

Offering Spiritual Direction as a Chaplain to Students at a New Zealand University

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*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them,
because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*
Matthew 9:36-37

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In this essay I will discuss how my training in the art of spiritual direction has a place in my context as a tertiary chaplain.

As a tertiary chaplain I have the privilege of rubbing shoulders with a wide range of students and staff from varied walks of life. To give some broad brushstrokes of the students I encounter and what they think spiritually, I did a 'spiritual history' questionnaire. I adopted and modified questions from Scott Peck's book *Further along the road less Travelled*.¹

Because this was a questionnaire and not a spiritual direction session, I was careful to honour it as such. Even so, having been a student in the art of Spiritual direction, I find my training in spiritual direction is now influencing the way I relate to students, in a more helpful way. The previous co-ordinator of the SGM formation programme - Sue Pickering - explains this, "*Spiritual direction is an art, a dynamic flow of listening and responding, of questions and wonderings, of encouragement, of silence, all in the context of prayer.*"²

The spiritual history Questionnaire

1. Were you raised in a religion? If so what?
2. Are you still in that same religion?
3. If not, what religion or belief do you identify with, and how did that change come about?
4. Are you an atheist?
5. An agnostic?
6. What is your notion of God? (In your opinion what is God like?)
7. Does God seem abstract and distant, or does God seem close to you and personal?
8. Has your notion of God changed recently?
9. Do you pray?
10. What does prayer look like for you?
11. Have you had any spiritual experiences? (Felt a presence or power which is different from your everyday life, a synchronicity of events, answered prayer, presence of God or of evil, experiencing that all things are one, sacred presence in nature, visions, dreams, sudden insight, hearing an inner voice)
12. What effect did these experiences have upon you?

Background information about the interviewees

I interviewed 8 students, one was a complete stranger who, when he heard what I was doing, offered to be interviewed! To protect their privacy I have changed their details, however the content is authentic.

The actual questionnaire takes about half an hour to do but what I found was at the end when I asked if they had any questions, or any feedback in regards to the questionnaire, they wanted to keep talking - one even asked if I had more

¹ Peck 1993, p251

² Pickering 2008, p23

questions. He said he was probably heading towards atheism but never worried about discussing such things as long as the other person didn't look like they were going to get annoyed with his answers!

My choice of interviewees was random in that I asked those who were available at the time. However, two have been to my house for meals and another I talk with each week after a Christian meditation session that she attends with me. Another regularly comes looking for a long chat, even more so since the questionnaire. The questionnaire has deepened my friendship with most of these students.

Ethnicity

There were two Chinese, four Europeans, one Indonesian and one Maori. The mix of cultures reflects the multicultural setting in which I work.

Gender & Age

There were three males and five females. The students I interviewed ranged between ages 18 – 30 years.

Areas of academic study

The students are currently studying in Human Nutrition, Veterinary, Philosophy, Politics, Science, and Sociology,

Family situation

Two students had father's who had died recently. One student talked of their mother's affair and another talked of their grief over a barely functioning relationship with their parent. A student's friend/peer was dying of cancer and has since died as I write this. Four of these students live far away from home - their families live in a different country. One student talked of their shock and struggle over their parent's divorce. One agnostic student has a partner who was brought up religious.

Religion

Two of the four European-born New Zealanders were not raised in a religion. The third European was nominal Anglican and the fourth was raised with a Christian mother. The other four students were born overseas; two had one parent who was Buddhist and the other Christian. The other two were raised Catholic. Both the students who were raised in Buddhist-Christian families now identify themselves as Christian.

These types of backgrounds are typical amongst the students I meet on campus.

Reflections from the Questionnaire

Jesus was impacted by the stories and circumstances of the people he encountered. I too was deeply affected by the things that the students shared with me in the context of the questionnaire.

A Christian student said, "Why does God make it so difficult if his ultimate goal is to have connection with us. Distant, it is not how it should be but it is how I feel at the

moment. He doesn't take away the sharpness and harshness of life. Distant from him because my effort has got me nowhere."

An atheist student said, "When I started reading I thought there is no possible way that the God that people talk about is able to let these things happen and not do a damn thing about it. Yet so many people, who are so deserving to live, die at an early age - that is a no! If God is so high and mighty - like people make out - then he'd do something about it. But he doesn't, so it kinda makes you wonder! Good things happen to bad guys and bad things happen to good guys. It doesn't really seem like a fair world to me. There is no possible way that God could be a part of it."

One student said, "I'm trying to open up to God. God is really good. I am trying to go to church, to sing, to listen, to solve my doubts. I went to church last Sunday and felt, 'this is right, this is where I belong.' I give church a chance".

