

# **Discernment in Spiritual Direction**

**by**

**John Axcell**

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## **Introduction**

This research essay investigates the question “How do spiritual directors determine their response to the material presented by a directee during the course of a spiritual direction session?”

The question arose during a debriefing of a spiritual direction session by two facilitators for a Spiritual Growth Ministries workshop. The facilitator who acted as the spiritual director remarked that during the session she had considered addressing one part of an incident raised by the directee, but then decided to focus on another aspect altogether. The director was asked in the debriefing why she had chosen to focus on the second aspect rather than the first, and the reply was given that she didn't really know, other than it seemed the right thing to do at the time. Why did the director to choose the second option and not the first? This essay is an attempt to look behind that question and identify the various psychological, cognitive, physical and spiritual elements that influence a director's response to the material presented by a directee. The aim of this enquiry is to provide directors and trainers of directors with some points of reference to aid reflection on their own discernment processes, and to provide a large scale map of some of the significant elements in the inner life in order to encourage further exploration in this area.

## **The Research**

The primary field of investigation for the research question is the experience and practice of some local spiritual directors, all of whom were interviewed during September and October 2015. A brief secondary and comparative investigation into the discernment processes presented in some of the contemporary introductory texts on spiritual direction is also included in the research.

During the preparation of the interview material and the survey of the texts, it was noted that the most distinctive feature of spiritual direction is the nearly universal recognition that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate director in any spiritual direction session. Recognising the authority of this 'third party', an enquiry into how spiritual directors understand the role and influence of the Holy Spirit in their spiritual direction was added to the investigation.

## Research Limitations

The research is bound by its very small scale and so no attempt has been made to statistically analyse the findings or to consider the demographic makeup of the interviewees and its effect on the interviewees' practice. It is also acknowledged that the survey of the literature is brief and limited. Finally, the essay does not cover the neuroscience of decision making or seek to identify the various cognitive or affective biases<sup>1</sup> that affect the spiritual direction process.

## The Interviews

Ten spiritual directors from the Wellington-Kapiti-Wairarapa region were interviewed. All the interviewees were women; the number of years that each had offered spiritual direction ranged from two to thirty five (several had been practising for twenty or more years). All but one of the interviewees had been through the spiritual Growth Ministries Spiritual Direction Formation

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<sup>1</sup> For example, confirmation bias which is the tendency to look for information that confirms what we already know or gender bias which is the tendency to believe that gender is a determining factor in a particular issue when no such causal basis exists.

Programme, and had received other training in one or more therapeutic and theological disciplines. The questions put to the interviewees concerned the logistics of their practice; the conceptual frameworks that orient their approach to the directee; the various elements and processing that shaped their specific response to the directee's material; and their sense of God's role in the spiritual direction process (see appendix 1 for a list of interview questions).<sup>2</sup>

During the interviews, all of the interviewees identified, with varying degrees of precision, a range of elements which contributed to their discernment process. While each interviewee identified most of the elements as being operative in their respective practice, no interviewee indicated that they made use of all of the elements. It was also noted that there were marked differences between the interviewees concerning the value or significance that each attributed to the various elements.

### **The First Element of the Discernment Process: The Mind/Heart**

The first element that contributes to the discernment process is the mind. During a spiritual direction session a directee sends a variety of signals, for example, body language, verbal content or tone, to the director who receives those signals with the mind.<sup>3</sup> The mind is the place which consciously and unconsciously filters those signals according to the type of formation, experience and training that the director has received. Those filters determine the ways in which the director notices, selects, categorises, evaluates, processes and responds to the information received. Signals are also discarded, put on hold or not noticed at all, according to the significance attributed to them by the director's interpretive framework. This first element of the discernment process was considered to be (semi)-automatic, in that the processing tended to be instinctive, habitual and conforming to previous and ongoing patterns of learnt behaviour and training.

Most of the interviewees indicated that this aspect of their processing included both their thoughts as well as their feelings. When asked to locate where this part of their processing took place in their body, the interviewees indicated in their head and/or in the region of their heart or chest (henceforth this element will be referred to as the mind/heart).

