

Poetry in Spiritual Direction

by

Andrea Williamson

Introduction

In this project I have put together some ideas about using poetry in spiritual direction. I have used some of my own ideas as well as some generously contributed by respondents to the questionnaire I sent out to a group of spiritual directors. The questions posed are found in Appendix 1. I have collated the responses and included them in the body of the writing.

The varied responses showed a diversity of how, and even if, poetry is used in spiritual direction. I acknowledge the contribution of those who gave their time and energy to respond to the questions, and hope that in reflecting on what they do and what they might do in future, those who have responded will also gain from this exercise. I also hope that in pooling our ideas, in this area and many others in spiritual direction, we might all be the richer. Reflecting on the responses has given me a broader perspective on what can be done with poetry in spiritual direction, and how I might use it in future. Thank you to all of you who responded.

I have begun by talking about what poetry itself has to offer us as human beings, and then moved to the use of poetry in spiritual direction. Finally I have discussed my experience in using poetry in spiritual direction in a palliative care context.

Poetry per se

Poetry is a medium which opens up some possibilities not readily found in prose. It is a more concentrated way of writing which attempts to distil the essence of what is being said. Robert Alter puts it this way:

“... poetry is a special way of imagining the world or, to put this in more cognitive terms, a special mode of thinking with its own momentum and its own peculiar advantages.”¹

Some of the advantages become obvious when we tap into poetry. Reading poetry opens the imagination's door and allows us to find places in ourselves and in the world around us which we might not otherwise have explored. We are taken beyond our usual limits into emotions, experiences, thinking and knowing which may not be achieved by other methods. Other expressive art modalities, eg. dance, storytelling, collage, paintings, song may have, for the individual, qualities which are also evocative and which take them into deep places. They do not, however, have the same qualities of language which poetry achieves and which is part of its magic.

Metaphor is the most useful and frequent of the literary devices poetry uses. It helps us to risk going deeply into poetry as it does two seemingly contradictory things. On the one hand, it gives us a safe distance from which to view life's issues, in that we can fool ourselves that we are looking at the metaphor itself rather than risking examining the issues. On the other it drops us into a more intimate and close inspection of what it is we may have been avoiding, at times taking us unaware into a deeply moving and spiritual place. Our

¹ Alter, Robert, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 205.

hesitations and vacillations may be overcome without our really noticing that we are shifting into that deep place.

Reading someone else's poetry helps us to find vocabulary to express the otherwise inexpressible, which is both helpful and important in spiritual direction. We find reflected back to us our own experience. This can have the effect of making us feel less alone with a difficult experience, or with one which is hard to explain. It may begin to familiarise us with experiences we may have believed to be foreign to us, thus perhaps evoking our compassion for those who are undergoing them. It may also make a bridge between the known in ourselves and the unknown in the experience. We may find our prejudices exposed, our wounds bared or bathed, our hearts lightened or our way cleared. Poetry of a worthwhile depth is rarely neutral. It does not leave us as it finds us but calls us to a depth of reflection which, whatever it evokes, will change us.

Writing poetry helps us language our imagination so that it has an external as well as an internal reality. We can refine our writing to allow further distillation than would prose, and test it out to see if it has captured what we wanted to express. Having our own poetry on paper provides a focus for reflection at a later time, as well as evoking sense memories, the emotion which was part of the original experience and a sense of intimacy which is precious.

The intimacy of poetry - provides a door to contemplation. There comes an inner stillness as we reflect on poetry. If we remain in reflective mode, we can begin to move from our own stillness into the stillness of God. Whether we are writing or reflecting on our own poetry, or reading someone else's, allowing ourselves to take the time to reflect will allow us more readily to enter into contemplation. It is this connection with our own and God's stillness which makes poetry an ideal tool in spiritual direction.

Poetry in Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction without poetry would be the poorer. Christine Vaulters Paintner and Betsey Beckman say:

Through its distillation of language, poetry guides us to an understanding of the underlying unity of opposites that permeates our existence. Rather than eliminating life's contradictions, poetry helps us to integrate sorrow and joy, horror and humour, with compassionate awareness. Poetry is a way of being with Mystery. All of these qualities of poetry make it a potent form for spiritual direction.²

Poetry seems to be a tool fairly frequently used by spiritual directors in individual direction sessions with directees, guided retreats and quiet days. (See later sections on the variety of ways respondents use poetry in spiritual direction).

Despite the regularity of the use of poetry in spiritual direction, there is little written about it in the formal sense of being able to buy books on the subject. It has been quite a task to track down chapters, even sentences which have been directly written about it, describing

² Beckman, Betsey, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*, 111.

its use and making creative suggestions both as to how to use it and what poetry might be helpful.

