# Spiritual Directors and Self-Care

by

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A Research Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries

#### Introduction

What is self-care? What constitutes good self-care? How and why is it important for spiritual directors?

If we as spiritual directors want to provide a sacred space for our directees, if we are aiming to be open channels of God's grace for them, then surely a significant way we can help our directees is to be coming from a place of health and wellness (waiora) ourselves. We can also encourage our directees in this regard, talking with them about the various areas as the need or desire surfaces in our times together.

In her book 'Spiritual Direction – a practical introduction<sup>1</sup> - Sue Pickering outlines eight beneficial aspects of self-care for spiritual directors and their directees. Using these areas as a base, a questionnaire was developed to survey current spiritual directors on their self care-practices. This questionnaire is shown in Appendix One.

The questionnaire contains the following 8 headings

Prayer and Reflection
Health and wellness checks
Recreation
Relationships
Adequate rest
Setting limits
Scripture
On-going professional development

Fifty surveys were mailed out to members of the New Zealand Association of Christian Spiritual Directors, (hereafter referred to as ASCD) largely in the lower North Island. Thirty one completed surveys were returned, a sixty two percent rate of return. Thank you to all who responded.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Pickering, Sue, *Spiritual Direction*, Canterbury Press: London, 2008, 143 -144.

# **Prayer and Reflection**

'I sit on my favourite rock, looking over the brook to take time away from busyness, time to *be*. I've long since stopped feeling guilty about taking *be*ing time, it's something we all need for our spiritual health, and often we don't take enough of it.'<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaire asked directors about contemplative prayer, petition for their own needs and their ability to spend regular time alone with God.

Sixty five percent of respondents said yes they were able to have these practices as part of their everyday life. Thirteen percent of directors mentioned that they aim to practise a contemplative lifestyle.

Other comments made in this section include, 'I have to work at it day by day given the busyness of life'. 'A precious aspect of my life', wrote one director. 'Practically I run a busy home ...so quiet/stillness/time to reflect has to be worked out' wrote another. Another key comment read as follows;

# 'I could not imagine being able to live well and effectively in the rest of life without these "essentials", let alone be an authentic Spiritual Director.'

Prayer and developing our relationship with God are at the heart of spiritual direction.

# Health and wellness checks

This is an area highly valued by spiritual directors. Ninety seven percent of those surveyed have regular medical check-ups. One director said;

"I am aware that I am responsible for my own body and health and the need to "listen" to my body – that as "the temple of the Holy Spirit", I need to respect and take care of it. Good nutrition, fresh air, exercise and rest all impact on my health, energy and wellbeing."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> L'Engle Madeleine. *Walking on Water - Reflections on faith and art – Commemorative Edition*, Waterbrook Press: Colorado Springs, 1998, 10.

#### Recreation

The questionnaire asked directors if they had times to enjoy their hobbies, get regular exercise and to connect with creation and/or their creativity. Eighty one percent of respondents answered this question affirmatively. Sixteen percent of those surveyed made mention of being retired or semi-retired thus giving them the opportunity to recreate with greater ease. However, twenty six percent of directors surveyed admitted that this was an area that didn't always get the degree of attention they desired. Comments here included, *'my life can become too busy and therefore create times when these areas need review', 'my favourite hobbies...could take more priority', 'probably not to the degree I could', I don't do this enough, 'I clearly need to pay more attention to this aspect of wellness'! 'Work does consume me at times'! 'I'm more inclined to keep working and recreation time comes in less often than ideally', and 'I love being nurtured by creation/nature but I'm aware of how I can be seduced away from it by other less nourishing things'.* 

The honesty of the directors surveyed indicates that this important area can sometimes get insufficient attention or be squeezed out by the demands of everyday life, and work in particular. One respondent said, *'my present hobbies bring me life and energy and I hold on to them'*. If we allow this area to suffer from neglect, then perhaps we risk missing out on the life and energy God may be wanting to gift to us.

#### Relationships

Members of the ACSD are required to receive regular supervision and spiritual direction.<sup>3</sup> Attending spiritual direction is seen as a key aspect of support for the spiritual directors surveyed. Sixty five percent of those surveyed acknowledged this area. Fifty five percent mentioned supervision as a key area of a support in their lives. Comments here included; *'Supervision is a huge support, that's where I can be very honest without fear of being judged wrongly'*. Another director wrote,

'Supervision is my greatest self-care discipline. I define it as "disciplined reflection on practice". It should and often does, check up on all these self-care topics'.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> www.acsd.org.nz Accessed on 6 October 2011

While these figures show good support for personal spiritual direction and supervision, what of the other thirty five percent and more? Perhaps they took these things as given, as they were not specifically itemised in the questionnaire. Or, do some spiritual directors find they have other support networks that are more beneficial? One respondent mentioned having informal support only. Are supervisors of spiritual directors regularly asking questions about the self-care of those that they see? Are directors being honest with their support networks about the areas they struggle in?

