

**Post-church Australian spirituality,  
CrossFit,  
and the place of Spiritual Direction**

**by**

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

This paper explores the emerging interest in spirituality in post-modern Australia, despite declining involvement in traditional religious activities (Hughes 2010) (Tacey, *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* 2000) (Williams 2007)<sup>1</sup>. As well as exploring a definition of spirituality, the paper considers what the emerging spirituality in Australia looks like and how the ministry of spiritual direction might be of benefit to, and accessed by, those for whom the 'spiritual' is important. With 'wellness' being identified as a 'new religion' for many Aussies (Ostrow 2015), I have surveyed members of a local CrossFit box<sup>2</sup>, as a case study, to find out more about their own spiritual awareness and spiritual needs, in order to determine whether spiritual direction may be of benefit, and in what form spiritual direction may take, within the CrossFit community.

Membership in mainline Christian churches across the western world is in decline (Wright Howe n.d.), and Australian churches are no exception (Hughes 2010). According to the 2006 Census (Frame 2009, 92-92), religious affiliation had declined from 97.5% in 1901 to 69.46% in 2006, with the number participating in weekly religious activities at around 15% (Williams 2007). Australian social commentator David Tacey blames the 'lack of spiritual vision' of traditional churches as a contributing factor to this decline (2000, 241). Kelly (2004) perceives this 'lack' as a separation between spirituality and ecclesial existence:

*Those interested in the new spiritual movements, will hear Church leaders saying a lot about the sacredness of life, the integrity of marriage, the necessity of social justice, the dignity of the human person, and the evils of abortion, euthanasia and violence. What they tend not to hear, if only for the reason that it is seldom expressed, is anything dealing with the experience of God, the life of grace, the way of Christ, the practice of prayer, the Christian mystery of suffering and earth, and the promise of eternal life.*

Tacey describes our predicament as an inheritance of 'a legacy of disenchantment and loss of spirit...of a tired religious tradition that has lacked the courage to discover the workings of the divine in the here and now' (2000, 241). But despite this lack of vision towards a new spirit in the mainstream churches, evidence exists of an emerging desire to find a still point without necessarily turning to institutional religion (Mackay 2007, 14), or in spite of it – embracing new imaginings of old ways as we adjust to new contexts of understanding the universe (Morwood 2007). Sargeant (2015, 14) also recognises this search for stillness and tranquillity in response to major changes in social structure that are shifting the context for the expression of spirituality, changes witnessed in the loss of credibility of many of the institutions, agencies, customs and theories upon which we all counted for the guarantee of our view of reality and

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<sup>1</sup> Although according to Mackay (2007), this decline in attendance seems to have stopped and there are signs of growth at the fundamentalist end of the religious spectrum, with many forms of non-traditional religious observance emerging – such as home church, Buddhist meditation groups, new explorations of the meaning of God and even days such as ANZAC Day taking on the character of a quasi-religious festival.

<sup>2</sup> Online journal CrossFit Life states: CrossFit is many things. Primarily, it's a fitness regimen developed by Coach Greg Glassman over several decades. He was the first person in history to define fitness in a meaningful, measurable way (increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains). CrossFit itself is defined as that which optimizes fitness (constantly varied functional movements performed at relatively high intensity). CrossFit is also the community that spontaneously arises when people do these workouts together. In fact, the communal aspect of CrossFit is a key component of why it's so effective.

of our morality (Barry 2009, 13-14). This search is reflected in the two thirds of Australian adults (2001 census), who despite not participating in regular religious activity, indicated the desire for spiritual life is either 'important' or 'the most important' principle guiding their lives (Williams 2007).

The idea of transcendence is significant to the definition of spirituality, as is a recognition that it has to do with the 'inner journey' (Barry 2009, 11), an attraction to the sense of mystery and 'other' present in life (Reynolds 2009), and that it allows transformation of perspective rather than simply reformation of behaviour, inviting one to embrace the present and ask, rather than 'what if' - 'what is?' (Oliver 1999, 16). It is the work of spiritual direction to journey with pilgrims exploring this place of present transformation, more on this later.

