

**Holy Borders and Sacred Threads -
Spiritual Direction's Role in
Anchoring and Weaving**

by

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

I grew up in a well-defined, orderly, safe container of religion. For many years, through my childhood and into adulthood, this container gave me life and sustained me. It offered me an understanding of God that made sense. I give thanks for that container of ritual and beauty which in so many ways formed who I am.

When the circumstances of my life changed, I began to wonder about this container. Somehow it no longer offered me the sustenance I sought. New people I met lived beyond this container and saw things – life, God – in different ways.

The Anglican tradition is the faith space in which I grew up and grew in faith, and I claim that as my home – the space in which I live and from which I offer my ministry to God's created people. In recent years I have surprised myself with a curiosity to wonder about other places and other seekers of God-truth and wisdom.

That is what this writing is all about. It is about holy borders and sacred threads: the holy borders of a beloved faith tradition, formed as explorers over time have sought and shaped ways to articulate their relationship with God, Divine Other, Eternal Mystery, Creator, Universe – whatever our inadequate human words give shape to Being beyond us; and the sacred threads that I believe link us all in our quest for meaning and thirst for connection with something beyond ourselves.

Spiritual direction – both receiving it and being formed to offer it – has been a safe and fruitful place for me to wonder and wrestle and discover a wider and more spacious sense of God than hitherto I had dared to imagine.

In this project I set the scene by referring to some models of faith development that have helped me reflect on my experience. I describe what I perceive as an increasingly urgent call for openness in life and faith. I reflect on how spiritual direction offers a safe place for anchoring ourselves, exploring, and opening us to greater freedom. And I offer some observations about spiritual direction across faith traditions.

Venturing beyond my own holy borders and discovering new sacred threads has been possible only through the gift and presence of several companions along the way. Just as the risen Jesus fell into step beside two disciples and listened to their stories, so there have been key people who have fallen into step beside me and listened to mine. I dedicate this writing to several companions on the way: my past and present spiritual directors who have journeyed with me through many years of discernment and growth; confidants who have offered me spiritual direction without knowing it, shedding fresh light and insight in shadowy times; colleagues who have accompanied my learning in the art and beautiful craft of spiritual direction and offered fresh inspiration and encouragement when I most needed it; and my husband Roger for his quiet patience throughout. I offer thanks and love to you all for your steady presence, deep listening, and wise counsel.

Faith Development

There are many models describing faith development. James Fowler, a leading researcher and writer in this area for several decades, described six stages of faith development through the lens of particular age-stages of one's life.¹ Others have offered descriptions that are less explicitly expressed as a logical hierarchy of stages. I would like to refer to two such descriptions: Alan Jamieson's portrayal of a move from conventional to post-conventional faith, and Brieger O'Hare's paradigm of relationship development.

Alan Jamieson describes a move from conventional to post-conventional faith through a phase of transitioning, suggesting that these three phases reflect characteristics of stages 3, 4 and 5 identified by James Fowler.

Conventional faith expression This phase focuses on "black and white" and "right and wrong," with a sense of dependence on external authority (leaders, the Bible, and one's community of faith), and an acceptance of answers. The primary sense of relationship with God is hierarchical.

Transitioning This phase notices the "greys" of faith and life, with a sense of exploring, questioning, and critique. There is an increasing focus on one's internal authority of self-understanding and experience. The primary sense of relationship with God is relational.

Post conventional faith expression This phase embraces all shades of faith and life, with a sense of interdependence, mystery, wonder, and paradox. Internal and external authorities of faith are integrated. The primary sense of relationship with God is as a co-discerner of God's leading and call.²

¹ Fowler, James W., *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2009. A brief summary of Fowler's stages of faith development (adapted and abbreviated from material in Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM) Spiritual Directors Formation Programme resources):

Stage 0, Infancy, "Undifferentiated Faith" – a pre-stage of experiencing and developing seeds of love, trust and mutual relationship.

Stage 1, Early Childhood (2-6), "Intuitive-Projective Faith" – as a child derives meaning and understanding from observing and experiencing the outside world.

Stage 2, Childhood (7-10), "Mythic-Literal Faith" – when stories of faith help children see their own story as part of a bigger story.

Stage 3, Adolescence, "Synthetic-Conventional Faith" – as the capacity for abstract, logical, and synthetic thinking develops; as a growing sense of identity expressed in breaking away from the faith of one's parents sits alongside a fresh quest for belonging and acceptance.

Stage 4, Young Adulthood, "Individuative-Reflective Faith" – a conscious choice to seek and form beliefs that are meaningful, sometimes prompted by changes or upheavals in one's life.

Stage 5, Middle Adulthood, "Conjunctive Faith" – seeing things in more integrated, holistic, inclusive and interconnected ways; tolerating and accepting difference.

Stage 6, Mature Adulthood, "Universalizing Faith" – life lived with a sense of vision and freedom in God, free from the needs of the ego, and with a willingness to serve and suffer for the kingdom of God.

