

FROM CLOISTER TO CAFÉ

- another model of spiritual direction

by

Ceridwyn Parr

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of [Spiritual Growth Ministries](http://www.sgm.org.nz)
(www.sgm.org.nz).

FROM CLOISTER TO CAFÉ

- another model of spiritual direction

On the northeast coast of the United States is the state of Maine. It has a wild, rocky and convoluted coastline, very like the Catlins, Kaikoura, or the Bay of Islands. Two years ago I travelled there, to an old New England farmhouse. Around the fire with me were three other women. The door was shut, and there were two hours ahead of us - this was spiritual direction Greenfire style. I had come from New Zealand to spend five weeks in Boston and had chosen to take a five-day retreat at Greenfire, having heard so much about it. Like the familiar yet new landscape, there was familiarity, similarity and striking difference to be discovered in a new way of spiritual direction.

Greenfire is “a small community formed in friendship and common spirit to enable the creative work of the deepest self, in the internal world, in the broader multicultural community and for the planet.”¹ There are five Episcopalian priests living there, all women. They are committed to mutuality, an intentional Christian feminist lifestyle, exploring their own faith journeys and helping other women to search for deepened awareness and collective wisdom. They work in a circle, with at least two of them present with guests (=directees) because they “wanted to be done with the Lone Ranger model of ministry.”²

All the women had years of experience, in counselling, chaplaincy, parish ministry and direction, helping people bridge the sacred and secular in their lives, “helping them name their spiritual centre and encouraging its concrete expression”.³ Among other types of consultation at Greenfire, they offer spiritual direction, which at its simplest is the process of helping another find her way with God. They wanted to avoid the expert/client model and to develop a model more consistent with feminist insights: “offering a **circle of friends** in which one woman can have her turn- her time to work through her needs/concerns- in the context of focussed committed listening”.⁴ Judith Carpenter observes that in one-on-one sessions “we have had to work so hard, focus and listen so intently there are whole parts of ourselves we don’t access. Having three or four of us together allows for us to touch that deep intuitive place in ourselves. It allows for ebb and flow, for the luxury of listening with a different ear.”⁵

This was my experience also, as a directee, in talking with three directors. They each responded to me differently and also talked to each other, drawing me into the dialogue. It was precisely like the image, which Mary Concannon uses, of putting an experience out on the floor and walking all around it, viewing it from different angles. Judith Carpenter has written her doctoral thesis on the work at Greenfire and says that people often comment on the power of the circle experience e.g. “I found the circle as the centre where all comes together to be opened, released and healed”.

¹ Greenfire - A Work In Progress: Reflections On The Story Of An Emerging Feminist Liberation Community Judith Perry Carpenter, Episcopal Divinity School 1995, p1

² *ibid* p15

³ *ibid* p39

⁴ *ibid* p40

⁵ *ibid* p50

There is something very attractive for me about the model of direction offered at Greenfire. It has the same purpose as the more familiar model of one-to-one direction, that of deepening the person's journey with God, but its circular nature emphasises the shared wisdom that arises in a group. The Spirit is evoked in the midst of the circle. "The level of intimacy touched can be profound because it is held among several ... the transference dynamics ... are diffused and erotic energy is held in a larger safer container ... the consultee is enabled to remain her own authority and is encouraged in a context of mutuality. This process frees us from the traditional boundaries ..."⁶ But, as in other forms of spiritual direction, "the work is always about grace."⁷

Building on from this experience, I would like to explore setting up a model of spiritual direction, which would incorporate the best of the Greenfire practice and understandings. At this stage, the process is experimental and developing, but there is enough support in the literature to make the discussion worthwhile.

I would envisage a person coming for spiritual direction and meeting, not one, but two directors, who would be equally involved in the process. The time frame could well be longer than the usual hour, as there would be more interaction. There would be the same understandings about confidentiality and commitment as in one-to-one direction, but probably a wider frame of reference and a higher degree of personal relationship outside the session.

I am proposing two directors. This immediately doubles the available experience and reduces the likelihood of projection. By having more than one director, there is a wealth of shared experience in which someone can find empathy and understanding, thus coming more quickly to a sense of acceptance and growing trust that "this is a place in which I can tell my story and be heard." Margaret Guenther observes that there can be a "special shared understanding between women of common experience; those who have borne children, widows. etc."⁸ In a spiritual direction partnership it would therefore be useful to combine different life experiences e.g. lay-religious, male/female, married/single.

The presence of a second director can act as a quasi-mentor or supervisor or moderator, although in practice, the roles would not be as clearly defined. Judith Carpenter says that, at Greenfire, they found the roles changed continually during the sessions, but that overall they were well able to critique and assess.