David Ranson (2000) (summarised by Wright Howe n.d.) has observed four different expressions of spirituality in the Australian context:

- The personal quest for answers to personal questions with no need for a guru or god
- Seeking strategies of balance and wholeness, wellbeing and restoration (use of therapies)
- Allegiance to certain religious societies or subcultures
- Spirituality derived from revisionist theology seeking to discover the presence of god in our place and our time: a dialogue between human experience and the Christian event

Current Australian society is "post family...post-patriarchal...and characterised by different forms of social cohesion and social capital" (Bouma 2006, 122). This is evidenced in population responses to the first three expressions above: seen in the rise of personal therapies available including life coaching, personal training (rather than drawing on wisdom in the family or the local priest); the increase in people making use of retreats and weekend workshops in meditation (a withdrawal from collective worship with shared purpose to instead focus on individual wellness); the growth in communities such as social justice groups and environmental groups<sup>3</sup>, and even sporting clubs<sup>4</sup> (satisfying a need for collective social cohesion once provided by the church). Those participating in the fourth expression are most likely to be isolated from institutional religious activity as a result of mainstream resistance to their revisionist position, though it is likely they will be found in groups mentioned above such as environmental or social justice groups, or in faith communities, such as Urban Neighbours of Hope<sup>5</sup> (UNOH).

In the context of the emerging spirituality, spiritual direction aims to give orientation to the inner journey (Leech 2001, 27) and so can guide pilgrims as they discover the point of reference described by Wright Howe, above. Deep seeing and deep listening is required to help us to 'see through' rather than 'look at' that which we contemplate (Tacey 2000, 117), in the case of spiritual direction it is the experience of God or something that points to God that

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<sup>3</sup> Common Grace is an example of a new online community in Australia that advocates for social justice and environmental issues through organising protests, petitions and social networking. Common Grace is openly Christian [www.commongrace.org.au](http://www.commongrace.org.au) There are many other groups that do similar work under a secular banner.

<sup>4</sup> A good friend recently shared she felt a greater sense of family, support and connection as part of her child's triathlon club than she ever felt from the church she attended in years past.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Owen of UNOH, in his book 'Muddy Spirituality' describes new possibilities of living incarnationally in disadvantaged urban communities in Australia, a way of life that is attractive to those seeking an authentic integration of what they believe and how they live – "There is a way to live through your deepest desires that are indelibly intertwined with creating, seeking, praying, and ushering in the reckless beauty, joy, peace and laughter that will flood us "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10) when people and their communities begin to live, laugh, love, labour and lament in harmony with God's heart song for our world (2011, 26-27).

provides this focus (Barry 2009, 9). Spiritual direction offers an opportunity to listen to that which unsettles us, to bring balance and harmony into the space of our lives that has been diseased by rapid societal changes, and through prayer, to deepen our awareness of Divine presence within us, being grateful for it and being courageous to give generous expression to it (Morwood 2007, 238-239).

Freehill-Maye (2015), noting the shift away from church participation in her American culture, identifies some of the following as ways Americans fulfil the desire to be part of something bigger than themselves, become better people and seek connection with others: attending rock concerts; using Apple products; toasting people before meals; watching TED talks; and CrossFit. It would be fair to say the same list applies to post-modern Australians. May (1982, 88) calls this 'displacement' – ways we seek to assuage our spiritual longings through physical, mental or interpersonal activities that are less threatening than the path of genuine spiritual growth. Mackay (2007, 284) agrees, suggesting the purpose of the new inward journey, for many Australians, is distraction from the very questions that trouble them, and a way to ease the pain of an increasingly senseless world (Barry 2009, 16). Some studies in Australia show emerging trends in spirituality that reflect this at a deeper level than consumer style list offered by Free-Hill Maye, including an environmentally motivated deep concern for the earth, a desire for connection with the sea and land, connecting with short-term communities of common interest, and more simple and sustainable ways of living (Raiter 2003, 77-102; Osborn 2001; in Robinson 2010). There is not space in this paper to explore these emerging expressions of spirituality, or other significant factors impacting changes in Australia's spiritual landscape such as multi-culturalism, indigenous spirituality and the effect of the physical land on our psyche; instead I will consider how CrossFit is meeting the longings of many Australians for physical, mental and interpersonal activity, and endeavour to discover whether spiritual direction has anything to offer this fitness community.