The Poetry of Scripture

The Old Testament is full of poetry – whole books of it in, for example, Psalms and Song of Solomon, and smaller sections for various purposes throughout the rest. Robert Alter says:

“The Hebrew writers used verse for celebratory, song, dirge, oracle, oratory, prophecy, reflective and didactic argument, liturgy, and often as a heightening or summarising inset into the prose narrative ...”³

We find ourselves identifying with the Psalmist, or having the Psalmist reflecting our humanity. We are creatures of inconsistency, and the Psalmist’s emotions ranging from height to depth, his railing against God and humankind, as well as his eagerness for God’s blessing, all link with what we too may experience.

Song of Solomon’s beautiful and sensual imagery may do much for our sense of God’s love for us and for the idea of intimacy and closeness in that relationship. In spiritual direction, the imagery may help directees to move beyond safe and familiar images of God which they may have been accustomed to.

In the New Testament, poetry includes the Magnificat, the Beatitudes, many quotes from the Old Testament as well as prayers such as that in Ephesians 3:14 -21.

Respondents who answered questions about how the poetry of Scripture has been used in their experience of spiritual direction, either as director or directee have included the following in their responses:

- As meditation at the beginning of a session to bring a directee to focus and to leave outside things outside.
- Read in spiritual direction or given for later reflection.
- Used in the session for lectio divina.
- Psalms and Song of Solomon used to reflect on issues of intimacy and expressions of emotion rather than as poetry per se.
- For private meditation for the directee to ponder their relationship with God and response to God. For airing emotions, especially anger.
- To help a directee go deeper and to crystallise their thoughts.
- To pray the words of Scriptural poetry to give expression to similar difficulties with which they are struggling.
- To illuminate an image of God or a metaphor for God’s love in action towards the directee eg. in Song of Solomon, the intimacy of God’s love, or Psalm 42:9, perceived absence.
- Not specifically used as poetry but as a passage which has been particularly meaningful.
- Writing their own Psalm as a response to the reading of a Psalm from Scripture.

³ Alter Robert, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 27.

Other poetry.

The mystics highlight certain dimensions of relationship to God which are not readily discussed. There are echoes of Song of Solomon in some of their poetry (St John of the Cross) as well as an inspiring wholeheartedness of surrender. The perils of intimacy with God are discussed (de Hueck Doherty). Imagery and metaphor are used with intensity (Teresa of Avila, Mechthild of Magdeburg) and they do not remove their passions and the embodiment from their faith as so often we do in the modern Western world. All of these facets make the poetry of the Christian mystics ripe for use in spiritual direction.

Aotearoa has its own contemporary Psalmists including Joy Cowley and Anna Johnstone, as well as there being many other poets who have spiritual references in their poetry – eg. James K. Baxter, Glenn Colquhoun, Janet Frame, Bill Manhire, Cilla McQueen, Hone Tuwhare.

There are many great modern Christian poets, whose work brings new insights to our Christian experience. Edwina Gateley, Macrina Wiederkehr, Joyce Rupp, Mary Oliver and Hilary Faith Jones are a few who have inspired me at times.

Whether poetry can ever be called secular is debatable. In some poems, there may be no words which refer overtly to the spiritual, but nevertheless they induce in us a sense of the sacred, a connection with the divine, the eternal or our inner self. Something spiritual is occurring. These are just as valid and often as useful in spiritual direction as those with a more overt spiritual theme.

Some of the respondents to the question of how poetry other than Scripture can be used in spiritual direction have said they have used it in the following ways:

- Used in direction on retreat especially in a group setting.
- Not a regular thing but certain poems have been useful.
- They can engage a self-conscious directee in deeper thought. They also help them to see the grace of God shining through the ordinary experiences of life.
- Given to take away and reflect on, or occasionally read in a session. Sometimes emailed or posted to a directee after a session. This has always been gratefully received.
- Some find poetry hard to relate to.
- As a tool to reflect on what the directee may be seeing or to affirm the articulation of a movement of God.
- As a way of closing a session and summing up themes that have arisen during a session.
- Directee brings a poem significant for them, then the poem and the directee's response become the material for direction.
- Conversation 'jumps off' the poem to explore other areas.
- Writing poetry/prayer captures the essence of an experience.
- The director's own fresh listening asks other illuminating questions.
- Have not used other people's poetry but brought my own if it seemed relevant.
- Have heard, listened to or recited. It always deepens the insight of 'God with us'.