² Jamieson, Alan, "Off-road faith", in *Spirited Exchanges* Newsletter, Issue 36, August/September 2005. My descriptions are drawn from the table on the third page of the article.

Briege O'Hare's description charts movement in a person's relationship with God, noting that the three phases need not be sequential.

Certainty In this phase there is a sense of higher authority, a system of rules, and clear expectations.

Searching In this phase a tension between one's own identity and the approval of others begins to emerge, new questions are asked, and clarity gives way to a quest for God in different places.

Intimacy In this phase there is increasing tolerance for complexity and mystery, a new capacity to live with paradox, and the potential for surrender into God's love and transformation through that love.³

Both of these descriptions resonate with my experience.

In my childhood through to my 20s, my *conventional* home within the Anglican Church provided a safe, predictable, ordered space with a strong sense of ritual, and clear roles in liturgy and music that defined my belonging. The gifts of *certainty* were many: I felt grounded, secure, and affirmed in my place in God's world.

Change and upheaval through marriage, travel, and parenthood triggered a new phase of *transition* and *searching*, where questions outnumbered answers. As some "old ways" didn't work any more, I experienced emptiness and confusion. Perhaps I hit "The Wall". There had to be something more.⁴

My quest for greater God-awareness was paralleled by my quest for self-awareness, as I felt myself moving towards a *post-conventional* phase of faith development, characterised by curiosity and wonder. I found myself increasingly open to new, *intimate* experiences of the Divine beyond my own faith experience, more content with a sense of mystery and paradox, and open to exploring possibilities with God, rather than waiting for clarity from God.

This movement, from conventional to post-conventional faith, and from certainty to intimacy, is the context in which my images of holy borders and sacred threads have found expression.

³ O'Hare, Briege, "Opening to Love: A Paradigm for Growth in Relationship with God", in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol 10, No 2, June 2004, 27-36.

⁴ "The Wall" is a phenomenon in the stages of faith described by Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich in *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed, Salem, Wisconsin, Sheffield Publishing, 2005. The Wall is described as "The mystery of our will meeting God's will face to face", between Stage 4 (The Journey Inward) and Stage 5 (The Journey Outward). It can be a place where "things just aren't working anymore...there's got to be more". Going through The Wall can hold discomfort, surrender, and awareness as well as healing, acceptance, and discernment.

Holy Borders and Sacred Threads

In one of the stories recounted in *My Neighbor's Faith – Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*⁵, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a member of the Orthodox Jewish tradition, writes of an encounter he had with Reverend Howard Thurman, then Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University:

“Dean Thurman”, I said, “I would like to take your course [in spiritual disciplines and resources], but I don’t know if my ‘anchor chains’ are long enough”. He put his coffee mug down on his desk and began to examine his hands. ...Finally, he spoke: “*Don’t you trust the ru’ah hakodesh?*”

I was stunned. He had used the Hebrew for the Holy Spirit, something I had not expected from a Gentile. And in so doing, he brought that question home to me in a powerful way. ... For the next three weeks, I was tormented by that question: Did I indeed trust the *ru’ah hakodesh*, trust it enough to have faith in my own identity as a Jew? Or was I holding back, fearful of testing my belief in an encounter with another religion, unnerved by the prospect of trusting my soul to a non-Jew? If I was fearful, did it mean that I didn’t truly believe? Finally, I realized that his question could have only one answer. ... I had to answer, “Yes, I do”, and so I signed up for his course.⁶

After initial hesitation, this man discovered he would be able to travel to an “other” place of learning and wisdom, while staying strongly and safely anchored in his own.

This is the challenge and gift at the heart of this writing: are we able to remain anchored within the holy borders of our own tradition, while being open to noticing and ultimately weaving sacred threads beyond them? Why would we want to do this? And what could be the role of spiritual direction and spiritual directors in this?

The Call to Openness

In the Introduction to *My Neighbor's Faith*, the editors express this hope:

May these narratives inspire you to explore anew your own religious or ideological terrain and help you expand the borders of your understanding as you seek to participate more fully in the healing of humanity and the earth.⁷

The earth we call home, and the humanity that inhabits it, needs healing. At this time in our history the love, compassion, and care that is at the heart of so many faith traditions needs to be released in a new wave of acceptance, connection, and healing.

The call to recognise and value faith traditions other than our own is not new. For example, in 1965, Vatican II proclaimed:

⁵ Peace, Jennifer Howe, Rose, Or N., and Mobley, Gregory (eds), *My Neighbor's Faith – Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2015.

⁶ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman, “What I Found in the Chapel”, in Peace, Rose, and Mobley (eds), *My Neighbor's Faith*, 2015, 209.