Ragan Sutterfield, a USA CrossFitter and seminarian, wrote for *The Washington Post*:

*"In an age where many are opting out of organised religion, CrossFit provides a rare place of community and holistic transformation. It may not be religious institutionally, but CrossFit does a better job than many religious communities in transforming people's lives"* (quoted from Freehill-Maye n.d.).

CrossFit 'changes lives' with its dynamic approach to group exercise that: incorporates personal goal setting, pushing athletes to the limits of their capabilities; encourages a healthy lifestyle incorporating nutritious food and good sleep patterns; creates a community that encourages and inspires members to be the best they can be. The CrossFit community satisfies the human longing for transformation on a physical and social-relational level, and as a result many dedicate their time, energy and money to CrossFit. Across the USA the CrossFit phenomenon continues to grow with more than 5300 affiliate<sup>6</sup>clubs, and a staggering 12000 more worldwide<sup>7</sup>. Growth in Australia has also been significant, with over 580 affiliates springing up around the country since the first box affiliated in North Queensland in 2006<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Affiliate: fee paying member of the CrossFit brand

<sup>7</sup> <http://map.crossfit.com>

<sup>8</sup> <http://crossfitnq.com.au/>

This year I joined a CrossFit box<sup>9</sup>. The box I attend has words like *faith, honesty, compassion and integrity* spray painted on the walls, along with statements that have spiritual overtones – ‘*faith is what keeps you going*’. CrossFit athletes generally work out together<sup>10</sup> in excess of 3 times a week and feel connected as a ‘family’. Athletes set and monitor personal fitness goals with encouragement from coaches and other athletes, socialise together, take care of each other, and can be active in the community – participating in charity work and acts of kindness<sup>11</sup>. One of the members recently posted on our closed Facebook group that the box is ‘the family she never had’ – powerful stuff! There are numerous articles on-line that describe CrossFit as a cult, and it’s easy to see how it’s gained this reputation.

Americans Rich Froning, the ‘fittest man on earth’, and Dan Bailey, both high profile CrossFitters, are open about their faith in Christ, how faith is a key motivator for their training, and the help that prayer is to their life and fitness (Journal 2012). There are pockets of CrossFit in the US that are openly Christian and incorporate ‘spiritual exercises’ (Bible study) in their programming, I could find no evidence of this in Australia. However, some Australian boxes do offer yoga or meditation/mindfulness (with particular focus on overcoming pain and physical challenges) sessions for their athletes. Despite a lack of overt spiritual focus in boxes in Australia there is a definite push for athletes to find inner strength and determination to improve, and to be mentally strong.

Taking into account the philosophy of CrossFit and the commitment<sup>12</sup> of those participating, I invited members of my box to complete a survey (see Appendix 1) about their own spiritual awareness and perspectives, in order to find out whether spiritual direction may be of benefit to them (given that their choice to join a box already reflects some of the expressions of Australian spirituality identified earlier by Ranson (in Wright Howe n.d.)<sup>13</sup>: seeking wholeness and balance in life, and belonging to a sub-culture). Members were invited, via the Facebook page, to complete a survey. Ten surveys were completed<sup>14</sup> by 9 females and 1 male. This sample is not significant enough to draw strong conclusions but did enable me to make observations that are a helpful starting point.