- When directees bring poetry – explore feelings, thoughts with them, to find out how it impacted their prayer life, or is their prayer, wonder with them, dwell on it, deepen further.
- Suggest people do a form of lectio with it and sit with Jesus/God/Spirit as they ponder and pray about it. Then sometimes to draw, sometimes to have their own dialogue with it, to walk the beach as they repeat the phrase or words that hit them.
- Draw what catches them. How is that for you? Can you draw it? What surrounds it? How do you reach it? Is there a sense of that in your body? What might you do to be in touch with that even more? Who is the God who dwells there? Is there some resistance to meeting?

Which poetry?

My own preferences for other people’s poetry and for poetry in spiritual direction are pretty eclectic but what they have in common is depth, richness of metaphor, grittiness and a sense of either capturing the essence of something, or opening a door to something I may not otherwise see.

Working with our own poetry as directees or with a directee’s own poetry when we are directing has a value all of its own. The writer has used poetry to record, sometimes to even access very personal matters. The sharing may not have been done with anyone else other than with God, so the director is in a sacred place of privilege. This requires particular sensitivity on the part of the director to leave the directee free to ascribe meaning rather than have it imposed and to help the directee to explore perhaps even more deeply what their poetry might offer in the way of insights into themselves and their relationship with God.

As a director, Kent Ira Goff uses poetry both in bringing it to the session

“I may open a session with a few lines of a poem ...”⁴

or by discerning when it would be fruitful for the directee to write their own poetry.

“When spiritual companions disclose their margins of discomfort, their edges of uncertainty, that’s where I suggest they write to find a gift. Poetry created a fresh way.”⁵

Preferences expressed by some of the respondents to the questionnaire are:

- Poems reflecting nature, which give useful metaphor. Also devotional poetry, sometimes ‘prose style’ modern pieces.
- Reflective and invitational poetry.
- Working with people’s own poetry.
- Psalms from Scripture (varied translations and paraphrases).
- Prayer, focus, reflective types of writing that enhances focus, thinking and reflection.

⁴ Goff, Kent Ira, *Writing in the Dark to Love in Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol 15, No. 1, March 2009, 39.

⁵ Ibid, 39.

- Poetry that accesses and expresses the 'direct knowing of the heart'. It enables the listener to bypass the thinking mind and access what is real.

Respondents also listed some of their most used and enjoyed poets. These and some of my favourites are listed in Appendix 2.

Results of using poetry in spiritual direction.

I have found that for me as a directee, poetry introduced by my director taps into a deep reservoir of creativity and knowing that is hard to access in other ways. As a 'words' person, other people's poetry lends me words which cut to the heart of the matter and open other perspectives on the given subject which I may otherwise overlook. Writing my own poetry allows me to find expression for deep matters so that I can better share them in direction and for my own understanding.

As a director, sharing poetry where it seems relevant in individual sessions, or more regularly in directed retreat or poetry day situations, seems to have been useful to directees, as has encouraging them to bring their own depths and experiences with God to poetry.

Here is what some of the respondents said:

- It deepened the reflective process and sometimes raised a fresh area of enquiry. It is effective for accessing the heart/feeling level and for giving voice to what is difficult to articulate.
- Able to invite exploration of new, sometimes 'left field' considerations.
- A way of affirming the directee's God experience/invitation to deepen reflection
- When people brought their own poetry it deepened the director/directee relationship.
- Deepened conversation, deepened relationship, helped give prayerful expression to life's reality, brought tears to the surface, and faced me with what has previously been wordless.
- A poem, or phrase from it, often speaks deeply and bypasses the conscious/ego so is useful in connecting at depth – similar to dream work and image work.
- Poetry described as the 'truth teller'. It evokes gleanings, speaks to my spirit, leads to growth, assimilation, and touches my soul.
- Adds dimensions which create more reflections and new ways of thinking.
- Enables me to take words away in my head or on paper, which enhances my thinking or perspective and often makes for more reflection.
- When sharing my own journalled poems, it has led to furthering and deepening conversation.

Ideas for using poetry in spiritual direction, quiet days and retreats.

The way I have best enjoyed poetry in spiritual direction or retreat is to have a poetry day where poems are read and enjoyed together in a type of lectio divina process read by two different voices. Participants are invited to hear the poem once for the head and once for the heart. Then they take it into quiet reflection with guide questions and suggestions to use if they wish. Out of this they are encouraged to do their own poetry or prayer writing. While

this format is not strictly a directed process, it does encourage participants into contemplation and to delve deeply into what the poems have to offer.