⁷ Peace, Rose, and Mobley (eds), *My Neighbor's Faith*, 2015, xix.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these [other] religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.⁸

This sense of different religions holding elements of truth is echoed by Joan Chittister:

The truth is that at its roots all religion speaks of the Mystery of Life that seeded us all into life, that holds the cosmos in Being, that is the ultimate End of all our hope. It is the Unity for which we seek, the Oneness of Life that has many faces and speaks in many tongues.⁹

Many books and articles I have been drawn to read recently speak of a widening, an opening, and a generosity of understanding as the most fruitful way forward for life, faith and humanity. In the words of Richard Rohr, “God seems urgent at this point in our tragic history”. He wonders why it is that so many of us are saying very similar things today when we are all from different traditions, countries, ethnicities, educations, and religions.¹⁰

In *The Great Emergence – How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle explores a phenomenon whereby every 500 years the Church feels “compelled to hold a giant rummage sale”, when “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”¹¹ She points to contemporary signs of a Great Emergence, 500 years after the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, as time’s most recent kickstart not only in Christian affairs, but in a cycle of human affairs in general.¹² Could this kickstart in Christian affairs involve not only a fresh look at the boundaries within Christianity’s holy borders, but also at the boundaries that separate Christianity from other world religions? Could there possibly be a divine call to more fully accept and appreciate holy spaces and quests beyond our own?

Reference to a global movement of emergence is cited by Brian McLaren. He observes that growing numbers of us believe that we are in the early stages of a new moment of emergence, which pulses with both danger and promise. He suggests that not only Christianity, but all our spiritual traditions will be challenged and all will change, “some

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time): Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html Accessed 17 September 2019.

⁹ Peace, Rose, and Mobley (eds), *My Neighbor’s Faith*, 2015, Foreword by Joan Chittister, xiii.

¹⁰ Shapiro, Rami, *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent: Sacred Teachings - Annotated and Explained*, Woodstock, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013. Foreword by Richard Rohr, ix. Also *Center for Action and Contemplation*, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations, 12 August 2019 <https://cac.org/a-shared-universal-truth-2019-08-12/>

¹¹ Tickle, Phyllis, *The Great Emergence - How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2008, 16.

¹² Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 2008, 38.

negatively and reactively, tightening like angry fists, and others positively and constructively, opening like extended arms".¹³

McLaren's observations about the challenging of traditional religious boundaries are reflected in his personal experience: some years earlier he wrote about his own experience as a Christian.¹⁴ He shared his quest to find a way to embrace the good in many traditions and streams of the Christian faith and to integrate them to yield a "new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts".¹⁵

Bishop Stephen Charleston believes that there is an appetite for new ways of being in spiritual community. In a speech in 2014 at the General Theological Seminary in New York he shared his journey of forming an online community of spiritual seekers.¹⁶ In spite of his reticence to embrace social media, he was persuaded in 2011 to join Facebook. So began his online sharing of short daily spiritual reflections, which he regards as a "catalyst" rather than a "product". His learnings surprised him. He discovered that people of all faiths and of no faith can gather in peace and harmony for a shared spiritual purpose. He discovered that what brings people back each day to engage with his reflections "is not that they are empty vessels waiting to be filled, but full spiritual beings overflowing with a desire to connect with others who have a need for spiritual insight". He describes the community that he formed as an emerging, global spiritual community without borders, formed across many of the old lines of demarcation between us:

We may not completely understand why it is happening, but it is happening and that fact alone should intrigue us and urge us to continue the invitation to this type of world without borders.¹⁷

Comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney suggests that looking beyond our own religious borders is not only a worthy quest in faith seeking greater understanding, but could be seen as in accord with God's vision:

While it would be a bit dramatic to say that God desires that theology be comparative ... we do well to see our effort to learn across religious borders as in harmony with God's plan.¹⁸

¹³ McLaren, Brian, *We Make The Road by Walking - A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*, 2014, Preface (Audio book).

¹⁴ McLaren, Brian, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004. The subtitle of the book is: *Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*.

¹⁵ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 2004, 22.

¹⁶ Charleston, Steven, Speech "OMG" <http://www.news.gts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Charleston-Lecture.pdf> Accessed 21 September, 2019. Charleston is a Native American elder, author, and retired Episcopal bishop of Alaska. His online meditations are on Facebook and have been collected into books published by Red Moon Publications <https://www.redmoonpublications.com/>

¹⁷ Charleston, "OMG" speech, 2014.

¹⁸ Clooney, Francis X., *Comparative Theology - Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Chichester, Blackwell Publishing, 2010, 37.

I wonder if God would celebrate the deep and searching conversations between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama in 2015, when they met in India to ponder the question: how do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering? Surely the week these two great spiritual leaders spent together was comparative theology in action! In distilling and sharing the wisdom flowing from the conversations that week, Douglas Abrams observes that removing the barriers between those whom we see as "us" and those whom we see as "other" is one of the greatest challenges that humanity faces.¹⁹

Sometimes it takes a tragedy for us to reframe "us" and "other". The shock of the mosque shootings in Christchurch on 15 March 2019 jolted many to a new awareness of the need and desire to weave fresh threads of connection across difference. Seeing, really seeing, the potential threads that can link us and foster a sense of freedom in conversation, caring, and loving, requires a spirit of openness, humility, and trust.