It would be essential for the two directors to have knowledge and experience of each other's way of working, and a high level of personal and professional trust.

I am proposing that the two directors have different backgrounds, life experience and roles within the church. Again this brings a wealth of available wisdom, points of identification and empathy, and a much wider reference and resource base. This would lessen any resistance to a particular style of spirituality and provide a broader base for relationship with the directee. Barry and Connolly stress that the personhood

⁶ ibid p52

⁷ ibid p55

⁸ ibid p131

of the directors is central and “needs to be sacramental sign of God’s loving care”⁹ Thus to have two directors will provide a complementarity, and indeed a greater supply of the quality which Barry and Connolly prescribe in large quantities – “surplus of warmth”!

I am proposing that this kind of spiritual direction is well publicised and freely available within a community – this is the significance of ‘café’ in the title. I would not envisage the sessions taking place in a café (necessarily!) but to be as accessible as going to a café to catch up with friends. In my observation of the Anglican church, for example, it is only slowly becoming more usual for clergy to have regular spiritual direction and even slower for lay Anglicans. There is a definite perception that spiritual direction is offered only by specialised clergy or cloistered religious, and the prejudice is hard to shift! The widely read books by Susan Howatch such as Glittering Images and Mystical Paths, have only added to the mystique. I would see the **circle of friends** model as helping to de-mystify spiritual direction. Gordon Jeff, in his distinctly different approach, would add that “the elitist view of spiritual direction has done immeasurable harm and has inhibited many Christians from going to talk through where they are with some understanding person. If some kind of spiritual direction is appropriate for all Christians then some of the great mystique as well as all the bad authoritarianism has got to go, and we are into something much more low key”.¹⁰

Along with an open attitude to spiritual direction, I would see this proposed model as honouring relationships. By this I mean that a person’s spiritual journey is conceived as not just of “the single soul in relation to God”, but as being equally “the human interconnected with other humans”. This implicit assumption would be demonstrated by the physical presence of the two directors acknowledging each other’s skills and showing openness to each other. This model of spiritual direction would be grounded in a particular worshipping or geographical community, and would inevitably take place among people who know each other. This is a real earthing of spiritual direction in relationship – with particular others, to communities of origin and to a “wider web of connectedness that encompasses the earth.”¹¹

In this alternative model I would expect that the usual boundary markers of direction/counselling/therapy/spirituality/supervision would be both more and less important. Less important, as the stuff of direction is the stuff of life and everything is open to the movement of God. I would wish this model to be holistic in encompassing the whole of a person’s experience. More important, because the potential for easy chat is greater, and the directors would need to keep the focus firmly on the directee.

⁹ Barry and Connolly, The Practice of Spiritual Direction p135

¹⁰ Gordon Jeff, Spiritual Direction for Every Christian p3

¹¹ Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, Weaving The Visions – New Patterns In Feminist Spirituality p8

The theory of this **circle of friends** model is based on –

- a theology of shared wisdom.
- the belief that God is the understanding and love within a group/circle.
- a theology of friendship as explicated by Mary Hunt.¹²
- a theology of risk-taking and boundary pushing, knowing that God is at the edges as well as at the centre.

However, I enjoy this comment by Plaskow and Christ, “We ought to theorise boldly but hold our theory lightly, because we will need more than ideological correctness to defeat the forces of sexism, racism, imperialism and class domination at work in our world.”¹³ I would add to this, the forces of tradition in spiritual direction. There is a tension between attempting to reform an established tradition and creating a new one, even if it is not in order to justify theory but to create a space for a new possibility.

It seems to me significant that the tradition of spiritual direction has come from writers and religious leaders most of whom are male. While the practices and understandings have been proved of immense value over the centuries, there must be a point at which we recognise that the received experience of males, in life generally and in religious understanding specifically, is only half the story and that “our understanding of all of life has been underdeveloped and distorted because our past explanations have been created by only one half of the human race.”¹⁴ One of the major contributions of feminist theology is the retelling of the Christian story with the other half of the characters present; asking the question ‘where were the women?’ In the field of spiritual direction, an equivalent question is, ‘How do women come to know themselves and their God, and how can their journey be best accompanied?’ A second question is – if most of the writers in the Christian spirituality tradition were women, would different models have developed? I see this proposal of a **circle** as beginning to address these questions.