I found myself getting angry with God for not apparently making himself known to these students. And I have doubted my ability to help these students. But I have come to understand that my feelings are only a taste of the grief and frustration God feels for his children, and so I am motivated to pray. Bakke says, "It is helpful to remember that all the initiative is not ours (or the students). In fact, any movement on our part toward God is an indicator that God has been seeking us."³

Jesus was the message, he was present to everyone he encountered. Jesus seemed to know just what to say or do. How come? He modelled the importance of spending time away with God. David Benner says, "Only love is capable of genuine transformation. Willpower is inadequate. Even spiritual effort is not up to the task. If we are to become great lovers, we must return again and again to the great love of the Great Lover."⁴

A Spiritual director, to be truly present to another and to be the 'right message', will need to follow Jesus' example and return again and again to the great Lover. People sense whether we are truly present or not and whether we truly care. What God requires of us is that we offer what he has already poured into our hearts.

New Zealand is increasingly becoming a post-Christian, post-modern, post-church society. At times, when we as chaplains have offered sessions on various spiritual issues the attendance has been disappointing.

In this environment what do the students want? What is the role of the chaplain?

The following analogy by Simon Brown best describes what we see the students responding to, and what our role as chaplains in my team looks like.

It can be likened to a campfire in the wilderness; welcoming travellers from all corners of life to stop, relax, and chat for a while. This is a place where tired bodies

³ Bakke 2000, p21

⁴ Benner 2002, p34

and spirits are warmed by the fire and refreshed, a friendly atmosphere where stories of the road are shared amongst travellers. Our job is to keep the fire burning because one never knows when a traveller will come and sit. It doesn't matter where on the journey the traveller has been exploring, or how long they have been walking, if they come in peace to sit on a log by the campfire, they are welcome.⁵

My campfire is the chaplaincy kitchen where students come to use the facilities and enjoy the free hot drinks. It is hanging out each week on Wednesday nights with students; eating pancakes, listening to music, and playing cards. It is chatting on the couch, providing a welcome face at the reception desk, and it is leading Christian meditation sessions. The spiritual history questionnaire discussed in this essay has also been part of the campfire. In all these ways stories are shared, friendships are formed and spiritual direction conversations happen.

It has become my conviction that God is at work in everyone. We are not all in the same place spiritually but we are all on a journey where God is active, in the seeker and non-seeker alike (see John 3:16; Revelation 3:20).

Scott Peck describes how there's a progression of growth that people can journey through spiritually. He has identified four stages¹, which he warns not everyone fits into as we are all unique. As a chaplain I think it's advantageous to be aware of these stages. Here is a brief outline of each.

Stage I: Chaotic, antisocial

Nearly all young children and maybe one in five adults fit in this stage. They are undeveloped spiritually and their relationships with others are all essentially manipulative and self-serving. They are basically unprincipled; there is nothing that governs them except their own desires. If a person becomes aware of their inner chaos they may convert quite suddenly to the next stage.

Stage II: Formal, institutional

In liberating oneself from the chaos of Stage I they submit themselves to an institution for their governance such as the military, prison, a tight corporation or church. Stage II characterizes the majority of church-goers who are very attached to the forms as opposed to the essence of religion. Unconsciously these forms are seen as saving them from the previous chaos and they have little understanding of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Peck describes their vision of God being like a benevolent Cop (who rewards and punishes) in the sky, and this is how God needs to be for them at this stage in their development; a legalistic religion for their governance.

Stage III: Sceptic, individual

We are all born Stage I and if our home is a stable and secure environment, by mid childhood we will become law-abiding, rule-following people. If our environment supports uniqueness and independence, by late adolescence we will have become

⁵ Brown p4

¹ Peck 1987, p188-202

self-governing so that we won't need an institution (e.g., church) for governance. We will grapple with the laws, rules and beliefs taught, and so our conversion to Stage III begins. Often we become atheists or agnostics. We make up our own minds about things. As sceptics, like scientists, we are highly submitted to principle, and to the scientific method of conventions and procedures; this is to ensure we won't be deceived. Advanced stage III people are active truth seekers, which may lead to the next stage.

Stage IV Mystic, communal

Where we acknowledge the enormity of the unknown and, rather than being frightened by it, we seek to go deeper into it in order to understand more.

We also become communal; having become practiced at emptying ourselves of preconceived notions and prejudices, we come to see the world as one big community and that we are all interconnected.