The wave of desire I perceive to transcend faith barriers that define and divide is not about diluting the distinctiveness and beauty of different faiths: each faith has its own character and its own exemplars who have charted and continue to chart its path.²⁰ Rather, it is about recognising the historic experiences of enlightenment and revelation that have given rise to different world religions.²¹ It is about awakening to a wider spiritual and theological awareness and being open to see, appreciate, and honour the unique gifts, insights, and wisdom of different traditions. It is about celebrating some common essence that we may find at the core of each, should we choose to look. It is about exploring other lives, cultures, religions, and coming back with fresh insight to our own lives.²²

Thomas Merton is an exemplar of the Christian faith who was open to the new. Esther de Waal notes that "'open', 'wide open' are amongst his favourite words".²³ Yet he also knew the gift of being rooted at "home":

It was because he had by now found a home [his home in the hermitage near Gethsemani monastery, where he spent the last three years of his life] that he was ready to go out. He knew that he belonged at Gethsemani, and that this rootedness gave him a place from which to set out and to which to return.²⁴

This sense of being anchored firmly enough within the holy borders of our own tradition to be able to go beyond them and return with insights to weave together is echoed by Clooney:

We need a home from which to go forth, yet must actually go forth, learning from another religious tradition, hearing questions to which we do not already have answers. We need to face up to what is very similar to or different from what we have

¹⁹ Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, London, Penguin Random House, 2016, 183.

²⁰ Prothero, Stephen, *God is Not One*, New York, Harper Collins, 2010, 13-15.

²¹ Dunne, John S., *The Way of All The Earth*, New York, MacMillan, 1972, 225.

²² Dunne, *The Way of All The Earth*, 1972, 220.

²³ De Waal, Esther, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, Guildford, Inter Publishing Service, 2000, 29.

²⁴ De Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, 2000, 28-29.

come to expect, and find ways to bring all this into conversation with the truths and values of our home tradition.²⁵

Spiritual Direction - A Safe Place

How do we anchor ourselves at home? How do we find the courage to go forth? And how do we respond to the urgency for dialogue and cross-border connection which many perceive must be the way to promote the healing of humanity and the earth?

Spiritual direction has a role to play. As David Benner observes, “Dialogue is one of the deepest forms of soul engagement we can experience with another person.”²⁶ Spiritual direction can help us to clarify and articulate our sense of home, as well as open and equip us for opportunities to venture safely beyond it, always to return.

Anchoring

Spiritual direction offers an opportunity for all seekers of meaning to notice, share, and reflect on life events. It is a quest for truth, providing a place to love questions and engage with them deeply.²⁷ Spiritual direction invites us to ponder our sense of the divine, and come to realise that there is a “God-component” in all human experience.²⁸ Spiritual direction offers us the chance to ask ourselves “Who is God for me, and who am I for God?”²⁹ and to discern a direction to bring us into deeper companionship with God.

Spiritual direction helps us to identify what home means: what spiritual practices most anchor us in God, and what images of God resonate most deeply with us. Spiritual direction has the capacity to itself become an anchoring place³⁰: a safe place for our stories and an opportunity to rest for a time, to notice, and to reflect.

Getting to know God goes hand in hand with getting to know oneself. Both David Benner and Sue Pickering refer to John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

²⁵ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 2010, 155.

²⁶ Benner, David, *Sacred Companions - The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2002, 54.

²⁷ Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening - The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Maryland, Cowley, 1992, 66.

²⁸ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 1992, 32. Many writers about spiritual direction observe this. Amoda Maa makes a similar point: “Every experience of your life is a calling from God”: Maa, Amoda, *Radical Awakening*, London, Watkins, 2016, 30. (A Revised and updated edition of *How to Find God in Everything*, 2008).

²⁹ Barry, William A. and Connolly, William J., *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd edition, New York, Harper Collins, 2009, 5.

³⁰ Brown, Simon, *Mission and the Art of Spiritual Direction*, Spiritual Direction Special Interest Project, Spiritual Growth Ministries Aotearoa New Zealand, (no date), 6.

https://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/mission_and_the_art_of_spiritual_direction.pdf Accessed 23 September 2019.

There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self, and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God.³¹

Pickering goes on to say that “God wants us to be honest with ourselves and with our Creator, so that our relationship can be deepened, our weaknesses and strengths offered to God for transformation and service.”³²

The self-reflection prompted by spiritual direction can anchor us, encouraging us to discover and connect with our deepest selves: our motivations and feelings, our weaknesses and strengths, our loves and our fears. Thomas H. Green quotes words that one of his spiritual directors, Fr Norris Clarke, offered on the occasion of his farewell. In thanking his directees over the years, Fr Clarke said:

They [my directees] were really saying to me, ‘I do not understand myself. So I would like you to journey with me to the most private and personal core of my being. Perhaps together we can make sense of it’.³³

In essence, spiritual direction offers us an anchoring place where we linger both with God and with ourselves.

