

**Orientation, Disorientation and New Orientation
as taught by Walter Brueggemann
and its relevance for Spiritual Direction**

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Introduction

One day I was driving a friend who was visiting from the North Island around the inner city of Christchurch – well, as much as was possible to see at that time, as during the previous year we had experienced severe earthquakes that dramatically damaged much of the city.¹ Now over a year later many of those affected buildings had been demolished. I well remember the sensation of being lost momentarily, confessing to my friend that “I am not sure where we are.” A weird sensation, as I generally knew my way around the city well. I quickly realised that we were on a well-known stretch of road, but due to the many buildings having come down, my ‘landmarks’ had been taken away, and I was momentarily *disorientated*. Christchurch had previously been a stable, well ordered city, built by the English settlers on a clear grid pattern, creating a stable *orientation* for the inhabitants and visitors alike. But we had been thrust into *disorientation*, with so many landmarks removed, so much of what had been our stability, gone. Yet now, some eight years later, we are entering the exciting phase of rebuilding, with new buildings being opened weekly. A *new orientation* is emerging, being built on the very rubble of the previous orientation.

Walter Brueggemann’s study of Psalms

Several years ago I discovered this language of orientation and its various forms from the work of Walter Brueggemann and his study of the Psalms.² For the purposes of this paper, I will explore the movements, as outlined by Brueggemann, from *orientation* through *disorientation* and onto *new orientation*, not only as a helpful metaphor for understanding our recent experiences in the city of Christchurch, but as a framework to help name and describe our current season in our personal journey of life, the two key movements within that journey, and its relevance for the work of spiritual direction. It seems that at any given moment in our lives, we would be situated in one of those three seasons, or the movement between the same. To understand this for ourselves, as well as for our directees, might be helpful in interpreting our current situation and potential challenges as well as possible invitations of the Spirit.

Firstly, Psalms of Orientation. Brueggemann suggests that these are Psalms ‘*that express a confident, serene settlement of faith issues.*’³

*Whenever we use these psalms, they continue to assure us of such a canopy of certainty, despite all the incongruities of life. Psalms of orientation, in a variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, His creation and God’s governing law.*⁴

Psalms 19 describes this season of orientation; ‘*the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul, the statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple;*’⁵ therefore, for the people of God, life was certain, constant – trust God, obey God, and all would be well.

¹ A 6.2 earthquake occurred in [Christchurch](#) on 22 February 2011 at 12:51 p.m, killing 185 people and severely damaging much of the city

² From *Whom no Secrets are Hid*, 2014, Westminster, John Knox Press

³ Brueggemann, W; *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 29% kindle version

⁴ *ibid*, 32% kindle version

⁵ Psalm 19:7

If only life were always so certain! Yet most will testify to the reality of *'human life consisting in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self pity, and hatred.'* Where is God in such times? Has He abandoned me? Have I abandoned Him? Jesus' own cry from the cross reflects such anguish, *'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'*⁶ Thus we meet the Psalms of *disorientation*. Often called Psalms of Lament, around one third of the Psalter consists of such psalms. Raw, emotive, honest. Not a list that would describe the typical church prayer meeting I would suggest, but at the heart of the Psalter nonetheless! *Disorientation 'includes all facets of our common life and experience. The times of disorientation are those when persons are driven to the extremities of emotion, of integrating capacity, and of language....we are "undone." ...the loss of orderly life is linked to a loss of language, or at least to a discovery of the inadequacy of conventional language.'*⁷

It is this acknowledgement of the reality of our circumstances, with the subsequent awareness and impact on our inner world, now given authentic and honest language through prayer in all its rawness, that I find so helpful. Here is a model for prayer that might be helpful to consider.

I had previously enjoyed Brueggemann's framework for understanding Psalms and their various orientations, yet in this last season of life I have unexpectedly *experienced* disorientation in ways and depths that have surprised me. A sense of vulnerability emerging from circumstantial challenges has been somewhat overwhelming. But, as was the case in our journey as a city, the language and understanding of *disorientation* has been helpful for me to name and navigate my current reality. Many an hour has been shared with my own spiritual director speaking of such realities. The Psalms have come alive, guiding, giving me language, permission, to bare my soul before the Lord, and, equally helpfully, before another human being. *'How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?'*⁸

Yet fortunately *disorientation* does not have the last word (although you do wonder if it does when you are in the midst of such a season!) Brueggemann reveals the last category of Psalms to be that of *new orientation*, where *'Human life consists in turns of seasons when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy break through the despair...'*⁹

This is not an attempt to compartmentalise our faith journey into disconnected boxes, in fact, to the contrary. There is a further nuance that Brueggemann notes which may be helpful for the discernment of the movement of the Spirit in our lives, and specifically for the spiritual direction relationship. *'Human life is not simply an articulation of a place in which we find ourselves, it is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, ...'*¹⁰

⁶ Psalm 22, interestingly quoted by Jesus on the Cross.