It is important to understand that progression through these stages constitutes growth. Peck says he has every reason to believe that when we convert, "...to atheism or agnosticism or, at least, scepticism! Indeed, God has a hand in this part of the conversion process as well." ⁷

A student raised Anglican and Catholic said he preferred to call himself an Anglican, "I'm not comfortable to say I'm a Christian, but I'm perfectly happy saying I am an Anglican, it's my culture." He said he was Anglican heading towards atheism...I wasn't shielded from other ideas, even if I believed in God, I would still believe in evolution. I have put thought into that kind of thing. I wasn't shielded".

This student is self-governing. He was raised in a home where he had the freedom to critically examine beliefs. He says now he has only a vague belief in God, "*but has started going back to church but not for the God part*" he said, but for the comfort he relishes from the music. Joyce Huggett said music, "reaches depths in a person into which words cannot trickle."⁸ He rationalised why he felt the music impacted him. "*We were raised on classical music...I don't feel it's the presence of God so much as an emotional reaction to music*". I think everyday events, such as listening to music, is a way in which God can try to reach us.

If we continue to progress through the stages, by late adolescence we will convert to Stage III scepticism. This is a critical time in one's life, and is when many people attend university. Colin Day, tertiary chaplain, wrote how university should be a time of broad exploration and self-discovery. The university community embraces a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs. Its an important time in the student's development to equip themselves not just with a certificate which says they have knowledge in a particular sphere...but just as importantly to take the opportunity to think through for themselves their convictions about life, and how it should be lived.⁹

⁷ Peck 1987, p199

⁸ Huggett 1989, p33

⁹ Day 2010, p4

A Christian student said, "I have more questions this year than I did before. I'm more confused than I was before, my simple faith in him doesn't seem to be that simple. God is mysterious, confusing - no scientific answers with him. One person gets healed and another doesn't. God is capable of healing but he does not heal all people. We can't figure it out! Frustrating! How can you give an answer to anyone! Wished we had a rulebook: I will heal people under these certain conditions, criteria".

Here we have a budding sceptic, she is feeling confused and has questions about God. Conversion from one stage to another is the time of greatest challenge and difficulty and can be ushered in by tragedy. This student has a longing for God to be like a benevolent Cop (Stage II) who should legislate who is healed and who isn't, and who is deserving and who is not. During conversion it is important that a person is listened to and supported as they explore their questions. Peck says no matter how far we develop spiritually, we retain in ourselves vestiges of the previous stages through which we have travelled and we can bounce between stages depending on the circumstances.¹⁰

Another student brought up Catholic said "I have found my own way into a belief that is mine rather than being my parents."

She went to a religious school where it was all routine. When she came to university she met people her age that went to church for God rather than for anything else. She initially went to her friends' church to hear the music, the message really spoke to her so now she goes and is learning more:

"It clicked! I'm definitely a believer."

At some point, usually by late adolescence, we will make up our own mind. This student has come to understand and experience for herself the true meaning and spirit of her upbringing.

"I'd been having a little bit of a difficult time you could say...there was just this one line that everyone had been saying to me...that night at church the speaker said the line - the words - so that was a bit of an eye opener! Like God wanted me there...I never thought that religion would be something I would get emotional over."

Spiritual direction is based on the belief that God communicates to us in the here and now. Dallas Willard says, "This Kingdom is not something to be accepted now and only enjoyed later, but something to be entered now."¹¹

She continued,

"God's gone from being like just something that we talked about but not really understood...I suppose it's changing more and more as I grow, so God just grows...I am definitely learning to listen better and understand myself. Every time something comes up now I take the time to talk about it. It has just created and strengthened my faith."

¹⁰ Peck 1987, p198

¹¹ Warwick, p1

Hughes warns us that, “our best efforts without attention to our inner life will only result in empty religion.”¹² Psalm 139:3 says, “Search me and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts”.

In Spiritual direction a directee is helped to make their own discoveries, to trust their own powers of discernment, to discover their riches, their gifts, their value, and their capacity to grow.¹³

One student said,

“The problem is - people are a problem; cause there’s always the possibility of deceit. Send down an angel so everyone can see it, if an angel touched down in New York and millions of people saw it, it would end the whole atheism thing right. People need some kind of physical proof. If we had documented stuff of the resurrection it would be a lot more convincing to people these days now that we have technology - something like a resurrection-type thing or an angel-type thing”.

As sceptics we are highly submitted to principle and the scientific methods of conventions and procedures to ensure we won’t deceive ourselves. As a Spiritual director I will listen and loiter around his comments, ask questions, and if appropriate resource him.