Exploring

When life within one’s holy borders becomes unsettled, or when we are curious or disoriented, spiritual direction offers a space to wonder, explore, and potentially discover fresh insight. I love Janet Ruffing’s description of the work of spiritual directors as they notice the movement of the spirit:

Spiritual directors evoke stories of grace and of religious experience. They listen for the light, the movement, the healing potential, the Breath of Sophia rustling the leaves in directees’ lives.³⁴

Spiritual direction is a safe place to admit we feel lost, when we want to say, like Thomas Merton: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.”³⁵ In such times, spiritual direction can help us read the maps, in the knowledge that we do not all travel by the one road.³⁶

When life becomes confusing, or when we are overwhelmed by pain, grief, loss, or brokenness, spiritual direction becomes a place where both light and dark, joy and struggle, love and fear can safely dwell. The safe space of spiritual direction encourages us to pour

³¹ Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 2002, 35-36; Pickering, Sue, *Spiritual Direction - A Practical Introduction*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2008, 122-123.

³² Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 2008, 123.

³³ Green, Thomas H., *The Friend of the Bridegroom - Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with Christ*, Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 2000, 64.

³⁴ Ruffing, Janet K., “To Tell the Sacred Tale”, in *New Theology Review*, Vol 16, No 3, August 2003, 47.

³⁵ De Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, 2000, 37.

³⁶ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2009, 145; Leech, *Soul Friend - Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, Harrisburg, Morehouse, 2001, 62.

out our deepest emotions, like the psalmists, in the knowledge that God shares our pain and weeps with us.

In times when God seems absent, spiritual direction can prompt us to look in different places to discern God's presence.³⁷ We may discern a call to go to "the desert"³⁸ – to places of simplicity and solitude to enable us to connect more deeply with God:

In silence and solitude, we make our spirit available to God so that the Holy Spirit may communicate more of the self of God directly to our spirit in contemplation, and the transforming work of God in us is advanced.³⁹

We may surprise ourselves by finding meaning and encountering the Divine in spiritual exercises and stories that have their origin in traditions other than our own.⁴⁰ For God keeps up with us, finding us where we are, whether within or beyond our holy borders:

God may be recognized as choosing to communicate to us even beyond the limits of our own traditions, even in the ambiguous space where we...[think] of our own and other traditions at the same time.⁴¹

Archbishop Desmond Tutu observes that "it takes time to build our spiritual capacity".⁴² Ultimately, a journey of spiritual direction helps us to build our spiritual capacity to notice life and live life with a sense of the divine, through all our journeying and in whatever situations we find ourselves.

Towards Freedom

We humans have a tendency to build walls, literally and metaphorically, both within ourselves and between people and places. There are countless boundaries on the religious maps we have drawn. We seek clarity, definition, and order. Sometimes walls are helpful:

³⁷ Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 2002, 53.

³⁸ Leech, Kenneth, *Soul Friend - Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, Harrisburg, Morehouse, 2001, 135-137. In exploring desert spirituality, Leech identifies the gifts and challenges of the desert as a place of purification and self-knowledge. He also shares insights about other prayer practices through the ages. Spiritual direction can draw on many resources to help directees discern God's presence in their lives. Pickering identifies different ways of listening to God (chapter 2 of *Spiritual Direction*, 2008). Sheila Pritchard offers many suggestions for journeying into prayer (Pritchard, Sheila, *The Lost Art of Meditation*, Bletchley, Scripture Union, 2003). Jo Swinney records her journey through various spiritual disciplines (Swinney, Jo, *God Hunting - A diary of spiritual discovery*, Milton Keynes, Scripture Union, 2011).

³⁹ Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 2008, 134.

⁴⁰ Anthony de Mello has written several books of stories and spiritual exercises that draw on a variety of spiritual traditions. For example, *Wellsprings* is a book of spiritual exercises that is "meant for persons of all spiritual affiliations". *The Prayer of the Frog* is a profound, often light-hearted "collection of stories from a variety of countries, cultures and religions. They belong to the spiritual heritage ... of the human race". De Mello, Anthony, *Wellsprings - A Book of Spiritual Exercises*, India, Anand Press, 1984. De Mello, Anthony, *The Prayer of the Frog - A Book of Story Meditations*, India, Anand Press, 1988.

⁴¹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 2010, 151.