⁷ Brueggemann, W; From Whom no Secrets are Hid, Page 153

⁸ Psalm 13 vv 1-2

⁹ Brueggemann, W; Spirituality of the Psalms, 21% kindle version

¹⁰ *ibid*, 22% kindle version

Brueggemann suggests that one of two movements will be experienced. Firstly, from *orientation to disorientation*.

I have noticed that many people seek spiritual direction at this time, as the stability of a former time of *orientation* is now passing away as the seeker moves towards *disorientation*, along with the confusing array of experiences and associated affections. To what, or whom, do I now turn? What might be the invitation from the Spirit in the midst of this movement? Ah, a rich environment for the discerning spiritual director to accompany the directee in the often perceived darkness towards greater depths of faith, hope and love. Although it might not feel like it to the directee who is seeking direction, through the very act of choosing spiritual direction, there is the indication of a turning to the Lord, a seeking of His Presence, His direction. The Spirit is always working, inviting, yet we sometimes need help to discern such. Again, the Psalms of Lament are such a great resource in times like these.¹¹

Brueggemann notes how this is ‘counter cultural,’ as ‘*the dominant ideology of our culture is committed to continuity and success and to the avoidance of pain, hurt and loss. The dominant culture is also resistant to genuine newness and real surprise,*’¹² as well as recognising the importance of bringing such experiences into language through prayer:

‘We may believe that such Psalms not only express what is already experienced, they also articulate and evoke the new situation of disorder so that it may be experienced, that is, it may not be fully experienced, embraced, acknowledged, unless and until it is brought to speech.’¹³

The second decisive movement noted by Brueggemann is from *disorientation to new orientation*.

‘Most frequently the Psalms stay with the experience to bring the speech to a second decisive move, from disorientation to new orientation. That is, the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected, that new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back...rather, the speaker and the community of faith are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God. That newness cannot be explained, predicted or programmed.’¹⁴

A surprising grace, as the underserved gift and favour of God, often found when all else seems to be lost. And here again the role of the spiritual director is helpful in being able to encourage directees to look beyond the immediacy of their given circumstance, to stand back far enough from the situation to be looking for Gods gracious gifts.

Other models of Life Stages

Apparently it was Carl Jung who first popularised the term ‘the two halves of life’ to similarly describe the major stages of life development.

¹¹ Consider Psalms 3, 6, 13, 28 and 56

¹² Brueggemann, W; Spirituality of the Psalms, 27% kindle version

¹³ *ibid*, 64% kindle version

¹⁴ *ibid*, W; Spirituality of the Psalms, 65% kindle version

*One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie.*¹⁵

Commenting on this, Richard Rohr notes:

*The first half of life is spent building our sense of identity, importance, and security—what I would call the false self and Freud might call the ego self ... But inevitably you discover, often through failure or a significant loss, that your conscious self is not all of you, but only the acceptable you. You will find your real purpose and identity at a much deeper level than the positive image you present to the world ... In the second half of life, the ego still has a place, but now in the service of the True Self or soul, your inner and inherent identity.*¹⁶

Just as Brueggemann suggests we move from *orientation* through *disorientation* towards a *new orientation*, Richard Rohr expands his understanding of the movement from the first half of life to the second by using the metaphor of *the three boxes*; as we move from *order* to *disorder* through to *reorder*.¹⁷

The first order, where we all begin, is a necessary first “containment.” But this structure is dangerous if we stay there too long. It is too small and self-serving, and it must be deconstructed by the trials and vagaries of life (“the cross” or disorder). Only in the final “reorder” stage can darkness and light coexist, can paradox be okay. This is true and contemplative knowing. Here death is a part of life, failure is a part of victory, and imperfection is included in perfection. Opposites collide and unite; everything belongs. Once we can learn to live in this third spacious place, neither fighting nor fleeing reality but holding the creative tension itself, we are in the spacious place of grace out of which all newness comes.

Relevance to Spiritual Direction

I have found these movements to be helpful as a framework for understanding my own journey and growing in awareness of the Spirit's presence and invitation in each season. As previously noted, I believe it is during a time of *disorientation* that many people reach out for support, often leading towards spiritual direction. Life has previously seemed so safe and certain, yet now it feels like all is falling apart. What is happening, where is God in all this? Firstly, understanding the simple framework as discussed, not as some rigid formula to be imposed, but rather a guideline to help locate and interpret our, or our directee's experience. Therefore these experiences provide the raw material for the direction session and discovery of how the Spirit may be working and leading in any specific season.

