

Mission and the Art of Spiritual Direction

by

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This essay is a discussion starter, I don't claim to have fresh theological or academic insight nor do I claim to have definitive answers to the issues raised here. I am merely a student in the art of spiritual direction who believes that Christian spiritual direction has a place among the many seekers who, as yet, do not know Christ or His church, but are drawn none-the-less to God through inexplicable spiritual experiences such as dreams, tragedy or the presence of *something* of the other world.

I will look at Barry and Connolly's definition of spiritual direction, and with the aid of statistical data from the UK, America and anecdotal evidence from my own practise of spiritual direction outside the framework of the church, I will argue for a broadening of its definition. First—the definition of spiritual direction as presented by Barry and Connolly.

*We define Christian spiritual direction, then, as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of that relationship.*¹

...*help given by one Christian to another*. We need to begin by exploring their terminology. Who is the *another*? Barry and Connolly suggest that the spiritual director is most interested in what happens when a person consciously puts him/herself in the presence of God"². A simple deduction makes it is clear that the, *another*, is a fellow Christian. Who else would purposely put themselves in the presence of God? The ministry of Christian spiritual direction, as Barry and Connolly intend it, is one that is carried out in the church, by church people for church people. While not denying the need for excellent spiritual direction amongst Christians, this essay will argue that the mission field is wide open for Christian spiritual direction for people outside of the Church as well.

¹ Barry and Connolly *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* pg 8.

² Ibid Pg 8

Is there a need for spiritual direction outside the Church?

In the UK 1987 an Oxford University survey of 985 randomly selected people stated that 48% of the population answered yes to this question,

“ Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or power, (whether you call it God or not) which is different from your everyday self?”

The survey was repeated in 2000 with the staggering 76% answering in the affirmative³. Yet only 6—8% of the population were regular church goers. People from all walks of life are having, or have had, spiritual experiences, and a huge percentage of those are not regular church goers. In fact many regular church goers have never had a spiritual experience. An American study in 1998 conducted by the Barna Christian Research Group surveyed the perceived activity of God amongst US Christians. This survey showed that 33% say that they have never experienced God’s presence at any time during their lives⁴. If Christian spiritual direction is about working with religious experience, as Barry and Connolly teach⁵, then we need to realise that most religious experiences are happening outside the Church. In first century Palestine Peter learnt this lesson in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius as recorded in Acts chapter 10. God set it all up so that Peter would do the unacceptable for a Jew and GO to a Gentile’s house. Then God did the unthinkable, God went to the Gentile’s house, and the people received the Spirit and were baptised into Christ. As in the first century Palestine, God is alive and well in the highways and byways of New Zealand and the secular west.

We (New Zealanders and the Western Church generally,) live in the midst of a period of enthusiasm for spirituality and spiritual direction.⁶ There are growing numbers of people, many with decades of Christian experience, being drawn deeper into the things of God. Barry and Connolly, Guenther, May, and Edwards are but a few modern practitioners/writers who have responded to the cry for developing effective spiritual direction training resources⁷. And so today we see spiritual directors from all major Christian denominations being trained to meet the influx of inquirers. But what is the Church doing to respond to the

³ A dramatic increase due to the changed social permission to admit to such awareness. Paul Hawker’s paper *Spiritual Experience in the General Population* presented in Wellington July 2002

⁴ Paul Hawker’s paper *Spiritual Experience in the General Population* presented in Wellington July 2002

⁵ Barry and Connolly *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* pg 8

⁶ *ibid* Preface vii

⁷ Barry and Connolly *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Margaret Guenther *Holy Listening*, Gerald May *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*, Tilden Edwards *Spiritual Friend*

needs of millions of non-church people who are restless because they have experienced something of the ‘Mysterious Other’⁸ we call God. These people, like the mature Christian, find themselves awakened and drawn into this unknown yet ‘seductive’ spiritual journey seeking understanding and direction. These people are travellers—pilgrims in search of truth. Some pilgrims are secure in communities of faith we call church, most are not and many are lost or alone, angry and hurt or dazed and confused receiving guidance from palm readers, fortune tellers and the like. According to Paul Hawker 40 per cent of non-fiction book sales in Australia are in the "spirituality self-help area".⁹ People are desperate for effective spiritual direction.

Clearly Barry and Connolly’s, *another* must be extended to include those outside the church whom God is stirring and drawing. “We desperately need,” says Hawker, “trustworthy spiritual guides, yet we look elsewhere because the trustworthy guides aren't putting their hands up. How do you find a trustworthy Christian guide in our culture?”¹⁰ he asks.

The foundational theological assumption of this essay is that God is at work in the whole world drawing people into relationship with God from all cultures, religions, ages and genders. [God is more interested in our daily conversion to Christ-likeness than our Christian credentials, labels or statements. When I say conversion I do not refer to a one-off event such as baptism or a public proclamation of faith, but a life long conversion which, for many, begins years before they are ready to make any statement of faith.] As long as there is a legitimate search for spiritual truth it doesn’t matter whether a person is an eighty year old saint, or a crystal toting hippie, if God’s calling them closer then spiritual directors need to be in place to assist with direction. A Christian mid-wife works equally professionally and compassionately with all women not just those in the Church.