Each interviewee identified several different ways of orienting their spiritual direction practice, by which they filtered and interpreted the material presented by a directee. For example, one interviewee talked of utilising a narrative filter to receive the directee's experience and to express their responses. Here the interviewee aimed to help a directee locate and make sense of their specific faith experiences within a broader narrative framework, such as their life story or the bible. Other interviewees described taking a stance of hospitality where they sought to receive a directee's experience with as much openness as possible, and then encouraged the directee to make what they could of the spiritual direction space. Others oriented their practice and analysed the directee's material using such filters as Transactional Analysis, Jungian psychology, first half/second half of life patterns, apophatic or kataphatic theology, material from other faith traditions, Enneagram and Myers Briggs. Most of the interviewees also commented on the importance of adopting a contemplative stance while offering spiritual direction, the implications of

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<sup>2</sup> Although there was a sequential list of questions prepared for the interviews, the interview itself was fluid in its delivery and many more questions, especially those which sought clarification, were asked than those listed in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this essay the mind is considered to be that part of the person which has self awareness or consciousness, and with that awareness, the ability to draw on memory, to think and to make decisions, and to act with a sense of will and autonomy.

which will be discussed later in the essay. The extensive training and life experience of the interviewees provided each of them with an eclectic range of filters for receiving and analysing material that a directee shared.

### **The Second Element in the Discernment Process: The Inner Observer**

The second element in the discernment process comprises the ability of an interviewee to locate part of their consciousness outside of the (semi-)automatic processing that takes place in their mind/heart. Through this relocation, nearly all of the interviewees indicated that a part of their heart/mind could then watch the rest of their mind/heart carry out its processing, and also observe the contribution of other elements in a session. The degree to which each interviewee was able to assume and hold this inner observer position varied considerably. Some rarely experienced or utilised this element, while others used it almost continuously. Interviewees noted that the inner observer could either be intentionally assumed, or was instinctively taken (i.e. it was assumed without conscious effort) by the mind/heart when required.

The interviewees identified three functions that were enabled as a result of utilising an inner observer. The first function concerned the ability to notice and identify certain psychological processes taking place in the interviewee's mind/heart. For example, interviewees described the ability to see a red flag situation, such as experiencing parallel process, transference or counter transference, or when boundaries were being transgressed. The function of the inner observer also enabled some interviewees to monitor their emotional state and notice if this was interfering unhelpfully with the session. One interviewee described this red flag function as their internalised professional supervisor. While some interviewees attributed the ability to notice various psychological processes to the inner observer's unique role and perspective, other interviewees simply saw such professional observation as part of their regular mind/heart processing. Despite this difference of opinion, it was clear that the interviewees were in some way, and to varying degrees, able to observe, in real time, various aspects of their own performance during a spiritual direction session.

The second function of the inner observer concerned the ability to notice and inform the mind/heart of input from 'deeper' parts of the self, namely from archetypal figures and the gut (see third and fourth elements, in the next two sections).

The third function of the inner observer was to alert an interviewee when they had moved away from a holistic stance (i.e. using all the elements in harmony) towards operating solely out of the mind/heart sphere.

When asked how the inner observer became established in their practice, most attributed its emergence to an ongoing practice of personal reflection outside of a spiritual direction session. In this time of reflection, the interviewees had developed the ability to examine their mind/heart behaviour from a 'third person' position. As a result of this practice of reflection they were then able to assume this inner observer position while in a session. Others noted the importance of centering prayer in helping them form an inner observer due to a key dynamic in centering prayer which is the act of watching the mind getting distracted when it strays from the stance of simply knowing the presence of God.

### **The Third Element of the Discernment Process: Archetypal Figures**

The third element in the discernment process is the contribution made by 'archetypal' figures.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees indicated that these figures resided in the deeper reaches of the self and were viewed as having enough autonomy, mystery, elusiveness and presence that they were not considered to be part of the standard and ordinary processing that took place in the mind/heart.

Some of the Interviewees described: hearing 'a still small voice', being aware of a specific presence or image, for example, a totem figure, a wisdom or saintly figure, or a Christ figure<sup>5</sup> which contributed to their processing either through direct input, such as a word or image, or by a tacit contribution, such as a deep sense of reassurance.

Some of the interviewees noted that the contribution of their archetypes emerged from the inner observer itself. In other words, the vantage point of the inner observer had various archetypal qualities that were intrinsic to its role and position.