*We dare not get rid of our pain before we have learned what it has to teach us. Most of religion gives answers too quickly, dismisses pain too easily, and seeks to be distracted—to maintain some ideal order. So we must resist the instant fix and acknowledge ourselves as beginners to be open to true transformation.*¹⁸

¹⁵ C. G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1960), page 399

¹⁶ Center for Action and Contemplation website, <https://cac.org/two-halves-life-2015-10-12/>

¹⁷ Center for Action and Contemplation website, *The Three Boxes*; Tuesday, Dec 6, 2016, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

¹⁸ Center for Action and Contemplation website, *The Three Boxes*; Tuesday, Dec 6, 2016, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

The spiritual director acts as a guide during these times; asking questions, listening, waiting and reflecting, looking beyond and beneath circumstances, discerning any recognisable season of the directee's journey, inviting appropriate reflection and discussion around this to frame the directee's experience in the wider journey. In the midst of my own recent season of *disorientation*, it was so helpful to come to the realisation that this is not the end, even though it feels like it! *Disorientation* leads to a *new orientation*, that simple awareness empowered me to keep going, continue to discern the Lord's presence and leading, realising that this is part of the journey, the way of the Cross, but now more expectant for the in-breaking of new gifts, new possibilities. The privileged role of the spiritual director is to help the directee notice these signs of the in-breaking of new gifts and possibilities when possibly they only see the challenge of circumstances.

The magnificent Psalm 23 so beautifully outlines the dynamics of the three seasons and therefore a helpful resource for the spiritual direction ministry. The Psalm begins with the provision and *orientation* of green pastures and still waters, moves towards the challenge and *disorientation* of the valley of the shadow of death, where the wonderful discovery of God's ever abiding presence reassures the reader. Leading onto a *new orientation* of dwelling in the house of the Lord, forever. Such passages of Scripture provide rich resources for placing ourselves in the story, understanding our own journey and potential invitations.¹⁹

Conclusion

It is in this journey towards the unfolding of our *true self*, towards the *new orientation* of maturity in Christ, that the spiritual direction relationship is outworked.

As noted, Brueggemann observed the movement of the people of God within the Psalter as being from a stable *orientation*, to the uncertainty of *disorientation* and ultimately to the gift of a *new orientation*. For the purposes of this paper I have applied this primarily to our individual journey, inviting a considered awareness of our current season as well as any movement between these various seasons as the raw material for discerning the Spirit's presence and invitation. But equally these movements could be a helpful framework for a faith community's journey.

No model of development will ever fully describe our maturation. Each individual's journey is unique and organic, likely far more cyclical than linear. Yet both models as described outline similar markers within this process. Firstly, life is a journey. A journey towards discovering a maturity that the Christian believes is rooted and empowered in the love of Jesus Christ. Within this journey, God is always working and the great invitation of spiritual direction is to accompany the directee towards noticing the movement and invitation of the Spirit within their life in any particular season. As both developmental models note, somewhere in this journey of life we encounter a metamorphic experience clothed as a crisis of *disorder*, or from Brueggemann's insight, *disorientation*. Today's cultural norm might persuade us that these challenges are to be avoided, but Jesus' invitation to take up our own cross and follow Him invites us to look for His working in the midst of the reality of

¹⁹ See Appendix 1 for an expanded resource using this Psalm based on these movements

such disorienting circumstances. Here the spiritual direction relationship finds its true place, as the discerning presence of a companion in these times to keep us oriented towards Jesus, seeking signs of grace, is so needful. Not to solve the problem or fix the circumstance, but to discover God to ever deepening levels, thus revealing the *true self*.

What a privilege to accompany others on this journey of self-discovery, of God-discovery. A path needful to have been trodden ourselves, often with the accompanying scars as evidence, but ultimately trophies of His grace pointing towards an Eternal Love.

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Appendix 1

Psalm 23

Read the Psalm slowly, meditatively, take special note of what word or phrase stands out to you or catches your attention. Stop to ponder this word, phrase, or image, be open to what God is saying, how He might be inviting you to respond. Then consider the questions following.