The task of the spiritual director is to be positioned, like a campfire in the wilderness, welcoming sojourners from all corners of life to stop, relax and yarn for a while. A place where tired bodies and spirits are warmed by the fire and refreshed. A friendly atmosphere where stories of the road are shared amongst travellers. The job of the spiritual director is to

⁸ Appears often in the writings of Karl Rahner

⁹ Melanie Pitcher, *ALIVE* Magazine March 1999

¹⁰ *ibid*

keep the fire burning¹¹ because one never knows when a traveller will come to sit. It doesn't matter where on the journey the traveller has been exploring, or how long they have been walking, if they come in peace to sit on a log by the campfire, they are welcome.

Some examples will help to put the discussion in context. All names are fictitious but the people behind the names were non-Christian pilgrims who have sat at my fire and enriched my life.

Jenny was in third form when I met her. I was the college chaplain at the time. She was a bright kid adept at rubbing adults/teachers up the wrong way. Witchcraft was her passion but she was interested in all religions and asked for some Christian material to read. I gave her a New Testament and showed her the stories of Jesus. Over the ensuing months Jenny became a regular visitor to my den. Jenny's interest in Jesus genuinely increased with every discussion. Ironically, her practise in witchcraft increased also. She joined the local youth group while still clinging to her 'craft' but eventually strayed from the Christian scene altogether. I met her some years later and discovered she had become a house captain at her school, a sport's woman of national acclaim, was no longer practising witchcraft and had dedicated her life to Christ and fellowshiping in a local church. Jenny came to direction with no understanding of the process of spiritual direction, scant understanding of the Christian story but keen to talk about her spiritual journey.

Jenny gives us a new starting point for spiritual direction. Thomas Keating speaks of 'levels of inner resurrection.' This is his term for stages of faith, the first stage beginning at conversion¹². Jenny demonstrates a 'pre-conversion' stage of faith and perhaps a new starting point for spiritual direction. Jenny qualifies for spiritual direction, not on the basis of her conversion, but on the basis that she's a traveller and she stopped at my fire.

Jed was in the fifth form when he knocked on my door. After brief introductions Jed waded into his story. He had no Christian understanding but was desperate to talk to someone about a disturbing dream he'd had. The outcome of that initial discussion was that Jed became interested in Jesus and wanted to become a Christian. He became a regular member of the local youth group and twelve months later went through the waters of baptism. Unlike Jenny, Jed was unaware of any interest in spiritual things prior to the dream although he had noticed, with some sense of desire, the way the Christian kids treated one another at school.

¹¹ Keep the fire burning refers to the spiritual fires of the director, kept burning through study, prayer, personal direction and supervision.

¹² Thomas Keating *Intimacy with God*

His teenage world was broken into by a seductive mission God which resulted in him being catapulted on to the journey of spiritual discovery. God was actively involved in Jed's life prior to him coming to me for understanding and his eventual baptism. Jed's starting point for direction was pre-conversion and Christian direction helped make sense of his uncertainties. Barry and Connolly rightly say, "The only prerequisite for engaging in the type of direction we describe is that the person being directed have effective experiences of God which he notices and which he can talk about with his director."¹³ I want to argue that this applies to pilgrims outside the church structure like Jenny and Jed who have had experiences of God but do not have the language to discuss it in Christian terms like God and Jesus. They prefer language like "Something," or "weird," etc. but this does not mean that their experience is any less important or significant.

Another example;

Jack was a hard man. He ran a small business and by his own admission had little time for fatherly responsibilities. Other than his work, rugby was his passion and he loved nothing more than to sit with mates, over a 'few' beers, and watch his favourite sport. I first met Jack when their only child died suddenly and they called me to their home. As a school chaplain I had spent some time with this child and we had become good friends. Jack had no previous Christian experience though his wife had been involved in a church when she was a girl. Jack was beside himself with grief and guilt. "Tell me she's gone to heaven," he pleaded of me through tear filled eyes. I became a regular visitor to the family home over the next week or so and Jack wanted to know more and more about heaven, about God, about where his baby was. "Will she be crippled in heaven like she was on earth?" "Will she hate me?" "How can I get to where she is?" Jack's questions led him to the church and library. He swiftly became a regular worshipper at the local church and hungrily read a small library of spiritual books. Several years on Jack and his wife have developed a personal relationship with God and are now regular members of a local church community.

Like Jed, Jack's world was broken into. There was an explosion in his life and before the dust began to settle Jack was looking for a fire to sit at. There was no question, or thought, of conversion to Christ or commitment to the church. Jack was locked in a spiritual kaleidoscope not knowing which way was up. Jack had no language to make sense of this new world which had engulfed him. Jack, in his pre-conversion state, needed effective Christian spiritual direction.