⁴² Dalai Lama, Tutu and Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, 2016, 227.

they may provide refuge and a sense of safety when we need it most. At other times, there is a risk that our walls constrain and confine. Amoda Maa invites us to imagine

if we could travel across the globe in a flash and from our bird's-eye view see that all the walls we have made out of national identity, cultural tradition, skin color and religious belief serve to keep us in prison.⁴³

A vital element in any spiritual direction journey is an invitation and a movement towards greater freedom.⁴⁴ Sometimes God might “crash through our walls of indifference”⁴⁵. In any event, allowing ourselves to share our deepest selves in spiritual direction and intentionally inviting God to be present can be “like opening the windows of a closed house to spring air”.⁴⁶ Spiritual direction can help lead us to places with a more open, panoramic view, where “awareness is clear and awake to everything”⁴⁷ and where we are “released into God’s greater vision”.⁴⁸

Esther de Waal suggests that all our lives are inevitably made of a succession of borders and thresholds, which open up into the new, and promise excitement or fear.⁴⁹ Fear is at the heart of much human activity, especially that which seeks to limit or divide. If we take time to analyse events around us, and to drill down to feelings within us, we may find that fear is at the heart of the matter. In one of my favourite poems, Michael Leunig observes that there are only two feelings, motivations, activities, and frameworks: love and fear.⁵⁰ Similarly, Amoda Maa urges us to make a choice between love and fear, both individually in our daily lives, and collectively in humanity’s necessary quest to act responsibly for the good of the planet we inhabit.⁵¹ She goes on to say:

These turbulent times may well be the greatest opportunity we have for collective transformation. By facing our current crisis with the full depth of our presence and the full breadth of our openness we may actually see how our belief in separation is a lie that we can no longer afford to uphold.⁵²

Spiritual directors, and the ministry of spiritual direction they provide, have a gift to offer both individuals and the world. This sacred encounter offers fellowship, acceptance, patience, and trust. It is a safe place where all stories are valid⁵³ and where Mystery,

⁴³ Maa, *Radical Awakening*, 2016, 225.

⁴⁴ Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, 2008, 80; Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2009, 161; Leech, *Soul Friend*, 2001, 115.

⁴⁵ Benner, David, *Desiring God’s Will - Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, Expanded edition 2015, 64.

⁴⁶ Bakke, Jeannette, *Holy Invitations*, Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2000, 25.

⁴⁷ May, Gerald, *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*, New York, Harper Collins, 1992, 122.

⁴⁸ Foster, Richard, *Prayer - Finding the Heart’s True Home*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1992, 53.

⁴⁹ De Waal, Esther, *Living on the Border - Reflections on the Experience of Threshold*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2011, 3.

⁵⁰ Leunig, Michael, *When I Talk to You - A Cartoonist Talks to God*, Australia, Harper Collins, 2004 (pages unnumbered).

⁵¹ Maa, *Radical Awakening*, 2016, 27, 133, 188, 213, 246.

⁵² Maa, *Radical Awakening*, 2016, 213.

⁵³ Brown, *Mission and the Art of Spiritual Direction*, 10.

however it is articulated, has a voice. The companionship of others in their spiritual quest and their movement towards freedom can yield growing self-awareness and God-awareness, and generate fresh and challenging insights, new opportunities for transformation, and surprising calls to action.

Spiritual Direction across Traditions

Historically spiritual guidance was most often offered within a particular faith tradition. John Mabry recalls that people went to the people they trusted – to the leaders of their own spiritual communities.⁵⁴

Things have been changing. Theresa Utschig shares her experiences and insights of spiritual companionship at the Taizé community, where she encounters pilgrims from many cultures. She notes that, for many, some form of “God” will be present, whether or not they are able to articulate exactly who God is.⁵⁵ She observes that “[as] the world becomes more interdependent, and as people from different cultures meet each other with increasing frequency, the Church will find itself confronted with more and more pastoral situations involving issues of cross-cultural dynamics”.⁵⁶

Mabry echoes these sentiments. He observes that we live in a pluralistic society. Fewer people are identifying strongly with one religious tradition, “interfaith” families are no longer anomalous, and people are beginning to claim “interfaith” or “interspiritual” as their primary religious identity. He notes that increasing numbers of people are reaching beyond their tradition of birth to find spiritual guidance and are finding that liberating.⁵⁷

What might this trend mean for spiritual directors anchored in our Christian tradition yet having a sense of open-heartedness to the moving of God’s Spirit among all?

Acknowledging the Tension

A first invitation is to acknowledge the tension between the two and to honour both. We must ensure we have rhythms and spiritual practices that anchor us within our holy borders and ground us in our relationship with God. And, just as an anchor chain extends in response to the current, we must remain alert and open to being stretched to see God at work in the world and in the lives of others, perhaps in unexpected places beyond our holy borders. We ask ourselves: Is God really at work, over there, in that situation, with others? We notice any tension within us that arises, and we explore our responses in the midst of that tension.

⁵⁴ Mabry, John, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol 24, No 2, June 2018, 6-14.