Regarding spirituality, 9 respondents shared a mixed sense of connection, purpose, strength or calmness that were an important part of their spirituality. All respondents had participated in various spiritual practices at some time during their lives, be it expressing gratitude, meditation, attending worship services or prayer. Most identified having multiple religious experiences on a regular basis (monthly or daily experiences) and 3 shared that the impact of an experience ‘completely changed (me) as a human being and a spiritual being’, I ‘felt grateful

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<sup>9</sup> CrossFit has its own vocabulary – ‘the box’ is the physical space of the gym

<sup>10</sup> Working out takes place in group sessions of up to 15 people with 1-2 coaches guiding participants through the WOD – Workout Of the Day. At the end of the WOD participants encourage each other with high-5s and celebrate PBs (personal best records) achieved, often posting images of the PB achiever on Facebook where members ‘like’ their post and write affirming comments to each other.

<sup>11</sup> Our box recently collected donations to support victims of domestic violence, they took baskets of Easter eggs to neighbours to ‘spread joy’, an in-house competition was held with all proceeds going to one of our athletes who had made the world games in the US.

<sup>12</sup> Monthly membership at a CrossFit box is upwards of AU \$175.

<sup>13</sup> There are a few things to note about the box I attend; it is located in Logan City, Brisbane’s poorer sister on the south-side, and a melting pot of cultures. The box I attend is owned by a NZ born Aussie couple. By CrossFit standards it is a small gym, with approximately 55 members at the time of the survey. At first I balked at conducting the survey because of these reasons but in the end decided that it was a true reflection of my local community, and where I am most likely to make connections in my work as a spiritual director.

<sup>14</sup> Even though this represents 18% of the total membership, a good ‘return rate’, I contacted 2 other CrossFit boxes requesting permission to conduct the survey with members in order to have a broader perspective, but the invitation was declined.

for what I have in my life...felt less stressed and happier’, ‘I just believe there is always someone looking out for me’, ‘it felt like everything happens for a reason’.

When asked whether they had or would talk about the above experiences the group was split with 4 stating they would very likely talk with others about it and 5 being not likely to do so. Trust in the other person was a significant factor for one respondent in whether they would share or not.

After offering a brief written explanation of spiritual direction, participants were invited to say whether spiritual direction is something they may be likely to access<sup>15</sup>. Two people felt this was very likely, but 6 felt it was not likely, with one preferring to meet with a psychologist or counsellor if they had concerns, and another expressing a desire to know more about spiritual direction. A third person felt they were too introverted and private to share. Two people indicated they would be more likely to participate in spiritual direction in a small group, and if it were free of charge. While group spiritual direction is not as common as one-on-one meeting, there are models that exist to support such gathering. There are a number of resources to support those looking to facilitate group spiritual direction, including: ‘Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction’ by Fryling (2009), and ‘An Open Place: The ministry of Group Spiritual Direction’ by Kropf and Schrock (2012).

Perhaps the biggest hurdle in making spiritual direction available to those most likely to access it is knowledge about what it is – how does one know they would benefit from it if they are unaware of what it is? The title itself is confusing as it may suggest to some a spiritualism and authoritarianism (Barry 2009, 10). However, as Barry and Connolly conclude, to use other titles can be just as misleading and suggest that spiritual direction is something it is not (2009, 9-11), such as counselling, advice or moral guidance (Benner 2002, 89-93). Spiritual direction provides a space where people explore and articulate their experiences without feeling embarrassed or dismissive of these powerful events (Dessaix in Tacey 2000, 243; Wright Howe n.d) the difficulty lies in finding appropriate ways to invite participation.

For those in the CrossFit community, science plays a big part in justifying the way they do what they do. Sharing evidence for the scientific and medical benefits of spirituality may be one option that would enable some CrossFitters to consider spiritual direction as something that would be of benefit. Moreira-Almeida, A (et al) found that ‘religious-associated variables have been shown to have protective effects for multiple mental health outcomes, including wellbeing, suicidal behaviour and substance misuses’ (in Williams 2007). A number of studies show that spirituality and religion are positively related to immune system function, and a wide range of health behaviours, including some for which there is no specific religious teaching (Williams 2007). While this evidence may encourage participation in spiritual direction, it would be important that this did not become the only motivation for people to seek it. Otherwise spiritual direction risks being reduced to another “path to self improvement”, rather than being born of an inner desire for deeper connection with God.