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters,*

³ *he restores my soul.*

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

⁵ *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ *Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,*

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Orientation, Disorientation, New Orientation

As outlined by Brueggemann, the journey from *orientation* through *disorientation* and onto *new orientation* is a helpful metaphor for understanding our spiritual journey as well as a framework to help name and describe the current season in our personal journey of life. (Also noted was the similarity to Richard Rohr's outline of our journey using the metaphor of "the three boxes": order - disorder - reorder)

Using Psalm 23 as an outline, the following questions may be used for personal or group reflection, or as a tool during a spiritual direction session.

Reflect on your spiritual journey thus far, note the seasons that may be described by the above framework as outlined by Brueggemann or Rohr.

Do you notice distinctive seasons of Orientation, Disorientation or New Orientation?

How would you describe each of those seasons? It may be helpful to 'name' each season with a word, phrase or metaphor that helps describe this specific season and its place within your spiritual journey.

What was your experience of God in each season?

Orientation

As noted by Brueggemann in his study of Psalms, Psalms of Orientation continue to assure us of a canopy of certainty, despite all the incongruities of life. Psalms of orientation, in a

variety of ways articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and relatability of God, His creation and God's governing law.²⁰

What, or where, are your quiet waters or green pastures where your soul feels refreshed or restored; the place, or the people, where you find your deepest connection with the Lord?

The place, or the role, where you feel your 'truest self?' Note how these people or these places may have changed throughout your life.

In what ways have you been aware of the Lord guiding you as in verse 3?

Are you aware of how the Spirit leads you? How might you nurture that experience, grow in awareness of the Lord guiding you, in all aspects of your life?

Reflect on a time of orientation in your life. How would you describe this season – what emotions did you experience?

What image of God would best describe how you saw or experienced Him during this time?

Disorientation

As noted by Brueggemann, 'human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self pity, and hatred.' ... Disorientation 'includes all facets of our common life and experience. The times of disorientation are those when persons are driven to the extremities of emotion, of integrating capacity, and of language....we are "undone."²¹

In verse 4 of Psalm 23, there is a shift from comfort and peace (representing *orientation*) towards walking through *the valley of the shadow of death* (representing *disorientation*).

Are you aware of times in your life when it felt like you were walking through a dark valley? Can you describe that time?

Were you aware of the Lord walking with you through this dark valley at the time? What about now as you look back on that time?

During this season of disorientation, in what ways did you sense the Spirit inviting you to go deeper, walking by faith, not by sight?

What associated feelings went with this time of disorientation? How did you process those?

In what way did your emotions and experience of this season flow into your prayer life?

New Orientation

Brueggemann reveals the last category of Psalms to be that of new orientation, where 'Human life consists in turns of seasons when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair ... new orientation is not a return to the old stable orientation, for there is no such going back ... rather, the speaker and the community of

²⁰ Brueggemann, W; Spirituality of the Psalms, 32% kindle version

²¹ Brueggemann, W; From Whom no Secrets are Hid, Page 153

faith are often surprised by grace, when there emerges in present life a new possibility that is inexplicable, neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God.²²

Can you describe a season in your life that might be described as a new orientation where you were 'surprised by grace,... where new possibilities emerged in the present life....wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God?'

How did you experience God in this time of new orientation? In what ways was this different to the two previous seasons?

It seems that this season of *new orientation* is where we are able to hold together the tension of the paradoxes of life, of our faith. Richard Rohr says that in this stage of *reorder*, "death is a part of life, failure is a part of victory, and imperfection is included in perfection. Opposites collide and unite; everything belongs." *What does this mean to you? How did you experience this?*

Who have you previously considered to be your enemy that the Spirit maybe inviting you to dine with?! (Psalm 23:5)

What do you sense is God's invitation in this season of new orientation? How might you respond to that invitation?

In Conclusion

Each individual's journey is unique and organic, and although the three seasons as outlined by Brueggemann are helpful to discern and grow in awareness of the Spirit's movement and invitation in our lives, our journey is likely far more cyclical than linear. Although you may experience a season of new orientation, having moved through seasons of orientation and disorientation, it seems there is always more! What may have evolved into a new orientation can eventually settle back into a comfortable orientation, leading to disorientation... and thus the cycle continues until "*we shall see Him face to face!*"²³

The ultimate new orientation awaits, where "*No one will mourn or weep any longer. The pain of wounds will no longer exist, for the old order has ceased.*"²⁴ As we journey towards this heavenly fullness, the invitation is to continue to grow in awareness of the signs of the Spirit working in your life, the inbreaking of heavenly fullness. They will always be there, sometimes seemingly hidden, sometimes obvious, but always inviting into greater depths of His Loving Presence and Purposes!

²² Brueggemann, W; Spirituality of the Psalms, 21% kindle version

²³ 1 Corinthians 13:12

²⁴ Revelation 21:4 The Passion Translation