⁵⁵ Utschig, Theresa, “Bridging the Gap - Cross-Cultural Spiritual Direction”, in *The Way*, Issue 42/2, April 2013, 18.

⁵⁶ Utschig, “Bridging the Gap”, 2013, 16-17.

⁵⁷ Mabry, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, 2018, 6.

Attitude to Difference

A second invitation is to ponder our attitude to difference. As spiritual directors we work with difference, as we recognise that the way others perceive or experience God may differ from our own. In these times of increasing interfaith awareness, it is even more important to recognise that difference does not mean wrong.

In the words of the Dalai Lama:

If...I relate to others from the perspective of myself as someone different – a Buddhist, a Tibetan, and so on – I will then create walls to keep me apart from others. ... In contrast, if I see myself primarily in terms of myself as a fellow human, I will then have more than seven billion people who I can feel connection with. And this is wonderful, isn't it? ⁵⁸

If we as spiritual directors believe that there is no-one with whom God does not desire to communicate⁵⁹, and that spiritual direction is the place where we explore people's intimacy with the Divine⁶⁰, then perhaps it follows that "when we see the divine in everyone, beyond any label, all separation dissolves and all boundaries evaporate."⁶¹

So we must delve deeply within to ask ourselves: How open are we, really, to difference? What degree of "difference" does it take to push our buttons? This may change as we change. And from our stance of openness, the very process of listening can help to inform and clarify our attitude to difference.

Listening means learning, and with that comes the willingness to change... The first step in listening, learning, and changing is to see that different is not dangerous; the second is to be happy and willing to live with uncertainty; the third is to rejoice in ambiguity and to embrace it.⁶²

How Ready are We?

A third invitation is to intentionally ask ourselves how ready we might be to offer interfaith spiritual direction. As spiritual directors we are interested in openness and we acknowledge difference, but how different is too different?

Mabry suggests three perspectives that spiritual directors can explore in discerning how, or whether, to allow themselves to offer spiritual direction to those of other faith traditions: exclusivism; inclusivism; and pluralism.⁶³

Mabry is clear about the implications of holding an exclusivist position which says "I'm right and everyone else is wrong":

⁵⁸ Dalai Lama, Tutu and Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, 2016, 100.

⁵⁹ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2009, 130-131.

⁶⁰ Mabry, "Spiritual Guidance across Traditions", 2018, 12.

⁶¹ Maa, *Radical Awakening*, 2016, 15.

⁶² De Waal, *Living on the Border*, 2011, 59.

⁶³ Mabry, "Spiritual Guidance across Traditions", 2018, 6-11.

It is not possible for someone holding an exclusivist position to provide effective spiritual guidance to someone outside her own tradition, as it will always devolve into a contest over “correct teaching” or proselytization.⁶⁴

An inclusivist perspective, Mabry explains, allows a spiritual director to both hold onto one’s theological perspective and offer effective and responsible spiritual direction to those of another faith tradition, as long as they make a conscious decision, in grace, to honour the directee’s choice of path and tradition. Going further, he observes that a spiritual director with a pluralist perspective is able to comfortably offer spiritual direction across traditions and to enter the symbolic world of a directee with relative ease:

Pluralism contains within it a humility, an agreement to rest in not-knowing ... to be pluralist is to admit that we do not have everything figured out, and probably never will.⁶⁵

Humility is at the heart of the inclusivist-pluralist continuum. An attitude of humility reminds us that “what we know about God is far less than what we do not know about God”.⁶⁶

Taking a step into the world of interfaith spiritual direction may make complete sense to some, and feel like a step too far for others. Perhaps we are called to take a deep breath and regularly ponder: Where do we sit now? Can we imagine that one day we might be open to discovering another place of sitting, which has a different and perhaps wider view? We may even find that a wider view strengthens and clarifies the love and commitment we feel for the place that anchors us within our holy borders:

What is the promise of interfaith spiritual direction? That it can embrace the best aspects of the spirituality of seeking and the spirituality of dwelling; that by exposing us to another tradition’s wisdom we can deepen our personal relationship with God, while maintaining, if not revitalizing, our ties to our own communities of faith.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Mabry, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, 2018, 7.

⁶⁵ Mabry, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, 2018, 9-10, 11. In this 2018 article Mabry suggests that useful follow-up reading on interfaith spiritual direction might be his earlier 2004 article “Three Modes of Interfaith Direction” (in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol 10, No 2, June 2004, 7ff.) That article identified three models for interfaith spiritual direction, drawing on Scott Peck’s recasting of James Fowler’s stages of faith development:

Mode 1: Sharing Wisdom – the director and directee sit securely in their respective faith traditions, utilizing wisdom from each other freely. It is good for the director to have an understanding of the major principles of the directee’s faith tradition.

Mode 2: Paradigm Shifting – the director “surfs” from one paradigm to another, entering the worldview of the directee. This requires a thorough knowledge of the directee’s faith tradition.