Only two interviewees used the term intuition to categorise aspects of their discernment process and indicated that their intuitive processing came from the sphere of the third element. Intuition was seen as the ability to see patterns of behaviour in the directee's life.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Fourth Element of the Discernment Process: The Gut**

The fourth element in the discernment process is a response arising from the gut or belly. Interviewees described how they listened to the gut by holding their mind/heart still and not attempting to intellectually analyse the directee's material or at least not to do so predominantly. They also tried to remain open and not commit to a response too quickly. The interviewees recognised that gut responses were formed automatically and instinctively, similar to responses generated by the mind/heart. However, a response from the gut was identified as having a particular tone which differentiated it from a mind/heart response. Gut responses felt integrated, as though all the elements of the self were contributing to the response. Also, gut responses were characterised by high energy, a sense of rightness, harmony and alignment with God's presence, involved a reduced sense of the ego's presence, arose from the deepest part of the self and the body (even deeper than the archetypal figures). Most interviewees noted the importance of the inner observer in enabling them to notice when they had moved out of a state of openness and receptivity to the gut, and were operating predominantly or solely out of the mind/heart sphere. The interviewees were unanimous in preferring responses to a directee's material that came from the gut (and also from the third element), rather than those that came solely from the mind/heart sphere. However,

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the essay the archetypal figures are part of the autonomous contents that are considered to reside in what depth psychologists would call the unconscious. The heart/mind becomes conscious of these, or aspects of these, previously unknown contents through use of the imagination; awareness of strong, unusual or disturbing emotions; unique experiences (e.g. religious), and noticing particular behaviours or habits for the first time. Over time the mind/heart ideally builds a relationship with these contents and as it does so, little by little, these unconscious contents becomes more conscious. The result of this growing relationship is a mind/heart that is slowly transformed by the contribution of these contents.

<sup>5</sup> Reference to a Christ figure and its contribution was set alongside an additional sense of God's overall presence. See section on Holy Spirit/God as spiritual director.

<sup>6</sup> The description of the term intuition by the two interviewees seemed to indicate that it was less a product of the third element of the self and more to do with a particular type of mind/heart (element one) processing that the interviewee used in a spiritual direction session.

most interviewees recognised that gut responses (and third element responses too) had to pass the through the mind/heart filter, to some degree, and so the first element always contributed to the discernment process.

### **Holy Spirit as Spiritual Director**

Having identified four distinct elements that contribute to the interviewee's discernment process, the essay will briefly consider the influence of the divine on the practice of spiritual direction. Most contemporary writers on spiritual direction, whether implied or directly stated, reflect the traditional understanding that the most distinctive feature of spiritual direction is the presence and influence of the divine. These writers echo earlier classical writers, such as John of the Cross, who wrote that 'spiritual directors should consider seriously that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide and mover of souls in this matter, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit'.<sup>7</sup>

One of the purposes of the interviews was to try and identify how this divine influence concretely manifested itself, and to what degree the interviewee was mindful of this influence (in conjunction with their mindfulness of other elements). Therefore, each interviewee was asked to comment both on this universal understanding and on how God determined or at least influenced their discernment process.

All the interviewees recognised that their practice as a whole was sustained and underpinned by God. Interviewees often described having a sense that God informed, integrated and tacitly pulled the whole discernment process towards the holy. However none were prepared to say that God specifically intervened in any clearly defined way to help make this happen. Indeed, interviewees openly expressed their reluctance to define God's specific contribution to the discernment process, and none would say that they heard 'the actual voice of God' or the equivalent in a session. Despite the reservation, all interviewees noted that particular elements of the spiritual direction process were considered to be 'closer' to the essence of God than other elements. For example, the third and fourth elements were frequently recognised by the interviewees as being more closely aligned with God. Responses that were considered to have more ego presence, or were coming solely coming from the mind/heart, were considered to be a less divinely attuned; although, the mind/heart was still considered to be a valuable and essential part of the overall process.

One interviewee made it clear that, despite all the various elements of the self and the critical influence of a divine third party that contributed to the decision making process, she took responsibility for conducting the session and ensuring that it went as well as it could.