Another student said,

I was taught God was good but I haven’t experienced God being good. I question why my life is like this. Why has this happened? I keep questioning. Maybe that’s what God wants for me...His way is best. He has his way, doesn’t always give you what you want, sometimes gives you what you don’t realise you need...God is a humble person he brings back the lost. Sometimes I feel like I’m the lost”.

The student continued,

“I think every event - even my parents marriage breakup - there’s meaning behind it, a reason. It’s the way it is meant to be. God’s way will be best for me”.

Times of upheaval and crisis can cause a person to grapple with their image of God. As a spiritual director I would join them on their search for spiritual reality and help them reflect on their view of God. Although the art of Christian spiritual direction is generally non-directive, a director can assist the student in a variety of ways to support their spiritual growth. Spiritual direction is about offering hope and there is always a next step.

Their doubts and questions must not be resisted but taken seriously or the person may become fixated in a perpetual resistance to spiritual insights.¹⁴

A student who asked questions in a bible study, was reprimanded by her peer who said ‘not to make trouble.’ And when she asked, “Did God not know that Eve would sin?” A leader in the church said, “We don’t ask questions like that.” She said she was

¹² Warwick, p6

¹³ Warwick, p4

¹⁴ Peck 1987, p200

asking genuine questions and felt oppressed and constrained by their attitude and has since moved away from Christianity.

We neither can nor should skip over our questions and doubts. Peck says, "Doubt must be considered a Christian virtue, a Christian responsibility".¹⁵ Our questions can be constructive in that they can lead us to exploration and growth.

Conclusion

My two years of training in spiritual direction has helped to cement in me the following values:

- *To love generously*
- *To hold loosely*
- *To withhold judgement*
- *And to pray*

To Love generously

This is about valuing and respecting each person because they are made in the image of God and are deeply loved by God. It's coming not from a position of dogmatic truth, but from a position of friendship, acceptance and love. As time and love work together, then the truth can be discovered. "Through our loving acceptance we are modelling and reflecting the love of God."¹⁶

Whatever stage or space I am in, that is where God meets me with compassion and unconditional love. I am first loved and then invited to go deeper.¹⁷

To hold loosely

I am learning to not assume that my own route is best for others. The focus is to be on God, not on a map. People must be free to make their own decisions, I am never to dictate to them who, what, where and how - I have no ownership of them.

"There is always the danger of the well-meaning or spiritually bossy charging into someone's life uninvited and doing some real damage."¹⁸

To Withhold judgement

Creating a place where anything can be said without fear of criticism or ridicule requires me to be a trustworthy person who keeps confidentiality, otherwise there's no real safety. In Luke 4:13 Jesus helped the woman at the well to look into herself deeply and there she discovered her thirst for God. She did not feel found

¹⁵ Peck 1987, p 200

¹⁶ Guenther 1992, p21

¹⁷ Perry, p7

¹⁸ Guenther 1992, pix

out or accused, but rather for the first time she was truly known and understood by Jesus.¹⁹

Cron says, "Sure we can disagree with others and sometimes we should - but whatever happened to gentleness and respect?"²⁰ Training in spiritual direction has helped me to reign in my instincts to correct another person's worldview.

And to pray

Because we believe the Holy Spirit is present and active, in conversation a spiritual director listens in three ways: to God, to the other person and to themselves so that the conversation is done in an attitude of prayer. When I sense it appropriate I offer to pray with or for a student. This has been gratefully accepted, and I have seen God work in amazing ways in direct answer to our prayer. Some of our greatest work is done in prayer.

Barry and Connolly's definition of spiritual direction is 'We define Christian spiritual direction, then, as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of that relationship.'²¹

As a chaplain working in a post-Christian, post-church, post-religious environment, spiritual direction looks more like the campfire scenario where relationships are less circumscribed and the directee's beliefs broader. It does not matter where on the road they have been travelling, if they come in peace, and want to sit and chat for a while, they are welcome. In my role as a chaplain I believe I can offer spiritual direction in the conversations I have with the student travellers I meet at the campfire. Sue Pickering says, "Spiritual Direction is helping someone find their way to God."²² John Franklin, who founded Spiritual Growth Ministries said his purpose was in "*deepening people's experience of God.*"²³

I hope you will agree that there is plenty of scope for a chaplain to offer spiritual direction conversations in a university environment to students, wherever they are on their spiritual journey. I still have lots to learn but this has been an exciting start.

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¹⁹ Guenther 1992, p50

²⁰ Cron 2013, p197

²¹ Barry 1986, p8

²² Pickering 2008, p18

²³ Hadfield, p10

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