Mode 3: Beyond Traditions – the director and directee meet at that place where “there is no name, but every name, no way but every way, no distinction yet myriad expressions. It is a place outside of any one tradition, but informed by many.”

⁶⁶ Mabry, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, 2018, 11. Mabry’s article contains a helpful guide to key principles of Interfaith Spiritual Direction. These are listed in Annex 1.

⁶⁷ Addison, Howard A., *Show Me Your Way - The Complete Guide to Exploring Interfaith Spiritual Direction*, Woodstock, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2000, Kindle edition, Loc 2262.

Weaving a Way Forward

In the winds of change in the world around us there are new calls to responsibility and relationship. There is a fresh urge to partner with God to anchor ourselves in spaces with holy borders – of whatever shape or name. There are increasingly urgent calls to weave sacred threads across holy borders to connect with others in a spirit of respect and trust. There is an invitation to all to partner in solidarity across difference for the good of ourselves and the earth we inhabit.

Spiritual direction is a ministry that speaks directly into these winds of change. By nature it is a ministry grounded in respect and partnership. It is our sacred task and calling as spiritual guides and companions to notice how God is present in all things, and to be open to the Spirit's work in making all things holy.⁶⁸

It may be hard to imagine the possibility of a “global transformation – a tsunami of love – coming our way” in the midst of the borders and brokenness we see in individual lives and the world around us. But Amoda Maa is optimistic that the vision of a brighter future belongs to every one of us, if we “dive into love, even when fear screams at us to run and hide”.⁶⁹

As spiritual directors we encourage our directees to “dive into love” in partnership with the Divine to foster healing and wholeness in the small and big moments of their lives and in the lives of others. Norvene Vest has collected stories of “tending the holy” – of spiritual direction across traditions. Common to all the stories is that

the seeker's experience with Mystery is expected to have some consequences in his or her life. If it is authentic, the growing relationship with the sacred that emerges from the companionship of spiritual direction will influence the seeker's way of being in the world. In a certain sense, spiritual direction is always an applied art; it is directed toward a transformed life.⁷⁰

We do not enter into a transformed life alone. God actively pursues us, urges us on, and celebrates with us. God is there already, desiring nothing more than to partner with us. As St John of the Cross reassured us: “In the first place, it should be known that, if a person is seeking God, her Beloved is seeking her much more”.⁷¹ It is this active seeking of us by God that ultimately nudges us to both contemplation and action in our world.

Crossing religious borders is “risky work, and complicated, and holy”.⁷² We are not meant to go to God alone, but together, enriched by one another's faith and wisdom and insights into

⁶⁸ Mabry, *Noticing the Divine*, 2006, Kindle edition, Loc 2195.

⁶⁹ Maa, *Radical Awakening*, 2016, 27.

⁷⁰ Vest, Norvene, (ed), *Tending the Holy - Spiritual Direction across Traditions*, Harrisburg, Morehouse, 2003, Kindle edition, Loc 49.

⁷¹ Green, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, 2000, quoting St John of the Cross, 81. Also Foster, *Prayer - Finding the Heart's True Home*, 1992, 61; May, *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*, 1992, 24-26.

⁷² Boys, Mary C., “It's Complicated”, in Peace, Rose, and Mobley (eds), *My Neighbor's Faith*, 2015, 143.

the ways of God.⁷³ We are called to remain anchored where we meet God, while opening our hearts and minds to God's dwelling and activity "in innumerable familiar and unexpected places".⁷⁴ And we recognise that the Divine is the ultimate weaver, who honours our attempts – however bold or tentative – to weave across borders, and delights in making them even more beautiful; even more fruitful.

May we allow ourselves to see the holy borders of our own traditions not so much as containers that confine, but as safe moorings from which to go out in response to the beckoning of the Divine Spirit to weave sacred threads in God's great web of connection.

⁷³ Peace, Rose, and Mobley (eds), *My Neighbor's Faith*, 2015, Foreword by Joan Chittister, xi.

⁷⁴ Clooney, "Thomas Merton's Deep Christian Learning Across Religious Borders", in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 37, 2017, 62.

Annex 1: Guidance for Interfaith Spiritual Direction

“Rules for Interfaith Spiritual Direction” offered by John R. Mabry ⁷⁵

- 1 “Different” does not mean “wrong”.
- 2 Pay attention to what the Divine is up to.
- 3 Notice the motion of your client toward or away from his or her goal.
- 4 Suspend judgment and withdraw your projections.
- 5 Be curious (ask questions!).
- 6 Use whatever language for the Divine your client uses.
- 7 Make connections to your own experiences.
- 8 Expect to encounter the Divine.
- 9 Do your homework.
- 10 Be teachable.
- 11 Love your client.
- 12 Hold your own faith lightly (and lovingly).

⁷⁵ Mabry, “Spiritual Guidance across Traditions”, 2018, 13.

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