Friends rated highly as providing support for directors, with seventy one percent of respondents acknowledging this important area. Family was also mentioned by twenty nine percent of respondents, and a partner or spouse by sixteen percent. Being part of a small group and relationships with colleagues were each mentioned by twenty three percent of respondents. Interpersonal, informal relationships are a significant part of maintaining waiora for the spiritual directors surveyed. Ten percent of respondents commented on their lack of relational support, including comments such as, *'suspect I still lack in this area a bit'* and *'this would be my least active part, I feel the need to develop my support network'*.

These findings raise a question for possible further exploration, that is, 'are there sufficient accessible support networks available for spiritual directors in Aotearoa New Zealand?'

#### **Adequate Rest**

Just over half of respondents reported having adequate sleep, breaks, days off and holidays. Comments included 'adequate sleep is essential', I've found that slotting time for breaks in my diary has helped' and 'I've learned the hard way how to make sure I get good sleep.' Comments from those who find this area a challenge, included...'not good at making time for 'time off', 'not bad, although this would be a weakness', 'I love holidays and days off but often find it difficult to take them, and 'I'm not so careful about breaks/days off – work usually comes as a priority'. Several directors specifically mentioned that holidays were particularly difficult to take. Interestingly, by and large the directors who struggle in this area do manage to look after their recreational needs! Perhaps this indicates that we may all have our areas of struggle, yet this does not necessarily mean that we are neglecting our self-care completely!

# **Setting Limits**

How hard is it for spiritual directors to say 'No' to others? Thirty two percent of those surveyed found that they are able to manage this well. Twenty six percent of respondents admitted that this is a difficult area for them, some calling it, 'a work in progress'. Comments here included; *'It has taken a long time and being aware of the need for it, this is a struggle but I am improving...even at this late stage in life, 'I have always found it hard to say No but am getting better', and 'I dislike having to do this...I beat myself up more than I ought'.* 

#### Scripture

Fifty two percent of those surveyed read and meditate upon Scripture regularly, with twenty three percent mentioning that this is a daily practice for them. Thirteen percent of directors emphasised loving this aspect of their self-care and/or finding it helpful. Respondents mentioned the use of lectionary readings and Lectio Divina as useful here. Ten percent of respondents said they do not read Scripture regularly and several mentioned finding poetry a more useful form of reading.

# **On-going Professional Development**

Spiritual directors undertake professional development in a wide variety of ways. Reading was the most common form of professional development mentioned (35%). Presence journal<sup>4</sup> was specifically mentioned by ten percent of respondents. The biannual ACSD conference was highlighted by twenty six percent. Twenty three percent of respondents mentioned attending appropriate workshops (e.g. on mandalas) and also helping to lead relevant workshops or retreats. Being a member of a group of spiritual directors was recognised as a helpful form of professional development by thirty two percent of respondents. The frequency of these groups varied, with a number attending six-weekly meetings, while others met twice a year. Ten percent of respondents mentioned taking retreats as a useful form of professional development.

Other comments in this area included; '...not as regular as I could be at attending regular Spiritual Directors meetings, and 'not at present part of a group – travelling a problem'. One respondent commented, 'this is a challenge. I don't attend the local SD support group, and feel unsure where to look for some really stretching, helpful professional development'. These findings raise questions for further exploration, such

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> More information is available here: www.sdiworld.org/presence\_journal.html Accessed on 10 October 2011

as 'is there enough 'stretching, helpful professional development' available? If not, what could be useful and who might best be responsible for developing this area?

#### **Other Comments**

Directors who completed the questionnaire were invited to add relevant comments at the conclusion of the questionnaire. Thank you to the many people who did so. As previously mentioned a small number of directors voluntarily identified themselves as retired or semi-retired. One director wrote, 'You did not ask age, may have been helpful for differences in 'seasons' of life'. Another respondent with teenagers at home wrote, 'stage of life has had an impact'. Perhaps those who are in 'retirement'have more time and space available for developing their own self-care practices. However, as another director put it, 'Self care and self awareness are significant for people in this profession'. All directors (and their directees) must surely benefit from regularly examining and reflecting on their self care practices.