Overall, interviewees were unanimous in noting that God felt most present and influential when all of the four elements in the discernment process were working in harmony. The flow and mood of a session on these occasions was characterised by an increased level of energy and significance. This sense of harmony was often marked with an 'aha' moment, or a tingling feeling, or a sense "that we are on to something here", and of being in a space characterised by a sense of mystery. Feelings such as excitement, tenderness, amazement and peace were also typically experienced. The interviewees became aware of the influence of the spirit as a result of either a post session review

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<sup>7</sup> John of the Cross, St. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991), *The Living Flame of Love* 3:46.

of specific events that had taken place in the session, and/or the ability to observe the signs of divine influence taking place in the session itself from the position of the inner observer, and/or from an overall sense of wholeness that was felt during key points of a session.

## The Literature

The essay now turns to present the results of a brief exploration into the discernment processes presented in the spiritual direction literature. For this exercise, seven contemporary introductory texts on spiritual direction were surveyed and the results are compared with the practice of the interviewees.<sup>8</sup>

The survey revealed a clear pattern. The predominant focus of the introductory texts is on the formation of a helpful stance or orientation by a director towards the directee. Most commentary in the texts is therefore aimed at developing sophisticated and nuanced filters for noticing and receiving material from a directee, and creating a hospitable environment which supports a directee to explore their spiritual experiences. These filters correspond to the first element of the discernment process.

The literature highlighted the importance of directors “noticing” their own reactions,<sup>9</sup> of being attentive to their “alarm bells”<sup>10</sup> or the various psychological processes that spiritual directors must deal with, such as parallel process and transference.<sup>11</sup> This capacity to notice inner responses implies the formation of some kind of inner observer but this term or the equivalent was only mentioned in two of the seven texts. The texts contained little discussion on how a director might form the capacity to maintain a conscious and ongoing awareness of the third and fourth elements in a spiritual direction session. Likewise, there was minimal discussion on the nature and contribution of these third and fourth elements. Although, occasionally the writers mentioned the importance of the ‘still small voice and its promptings’<sup>12</sup> and all recognised, to varying degrees, that the divine through the Holy Spirit vitally influenced spiritual direction.

There are two exceptions to the general pattern of the introductory texts. The first is the psychiatrist Gerald May, who explicitly presents the importance of the contemplative approach, and the ability to adopt an attitude of openness to the divine in a spiritual direction session.<sup>13</sup> May’s emphasis on the importance of being able to attend to the promptings of God through inner observation also extends to noticing the contribution of element three, and being mindful of the various

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<sup>8</sup> The texts selected for the survey were derived from the essential reading material for the Spiritual Growth Ministries Spiritual Direction Formation Programme. The texts are: Jeannette Bakke, *Holy Invitations* (Michigan: Baker, 2000); William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2009); Suzanne M. Buckley, ed., *Sacred is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programmes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005); Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Massachusetts: Cowley, 1992); Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* Revised Edition (Pennsylvania, Morehouse Publishing, 2001); Gerald May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (New York, Harper One, 1982); and Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction - A Practical Introduction* (Canterbury, UK, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, 114.

<sup>11</sup> Pickering, *Spiritual Direction - A Practical Introduction*, 135.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*, 113-148.

psychological processes (e.g. transference) that may take place in a session. He notes the specific challenges of adopting such a stance in a session, where the distractions that typically arise within solitary discernment are amplified by the presence and demands of a directee.

The second exception to the general pattern of the introductory texts is a chapter by Maria Bowen in *Sacred is the Call*. This chapter presents the value of contemplative listening in spiritual direction, and provides a methodology for observing the thoughts, feeling and sensations that emerge in the self while listening to the material presented by a directee.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these exceptions,<sup>15</sup> it remains clear that the predominant focus of the introductory texts is on mind/heart functioning, which includes the ability to observe psychological processes. A probable cause for the lack of systematic attention to the second, third and fourth elements is because these elements are assumed to be operative when a director adopts a contemplative stance, which the writers consider is the ideal orientation when giving spiritual direction. The assumption regarding a contemplative stance draws on the understanding that, just as the director is watching out for and receptive to the influence of God in all aspects of their daily inner and external life, so this openness continues in the spiritual direction session itself. This assumption is problematic in that, while a director may be experienced in discerning the will of God in times of solitude or prayer or even while participating in a non-demanding external setting, it is quite another matter to attend to the divine while responding to the immediacy and intensity of a directee during a spiritual direction session. The ability to simultaneously listen to the directee and to listen to the inner self typically requires an inner observer, at least until some kind of instinctive harmony between all the elements can occur. When this point of harmony occurs, there is less need for an inner observer to observe and 'monitor' the discernment process.