The SEED (Spiritual Encouragement Through Education and Development) team in Northland have been running these days to the enjoyment of participants and I was privileged to help run ~~the last~~ one. Part of the richness for me was in the getting together beforehand with other spiritual directors to share the poems we have discovered and loved and to prayerfully nut out what might be useful on the day. We also found lighthearted poems to share before the breaks in the day. Thank you to SEED for the format and the encouragement.

SEED in Northland also run themed retreats in daily life which last for four weeks, with a reflection sheet including poetry for each week and an individual direction session each week as well. I found that, as one of the directors ~~this year~~, both my directees and I profited from spending a week with a particular piece of poetry.

Here are some of the ideas shared by respondents to the questionnaire.

- Use poetry to illuminate a directee's insight, to underpin a loss, grief, lament, as motivation to write directee's own song/Psalm.
- A good way of working that potentially avoids too much linear left-brain analysis – offering a poem for reflection/prayer or encouraging retreatant directees to write their own.
- It is helpful for the director to be conversant with a range of sources so if a particular issue arises, director can offer a poem to a directee as something that might be worth considering/contemplating.
- It is good to help a directee to personalise a Psalm from Scripture – to pray it/speak it aloud as if they were the Psalmist or as if God were talking directly to them.
- I have attended an Enneagram series with poetry for reflection. It was good to look at Enneagram through a different lens.
- A day retreat with one poet and their poetry eg. Rumi, Rilke, Mary Oliver – as one way of accessing the 'mystic within'.

Spiritual Direction and Poetry in a Palliative Care Context

Working as Chaplain in a hospice afforded me opportunities for accompanying people spiritually through their own or a family member's experience of terminal illness. Often this was intermittent and dependent on the relative health of the patient. But there were times when I was able to meet with people over a lengthy period of time. Where they had specifically asked that I help them to explore the spiritual dimension, where this could be reasonably regular over a period of time, I have dealt with this as spiritual direction. It could be said that even then there would not be a long and guaranteed future to the arrangement, but I would want to argue that there were times when this was for the rest of their life.

Margaret Guenther would seem to agree. In an article entitled "Companions at the Threshold: Spiritual Direction with the Dying", she explains the type of relationship I have just described.

“The relationship may never be described as “spiritual direction” per se, but it is distinguished by the quality of loving but disinterested attentiveness characteristic of direction. This is not psychotherapy or pastoral counselling, but a ministry of prayerful presence.”⁶

Guenther further affirms the closer time frames between sessions as death approaches, saying that;

“the meetings may be very brief, just a few minutes of conversation, prayer, or shared silence, but there is an intensity of focus that is absent from more leisurely traditional direction.”⁷

I have experimented with emailing a poem to patients ahead of a session. The poem would have arisen from both my knowledge of the patient’s situation spiritually and physically and from prayer. As some of those who were asking for some help exploring the spiritual were relatively unchurched, the purpose was to give a potential beginning focus for the session. There was no compulsion on the part of the patient to discuss the poem or to actually begin the session there, but there were times when it provoked useful discussion or dovetailed with something else which had caught their attention spiritually or which related to their current life experience. In these cases it bore good fruit. At worst it was dismissed as something the person did not relate to, or which they did not like. At these times there did not seem to be a barrier to further discussion unrelated to the poem.

At times, too, a spouse was present when I explored spiritual matters with someone who was dying. The spiritual direction sometimes included them. I know that this is not the classical model, but when working with a dying person, their needs and their wish to have present whom they choose would seem to take precedence over a director’s insistence about using a particular model of spiritual direction. Jurgen Schwing comments on his own models of spiritual direction with dying people.

I offer spiritual direction not only one-to-one but also in groups, either formally or informally, often at a dying patient’s home.⁸

One of the respondents to the questionnaire talked about working with people who are dying. She gave helpful questions to use working with poetry, especially Scriptural poetry and this part of a directee’s life. They were:

- What does this mean to you?
- How does it help?
- What does it say of God?
- How might you give yourself enough space to be in touch with God/the valley of the shadow of death?
- What does that feel like?
- Could you draw it?

⁶ Guenther, Margaret. *Companions at the Threshold: Spiritual Direction with the Dying* in ed. Vest, Norvene, *Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction*, Harrisburg, Morehouse Publishing, 2000, 106.

⁷ Ibid, 106.

⁸ Schwing, Jurgen, *Spiritual Guidance at the End of Life* in ed. Frager, Robert, *Sharing Sacred Stories: Current Approaches to Spiritual Direction and Guidance*, 109.