#### Issues for further exploration

The results of this questionnaire indicate a number of areas where further research could be beneficial. It appears that directors find it easier to maintain their waiora when they are retired or semi-retired. Does this make the art of training as a spiritual director more appealing to those at or approaching this stage of life?

Another area for exploration could be to investigate ways in which spiritual directors can be encouraged to develop or attend to areas of self-care in which they struggle. This research showed recreation to be one of these for over a quarter of the directors surveyed.

The results of this questionnaire also raise questions re the strength of current spiritual directors support networks. How are directors finding their current supervision? Are directors being honest with their supervisors about their struggles, including those related to self-care? Are supervisors asking key questions to encourage this reflection?

For those who wish to be part of them, are there sufficient accessible support networks available for spiritual directors in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The availability of professional development is another area for possible further research. Members of the ACSD sign a covenant each year<sup>5</sup> accepting the need for ongoing formation and training, but do not currently have to supply any evidence of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> www.acsd.org.nz Accessed on 6 October 2011

this. Is there sufficient professional development available for spiritual directors? If not, what could be useful and who might best be responsible for developing this area?

#### Conclusion

By surviving passages of doubt and depression on the vocational journey, I have become clear about at least one thing: self care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch<sup>6</sup>

Good self-care for directors is essential for both the maintenance of our own wellbeing and for the breadth and depth of holy listening<sup>7</sup> that we offer to our directees. The value of our ministry to others is influenced by how seriously we undertake our self-care practices. Spiritual directors who model self-care practices allow people of all ages to see the benefit and encouragement of spiritual direction. Younger directors may have to work much harder at developing self-care practices because of the demands of their stage of life. Self-care needs to be talked about regularly by directors, to directees, and in supervision. Discussion on this topic is an essential element for stewardship of the gift we've been given, both for ourselves and for those whose lives we touch.

From my research it seems that all of the self-care practices named in the survey are important to maintain the gift that we as spiritual directors have to offer. While questions may need to be explored about the balance of these practices versus the depth of their use, as I reflect on this research I believe that:

- a) Spending time in prayer and reflection is an essential part of being a healthy Spiritual Director.
- b) Work and busyness can squeeze out time that could be valuably spent recreating and/or resting.
- c) Attending spiritual direction and supervision are essential areas of support for spiritual directors.
- d) Setting limits/being able to say 'no' to others is a common area of struggle for directors, but developing this skill is necessary for wellbeing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Palmer, Parker. *Let your Life speak*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2000, 30-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Guenther, Margaret. *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction.* Cowley: Massachusetts, 1992

- e) Reading and meditating upon Scripture regularly is valuable.
- f) Appropriate regular professional development (such as relevant reading and being a member of a group of spiritual directors) is regularly required.

As we journey together as spiritual directors, may we grow in looking after ourselves, each other and in seeking to live an honest life.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> ...';Our primary task is to be a pilgrim. Our best preparation for the work of Spiritual Direction is an honest life' Petersen, Eugene. *Working the Angles*, Eerdemans: Grand Rapids, 1987, 184.

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### **Appendix One**

The focus question for my research is...

"How can we as spiritual directors do our utmost to maintain our own *waiora* (health/wellness), in order that we are most available to God and our directees?"

(In other words, how are we doing at looking after ourselves?)

#### Please comment as fully as possible on your level of self-care in the following areas:

Prayer & Reflection – Are you able to;

- make contemplative prayer a regular priority?
- bring your own needs to God?
- spend regular time alone perhaps using the Examen or journaling; creating space simply to 'be' with God?

*Health and wellness checks* –How are you doing at keeping up to date with medical checks that are relevant to you eg cholesterol and anaemia, mammograms, cervical and prostate cancer checks?

Recreation – Are there times for you to;

- enjoy your hobbies?
- get regular exercise?
- "unwind and connect with creation" and/or your creativity?"

Relationships – do you have a network of support? Informal as well as formal?

Adequate rest - Do you get adequate sleep? Do you take breaks, days off, holidays?

Setting limits – how hard is it for you to say 'No' to others?

Scripture – do you read and meditate upon it regularly?

*On-going professional development* – Please tell me about any opportunities you have to grow and develop as a spiritual director. E.g. are you part of a group of spiritual directors that meet regularly?

Anything else you would like to add – I welcome any comments you may have – perhaps categories that I may not have listed or any further comments.