The second possible reason for writers in the spiritual direction field having a focus on mind/heart functioning is the influence of writers from other therapeutic disciplines with their similar orientation towards mind/heart processing.

This singular emphasis on mind/heart processing contrasts with the practice of the interviewees, who commented at length on the importance and contribution of an inner observer; the ability to assume that role; and the ability to observe and be influenced by deeper elements in the self and, most significantly, by the divine. The contrasting approach of the interviewees with the literature has implications for those in formation as spiritual directors, and for those facilitating their training. The essay now turns to look briefly at those implications and to conclude the research.

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Bowen, 'Hearing with the Heart: Contemplative Listening within the Spiritual Direction Session', in *Sacred is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programmes*, ed. Suzanne M. Buckley (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 33-41.

<sup>15</sup> The essay also notes that mention of such a role as an inner observer in material beyond the basic texts is sporadic too. For example, Janet K. Ruffing makes no mention of an inner observer or the equivalent in her book *Spiritual Direction beyond the Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000). Even though the book looks to extend the basic knowledge of spiritual directors, its focus remains on developing the right filters for the mind/heart. In contrast to Ruffing, Cynthia Bourgeault states in her book, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Plymouth UK: Cowley Publications, 2004) p. 125, that "In classic spiritual direction training, authentic work on the self begins with the development of a strong inner observer or witness". Also, Peter Wilberg's chapter on maieutic listening in his book 'The Therapist as Listener', in *The Therapist as Listener: Martin Heidegger and the Missing Dimension of Counselling and Psychotherapy Training* (Sussex: New Gnosis Publications, 2004), 113-129, provides a strong presentation on the importance of establishing the systematic capacity for listening to the inner self while in a therapeutic session.

## **Implications of the research and conclusion**

It was made clear in the interviews, and endorsed in the literature, that the greatest gift that any spiritual director can offer a directee is their attentiveness, receptivity and openness to God and their inner life during a spiritual direction session. The implications for those forming and being formed as spiritual directors is that any programme of personal development in order to become a spiritual director would benefit from a sustained and systematic education in the four elements (and the influence of the divine) that make up the discernment process. Correspondingly, there would also be merit in nurturing the ability of trainee directors to be contemplative towards both the directee and the four elements of their self while a session is taking place. Therefore training that assisted spiritual directors to consciously discern the will of God, through using such mechanisms as the inner observer, would likely to prove valuable.

Another area that may benefit from some consideration by those involved in spiritual direction formation is the value of compiling texts and material that articulates the formation, place and contribution of the four deeper elements (two to four) in the provision of spiritual direction. Such material would ideally complement and go some way to towards rebalancing the emphasis on element one as presented in the introductory texts. Overall the intention of this research is to invite reflection on what it means to nurture real time awareness of one's inner processes during a spiritual direction session, which in turn will hopefully lead to better spiritual direction for the director and the directee.

Finally, thank you to the interviewees who unreservedly and warmly shared their inner life and their outer practice for the benefit of this research.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Questions concerning the interviewee's spiritual direction context**

*The following questions focus on your formation and current spiritual direction commitments*

1. How long have you been practising as a spiritual director?
2. How many directees do you have?
3. Briefly describe your formation as a spiritual director; training, programme of study, approaches (schools of thought, conceptual frameworks) and persons who have influenced your practice.

#### **Questions concerning your discernment process**

*The following questions focus on your actual practice of discernment within a spiritual direction session.*

4. What do you do to prepare for a spiritual direction session with your directee?
5. During any given period in a spiritual direction session the directee will present an assortment of signals (body language, tone of speech, emotion, silence, significant subject matter etc.) of varying intensity. How do you determine which issue you will respond to?
6. How do you determine your response to that issue?
7. Describe your awareness of your discernment process(es) as it (they) takes place in a session. Where did this awareness come from?
8. What do you do in a spiritual direction session to assess how the session is proceeding?
9. What do you do after a session with a directee has finished?

#### **Questions concerning God's part in the spiritual direction process**

*The following questions focus on your sense of God's role in the spiritual direction process*

10. In the spiritual direction literature, spiritual direction is often presented as being conducted not by the director but by the Holy Spirit. What is your response to this statement?
11. How does the Holy Spirit influence your spiritual direction?

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