- Where is God in the picture?
- What difference does God make?
- Where do you sense that feeling that you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death?
- How does the Scripture comfort you?

Thank you to this respondent who shared very generously of her own experience in this special field.⁹

Working in direction with the dying is beautiful work, poignant and bitter sweet. It felt important to me to have the resources of Scriptural and other poetry at hand for the benefit of the directee, but it may also be important in enabling the directee and perhaps their family members to write about what they are experiencing and for the director, too, to reflect in their own poetry on what the experience has meant for them and their relationship with God.

Final Words

So what were the respondents' final words on the subject of poetry and spiritual direction?

- Poetry is also found in song. Having a directee sit quietly reflecting on simple, well-chosen song can unlock wonderful insights or invite exploration of stuck/taboo areas. It can be an effective way to introduce meditation to someone uncomfortable or unfamiliar with it.
- Poetry is an effective 'door opener' for someone who doesn't know where to start. It needs to be used in moderation to keep its freshness.
- Always know the directee's experience and read the situation with discernment before introducing material other than that of the directee's sharing.
- A song at the end of a session can be useful.
- Reflecting on poetry's use in my own spiritual direction experience has made me realise how often poetry has been used by others for prayer. Like creating a sculpture – it has the power to birth what hasn't been seen before.
- It feels as if using poetry in a group setting is less directive than offering it in one to one direction. I think this is why I use it more in group settings.
- Often people think poetry has to rhyme. Encouraging free writing by sharing examples from Psalms and the above authors can be liberating. Material a directee produces from their own context is likely to have great personal meaning so encouraging directees to write their own Psalm is something to do more intentionally as directors.
- Making more use of poetry in sessions may require more time for preparation. I think to have a list of poems could be useful.
- We need to use poetry a lot more in spiritual direction.

As a result of completing this project, I have been encouraged to hear the different ways in which poetry has been used in direction, and even more encouraged to find such willing sharing of resources and ideas. My ideas for using poetry in spiritual direction have been broadened, and the use of poetry affirmed over and over by experienced directors. I have

⁹ And thank you too to Walter Nasarek hospice nurse, librarian and IT wizard, who searched palliative journals for me for this project.

enjoyed reading and researching for this project and particularly reading the input from the respondents. As a beginning spiritual director I have appreciated the depth of knowledge, wisdom and experience of spiritual directors who have been accompanying directees on their journeys sometimes for many years. I think with gratitude, too, of those who have forged the way for us over the centuries.

I will leave the last words to Rainer Maria Rilke. This poem was sent to me by one of the respondents.

You must give birth to your images.
They are the future waiting to be born.
Fear not the strangeness you feel.
The future must enter you
long before it happens.
Just wait for the birth,
for the hour of clarity.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Appendix I

Questionnaire for Andrea Williamson's Special Interest Project

1. As a director

How has the poetry of Scripture (eg. Psalms, Song of Solomon, the Magnificat and other songs) been used in direction sessions?

- a. When introduced by you as director.
- b. When introduced by the directee.

How has other poetry been used in direction sessions?

- a. When introduced by you as director.
- b. When introduced by the directee.

What has been the result of using poetry in sessions you have directed?

2. As a directee

How has the poetry of Scripture (eg. Psalms, Song of Solomon, the Magnificat and other songs) been used in direction sessions?

- a. When introduced by the director.
- b. When introduced by you as directee.

How has other poetry been used in direction sessions?

- a. When introduced by the director.
- b. When introduced by you as directee.

3. What has been the result of using poetry in sessions where you have been the director/directee?

4. What do you see as poetry's contribution to spiritual direction/directed retreats?

5. What poetry/ types of poetry have you found the most useful in spiritual direction?

6. What ideas do you have as to how poetry could be used in spiritual direction/directed retreats?

7. Is there anything else you would like to say about poetry and spiritual direction?

Appendix II

Poets whose work I and respondents to my questionnaire have found helpful in spiritual direction.

Angela Atallah
Anne Powell
Anna Johnstone
Antonio Machado
Catherine de Hueck Doherty
David Whyte
Dawna Markova
Derek Walcott
Dylan Thomas
Edward Hays
Eddie Askew
Edward Carpenter
Francis Thompson
George Herbert
Gerald Manley Hopkins
Glenn Colquhoun
James K. Baxter
John Keats
Joy Cowley
Joyce Rupp
Macrina Wiederkehr
Mary Oliver
Mary Elizabeth Lauzon
Maya Angelou
Naomi Shihab Nye
Pesha Gertler
Rainer Maria Rilke
Robert Frost
Rumi
T S Eliot
William Bly

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