In a society that is increasingly comfortable hiring experts as private consultants the decision to meet with a spiritual director is no longer as strange as it once might have been (Wangness

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the ideal way of communicating the role and purpose of spiritual direction but was the only option in order to maintain anonymity of the participants, which was especially important given that I am a member at the box and given the personal nature of the questions.

2012). However, it is important that spiritual direction not be seen as either a consumer item or alternative to Christian/spiritual community (Campbell 2010). Leech warns of this danger of commodification of spirituality and maintains that one of the central tasks of spiritual discernment will be to disentangle the values of the gospel from those of the dominant culture (2001, 24-26). Working out the best way to 'market' Spiritual Direction to groups who may benefit most from this ministry is a process that needs to be undertaken with great care in order to avoid commercialisation.

In my opinion, genuine understanding of what spiritual direction is and what it has to offer is the main barrier to people in the CrossFit community. It is worth exploring ways of sharing information about spiritual direction with communities that exhibit some of the expressions of emerging spirituality (Wright Howe n.d.) in order to demystify the practice, and to further consider alternatives to the traditional one-to-one style of delivery in order to make spiritual direction more accessible to those who would not otherwise participate.

Given that the majority of Australians are placing such importance on their spirituality, it is important that we, as directors, do all we can to be available, accessible and present to those seeking to be listened to and accompanied as they walk the path of their emerging spiritual journey. Spiritual Direction provides the vital space needed to help us navigate this revolution.

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## Appendix 1

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. The survey will take you approximately 10 minutes, depending on the depth of your answers. Some questions require you to tick a box, others include short answers – please include as much detail as you can in these sections. There is a blank page at the end if you need more space for any of your answers – please add the relevant question number to anything you write on the extra page.

All survey responses will be treated confidentially and I will not speak with you about the survey unless you specifically invite me to contact you, leaving your details on the last page.

The findings of this survey will inform the research for my Special Project that explores how Spiritual Direction may be of value, and accessible to, post-modern Australians, particularly people who would not normally find themselves in a church or place of worship but who have an interest in spirituality. I have chosen to survey members of the CrossFit community as I see elements of spirituality in the CrossFit philosophy, particularly around building a connected community with a common purpose (in the case of CrossFit this purpose is fitness).

### 1. Demographics

How old are you?

- 18 – 25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 65+

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

Cultural Origin (if you are first generation Australian please indicate your family of origin's home culture in the 'Other' section)

- Australian
- First Generation Australian (born here but my parents were not)
- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE CONTINUE OVER THE PAGE**

2. How often do you train at a CrossFit box?
- Casual pass
  - Up to 3 x week
  - More than 3 x week

3. Apart from the regular WOD class, what other programs do you participate in that are offered by your box?
- Bootcamp
  - Challenge programs incorporating diet/weight loss goals
  - Yoga/taichi
  - Meditation
  - Other: please describe
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4. What aspects of CrossFit are most attractive to you?
- Group exercise
  - Coach attention
  - Scientific approach to exercise
  - The positive environment of my box
  - Promotes healthy lifestyle
  - Other:
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5. What elements of a healthy lifestyle does CrossFit help you with?
- Fitness
  - Diet
  - Mental health
  - Spiritual health
  - Social life
  - Medical reasons
- How does CF help with the selections you have made above?
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6. Are there any phrases/words/sayings used in your box (either relating to the WOD or on the walls or documentation) that inspire you in some way? For example: 'The only voice you can hear is the one that says "I can!"' What are they and how do they inspire you?
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**PLEASE CONTINUE OVER THE PAGE**

7. How do you understand spirituality to be of value to you? (spirituality is a broad term – while it includes people who follow a particular religion, it also includes people who are non-religious but search for meaning and purpose, transcendence, connectedness and values in their life)

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8. In terms of spiritual practices in your life, which, if any, of the following do you do/have you done in the past:

