, curious questions, questions that gently pick up on something significant that the directee has said or alluded to.
- Reviewing my work after a session – what might I have done differently? What questions open up my directee.
- Personal preparation and prayer prior to a session.
- Slowing the pace of a session to give myself time to formulate a question.
- Observing and collecting questions from another spiritual directors / role plays / books.
- Questions I have been asked.; Questions I would like to have been asked; Questions Jesus asked; Questions I have asked others - I have asked some bad/closed questions.
- Listening carefully to what the directee is saying and asking reflective questions to help them unpack their thinking.
- Relax and trust the Holy Spirit’s leading. Getting comfortable with space, silence, not needing to fill things in.
- Sometimes, if unsure what question to ask, reflect the directees words. Hearing what they said, can be helpful (for both of you).
- Not trying to explain my questions, but letting the directee interpret and answer the way they want to; being brave to ask; Starting with "I wonder if.... "; Not being self-conscious but being curious alongside the directee.
- I always remember that I am holding space with the directee and that I am not there to fix or give answers.
- Building relationships of trust; Listening and following.
- Developing my own interior journey of self and experience of God must be continually deepening, to make room for the other and their unique story.

---

<sup>32</sup> List of responses from spiritual directors

## **Appendix 8: If we are holding a contemplative stance what difference does that make to the questions we ask?<sup>33</sup>**

- Gentler, more invitational.
- Questions that invite reflection on all of life, not just ‘spiritual’.
- Questions that focus on noticing / awareness in the ‘here and now’.
- Questions that invite the directee to notice self and to notice God.
- We ask questions from a still place.
- We are wondering, and wandering in a landscape of soul, but not anxious about what might happen with something new to us.
- We are dwelling with what is at present time and trust in its gifts, whatever it is like.
- We are trusting God’s presence in all things.
- We might allow some silence to linger after the directee has spoken (unless they tend to rush on) before putting our question to them.
- We need to learn to distinguish the subtle difference between a question we may want to ask to satisfy our interest, intellectual curiosity, or express our empathy (none of which is inherently wrong) and a question that we sense the Spirit of God inviting us to put to the directee – which may surprisingly run counter to our own interest. This is a subtle distinction requiring spiritual sensitivity and discernment, and the submission of our agenda to the leading and guiding of God – the true director in SD.
- Welcome use of silence and space.
- Willingness to ask questions and explore subjects without the pressure to provide answers, or even knowing there won’t be answers. This opens up a subject and gives God more room to move.
- When I am listening in a prayerful/contemplative way, I find questions arise more gently and less self-consciously. There is less pressure to fix, solve, or perform and more space to wonder what deep work God is doing. And, of course, I am reminded that God is working in mysterious ways that I don’t need to know about.
- We will not be under pressure to fill the silence or obliged to say or ask just anything (esp if the directee looks at you with expectancy or question). The questions will therefore be considered, and gentle.
- As director I am assisting or guiding my directee to find God in their ordinary everyday life. My questions will perhaps alert their attention or awaken their awareness to finding God with them in every moment. They may not have recognized the significance there. So my questioning may be like... ‘You briefly mentioned..., tell me more about that.’
- Take your time to ask a question. From a contemplative stance, I want to listen for Holy Spirit prompts. Give yourself time before you ask a question. Often this creates space where someone (who doesn’t speak a lot normally)
- The difference to me is that we invite silence and encourage a posture of openness and receptivity towards what God might want to say either through understanding one’s heart or through hearing from God in other ways.

---

<sup>33</sup> List of responses from spiritual directors



Exploring the Means of Asking Questions that Empower and Deepen the Experience of the Directee  
with Themselves and God – Maree Shepherd

- Not the first things that comes to my mind but the thing they are wrestling with.
- More personalised to the directee – freer from parallel process, transference or countertransference.

## Appendix 9: What is different in the way you ask questions when your directee is holding an object or something?<sup>34</sup>

- I would be aware of what they are holding, and the significance of that object (or memory or other thing) to the directee, and I would try to keep my questions focussed on that thing so that its significance and potential for opening up their relationship with God is fully explored.
- More focused, more specific to the subject of attention.
- Sometimes the work happens without me asking anything. Another time holding an object linked wonderfully to the image of God, with minimal prompting on my part.
- Encourage directees to look in from the outside, which can get around their defences.
- It depends on the context and the individual directee, but essentially it is similar to working with a metaphor, symbol, artwork etc. with the added tactile senses – touch, smell etc. involved. What do you notice about...? What does it remind you of?
- A useful aspect of this is how/what the object says about their relationship with God (or others). Can expand their image of God.
- How is related with their soul journey? What are the voices that speak from it? What is their response?
- I think questions arise that are more in the present moment. E.g. What do you notice? What are you noticing within yourself? What are you feeling at this moment? What questions are arising within you (as you look at...)? Notice body sensations too.
- Questions are using the metaphor, exploring the object's shape, colour, weight, smell, what was it about it that caught their attention.
- Including the senses (e.g. seeing) and the body through touching or holding an object makes the questioning process a more holistic one. Using symbols opens up the heart space and helps us move from cognitive to deeper layers of our soul and being. Focusing on any artifacts also refocuses the attention away from the director-directee talking arrangement.

---

<sup>34</sup> List of responses from spiritual directors

## Appendix 10: Is there anything else you would like to say about asking good questions?<sup>35</sup>

- Good questions create doorways into new levels of understanding; they are invitations to travel where one has not been before and see things with new eyes.
- Good questions must be easily understood, clear, concise and confident (in that the director really knows what she wants to ask and not just filling the silence or mimicking what she had learnt from the books or others).
- They should bring attention to underlying feelings and presence of God; challenge previously held ideas etc and invite deeper search.
- Good directors notice their intent when they ask questions, our motives and hidden 'direction' may be more important than the style of questions. The key is to have none! No hidden motives or agenda, even 'good' intentions. We are trusting God in how God might be at work there without our own things.
- Move from thin to thick descriptions.
- Expand our current understanding.
- Show new and other perspectives.
- Invoke God's presence and wisdom.
- Deepen our understanding of ourselves, others and God.
- Re-story our lives.
- Consider alternative outcomes.
- Bring forth new identity descriptions.
- Connect us with God and increase our sense of intimacy with our Maker.
- Lead us into a liminal space.
- Bring forth transformation.
- Some directees may find spoken (English) language a barrier. Use of creative media, drawing, music, play dough, movement ... can assist the directee to express their reality. Minimalize questions... tell me or show me about this ... and then use of reflection ... so it's like this ...
- The key for me is listening carefully and following up on things they are saying - ie. keeping in their track and way of talking and not your own.
- The other thing is being prepared to challenge to the extent that they are willing to be challenged - in my experience this changes over time as trust is built.
- Taking time before answering a question makes a real difference. And I'm not satisfying my own curiosity. I'm seeking to deepen their noticing/listening to God.
- Practice – review and reflect – and more practice.
- Asking good questions is an art. I need to accept that there's no formula to 'get it right'. Practise helps along with honest evaluation of myself and by others.
- I remember reading/hearing great questions as part of the programme. They are now all forgotten. I simply go with whatever is happening in the play of conversation. I do not have a repertoire of questions.
- Less is more!

---

<sup>35</sup> List of responses from spiritual directors