There are many parallels between the Greenfire practice and conventional spiritual direction which Barry and Connolly describe as having two parts:

“Helping the directee pay attention to God as he (sic) reveals himself ...
Helping the directee recognise his reactions and decide on his responses to this God”¹⁵

This is precisely what occurs at Greenfire although the language would be more inclusive and the concept of God broadened considerably. There is a serious attempt to see the directee in their context and to include the processes of social analysis and feminist understanding in the conversation. More than that, there is the basic feminist practice of sharing wisdom and believing it will arise within the group. Margaret Guenther says that, within the church, women have often been in a passive-dependent role and that “this unauthentic, non-autonomous pattern of relationship must be broken” if women are to mature in the spiritual life. She points out that a “hierarchical therapeutic relationship epitomises the patriarchal closure of women, their fixation as the primary votives of sacred dispensation and spiritual direction.”¹⁶ In other words a

¹² Mary Hunt, Fierce Tenderness: a Theology of Friendship. Hunt uses friendship as a more appropriate metaphor for our relationship with God, as opposed to any relationships involving power or dependency.

¹³ *ibid* p8

¹⁴ Jean Baker Miller Towards a New Psychology of Women p x1

¹⁵ Barry and Connolly *op cit* p46

¹⁶ Margaret Guenther Holy Listening p125

traditional one-to-one model can perpetuate an attitude of dependency while a feminist **circle of friends** would allow for complete participation and empowerment of the person.

There are parallels in related disciplines, such as co-counselling, mentoring, peer supervision and a newly coined word “co-operacy”.¹⁷ All these techniques embrace a desire to include the wisdom of others, to co-operate and share, and to honour the whole person. As the authors of Co-operacy point out, “this co-operative way of working is asking a lot”¹⁸ and it is “not yet an integrated system of thought or a coherent philosophy”.¹⁹ However a recently completed study showed that professionals who have experienced co-operative ways of working have the highest levels of career success and satisfactions.²⁰ I believe that there is scope for continued development of this theory based in reflective practice. The doing of the work will deepen our dependence on God and thus deepen our ability to do the work, in a continual openness to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

However, this is still newly explored territory . In her book, A Map of the Unknown Country, Sara Maitland underlines the active or political aspect of spiritual direction and also the interconnectedness of the human condition.

“Spirituality is both a personal journey and food for the body. It lives between these points in a curious tension. Prayer is not about feeling good, it is about knowing God and loving and redeeming the world. It is not an alternative to life in the world, it is a point of entry into fullness of the world – politics, passion, thunderstorms, history and ticklish toes...we have to spin the circle faster and faster until the different spokes are indistinguishable and become one mass of movement.”²¹

In considering this post-modern, deconstructed, non-hierarchical, interactive model of spiritual direction, I am taking seriously the insights of contemporary feminism and theology. I wish to honour and utilise the wisdom which comes ‘when two or three are gathered’, in a circle, and to create a new paradigm, another way of accompanying a person on her faith journey.

¹⁷ Hunter, Bailey and Taylor Co-operacy – a New Way of Being at Work

¹⁸ *ibid* p10

¹⁹ *ibid* p8

²⁰ Pauline Collins Social Work July 1994

²¹ Sara Maitland A Map of the New Country; Women and Christianity p188

Bibliography

- Barry, William and Connolly, William. The Practice of Spiritual Direction. Seabury Press: New York, 1982.
- Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule. Women's Way of Knowing. Basic Books: New York, 1986.
- Carpenter, Judith. Greenfire – A Work in Progress. Thesis for D.Min. Episcopal Divinity School: USA, 1995.
- Collins, Pauline. “Does Mentorship Among Social Workers Make A Difference?” Social Work Vol. 139 no.4, July 1994.
- Fischer, Kathleen. Woman at the Well -Feminist perspectives on Spiritual Direction. Paulist Press: USA, 1987.
- Guenther, Margaret. Holy Listening – The Art of Spiritual Direction Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1992.
- Hunter, Bailey and Taylor. Co-Operacy A New Way Of Being At Work. Tandem Press: NZ 1997
- Hunt, Mary. Fierce Tenderness A Feminist Theology Of Friendship. Crossroad: New York, 1992.
- Jeffs, Gordon. Spiritual Direction For Every Christian. SPCK: London, 1987.
- Kelsey, Morton. Companions on the Inner Way. Crossroad: New York, 1984.
- Maitland, Sara. A Map of the New Country. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1983.
- Miller, Jean Baker. Towards a New Psychology of Women. Beacon Press: Boston, 1976.
- Plaskow, Judith and Christ, Carol. Weaving The Visions – New Patterns In Women's Spirituality. Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1989.
- Rhodes, Lynn N. Co-Creating - a Feminist Vision of Ministry. Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1987.