- Attending a regular worship service with a gathering of people
- Studying scriptures or wisdom texts
- Memorising scriptures or affirmations
- Prayer
- Meditation/contemplation
- Stream of consciousness writing
- Breathing/mindfulness
- Talking with counsellor/spiritual director/religious leader
- Reading books on spiritual topics
- Spiritual exercises (for a specific spiritual purpose, not just fitness) yoga/tai chi
- Dream journal/dream work
- Journaling
- Expressing gratitude
- None
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE CONTINUE OVER THE PAGE**

9. Which, if any, of the following have you experienced?

	Once	2-3 times	monthly	daily
A deep sense that you are not alone and that someone/something 'out there' is taking care of you				
A connectedness to the universe, that you are part of something bigger than yourself				
An inner feeling of peace that reassures you things are going to be ok				
A sense that life circumstances are lining up in your favour and you feel looked after by God/the universe				
Feeling that someone who has died is close and guiding/caring for you				
A significant awareness of connection with the world/all people/God/the universe through nature – a sunset, the ocean, the bush				
A deep sense of gratitude that overwhelms you and inspires you to say 'thank you'				
Listening to music, you are moved to tears and connect with the song – it seems like it's speaking to you and you wish you could talk to someone about it.				
Something has happened and it seems that it's a direct message to encourage or guide you – eg: you get a timely letter, dejavu, you keep seeing the same word 'hope' pop up all around you.				
An experience that makes you wonder if there isn't 'more' to life				
A surge of emotion/energy that you can't explain, it surprises you, that helps you achieve something positive.				
Looking at a child or baby and being swept up in the wonder of life				
Describe another experience here:				

10. Thinking back to the most significant experience you mentioned in Question 9, how did this experience affect you? (As a result of the experience, did you change the way you think about life? Did it help you make a decision? Do you do something differently to the way you'd done it before?)

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11. If you had been able to talk about the significant experience, from Question 10, with someone who could help you unpack it and understand it in a deeper way, how likely would it be that you would take that opportunity?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not likely
- I did talk to someone about it (please indicate who [friend, counsellor, pastor] and how they responded in the box provided)
- Please explain your response:

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12. Spiritual Direction is an ancient practice of one to one, confidential conversation with a person trained to listen to your actual experiences of God (as you experience God to be), and to help you to pay attention to the movement of the mysterious other we call God and to respond to that (Barry, 2009, pp. 8-9). Spiritual Directors are not psychic, do not try to convert you to a particular religion, do not tell you what you should believe and are not counsellors.

Spiritual Direction conversations may cover topics such as your dreams, fears, ways of praying/connecting with God, spiritual experiences; and may include techniques such as journaling, silence, creative visualisation (using your imagination), styles of praying, drawing therapy, movement. Spiritual Direction typically involves meeting with a Spiritual Director once a month for an hour.

In terms of wholistic (the whole person – all aspects of your total wellbeing: mind/body/spirit) care for yourself, how likely is it that you might meet with a Spiritual Director?

- I already meet with a Spiritual Director
- Very likely
- Possible
- Not likely

Why did you select the above response?

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13. Would you be more likely to participate in a Spiritual Direction style conversation:
- In a small group setting (3 – 4 people with a Spiritual Director) where all present agree to confidentiality and to speak honestly about their spiritual experiences without criticism
  - If I had more information about what to expect, I would prefer to find out more before deciding if it is something I would do.
  - At my CrossFit Box – I feel comfortable there
  - If it were free (Spiritual Direction in Brisbane typically costs between \$30 - \$60/hr)
  - I'm not interested in Spiritual Direction at all
  - Other suggestions:

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14. These are some questions/comments I have about Spiritual Direction/spirituality/spirituality and CrossFit.

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**OPTIONAL**

I would like to talk more about Spiritual Direction, please contact me to make a time to talk further.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**I WILL ONLY CONTACT YOU TO SPEAK ABOUT THIS SURVEY IF YOU FILL IN THIS SECTION, OTHERWISE YOU WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS.**

**THIS IS THE END OF THE SURVEY!**

Thank you for your time and willingness to complete this survey and support me in my Special Project.

Your participation is much appreciated.

Cassie