¹³ *ibid* preface xi

Jane is a social worker; estranged from her husband she lives with her three kids and a lover. Jane and I became friends several years ago. She had enjoyed a childhood infatuation with God but was currently exploring 'New Age' spirituality. We often discussed spirituality from a variety of angles and I soon discovered that her early adult experience of church was offensive to her and Christian spirituality had therefore become increasingly irrelevant. In our most recent discussion Jane confided that she had begun praying to her childhood God spending regular time in meditation with God. As we spoke of God, his love and grace she wept. "How is it," she asked, "that you can have this love relationship with God and I cannot? I have longed for this kind of relationship all my life but it has alluded me. Is it just luck?"¹⁴

Jane's journey is as long as my own. Though our paths had gone in different directions they did come together eventually. Jane brought a wonderful richness to my campfire sharing precious spiritual jewels from far off lands. I told her stories from home.

For a spiritual director to be effective outside the church s/he needs to have a sound understanding of the Christian faith traditions and spiritual direction skills. S/he must also be familiar with the language and practises of the secular culture in which the directee lives and not be afraid to engage such cultures.

When a teenager says, "it was way out there man," the director needs to inquire of things 'out there' while resisting the temptation of labelling those things with Christian terms. In his book "Soul Survivor"¹⁵, Paul Hawker refers to God as 'The Source'. In so doing he's making his spiritual discoveries accessible to people who are either antagonistic toward Christianity or have no concept of God. In this way Hawker is hinting at the way forward for spiritual direction outside the church.

The form in which the direction takes will develop spontaneously as the relationship grows more intimate. As we have seen with the stories of Jenny, Jed, Jack and Jane, the pilgrims found a safe anchoring place for their stories. Over a long period of time each one found

¹⁴ Spiritual direction is not, an evangelistic tool to be abused by zealots. Directees are not targets, they are not viewed as un-saved. They are spiritual wanderers like anybody else. In the cases of Jenny, Jed, and Jane (Jack initiated most of the meetings however I did pop in from time to time as a neighbour does) the initiative was always with them. They set the agenda for the discussions. Sometimes the discussions were 6mths apart. I, as the director was available, but in no instance did I initiate any of the meetings or spiritual exchanges that ensued. Organised spirituality is viewed with suspicion outside the church and the spiritual director must be patient in this context.

¹⁵ Paul Hawker *Soul Survivor* A spiritual quest through 40 days in the wilderness.

security in the Christian story and eventually their stories became a story of God and His work in their lives. As the 'director/directee' relationship (friendship) emerges so does a healthy understanding of the Christian story develop. The pilgrim may eventually take deliberate steps towards holiness in Christ requiring more 'orthodox' direction where the Bible and church traditions become authoritative. But in the early stages of the relationship s/he is a pilgrim seeking a place to rest, to tell their story and be accepted and refreshed.

So what does spiritual direction look like in pluralistic New Zealand 2002?

- **Client driven.**

Direction is sought by the pilgrim. It is no secret that un-churched citizens no longer knock fervently on the church door seeking interpretation of their dreams or trauma. But in their search for truth they might phone a spiritualist or a palm reader advertised in the media. If the director is to be effective in secular western society then she must be known and available in that society. This would generally be accomplished by anchoring oneself in the affairs of the community serving where ever possible and rubbing shoulders with neighbours over a sustained period of time. The Spirit of our Mission God, who is working in the lives of our neighbours, will eventually seek out the Spirit within the director. Conversations will spark and direction begins albeit very tenuous and unstructured at the beginning. The director may well be a servant of the local community and considered to be a friend of the many.

- **Spiritual direction will be available to all comers regardless of age and cultural or religious history.**

The truth is, Christian spiritual directors have no idea who God is drawing out of darkness into the light. If we are not careful we can miss the signs of God's grace in the lives of teenage witches, New Age neighbours or drunken rugby fans. People with crystals in their windows or heroin in their veins are not exempt from the grace of God. Their experience of the 'Mysterious Other' is valid and their stories are valuable.

- **Devoid of Christian jargon.**

The experience of Pentecost in chapter two of the book of Acts models for us the need to speak to people in the language they understand. Language is a powerful tool to both unite and divide. People who understand the language feel a strong sense of connectedness and security, conversely people who do not understand the language used quickly become isolated and disconnected. This does not mean a spiritual director needs to compromise his own standards of vocabulary to join with the pilgrim in the exercise of gutter language for example or learn all the local jargon. What I am saying is that the director must restrict his/her language to vocabulary common to both. For example, the word conscience, although it does not tell the whole story, it is far more accessible in the Western culture than ‘hearing the voice of God’ and therefore makes a good starting point when a directee is trying to hear God. The words guilt or shame, mature Christians know, is humankind’s response to sin, it’s what Adam and Eve experienced after eating the forbidden fruit. Guilt is not sin but guilt is a universal feeling and therefore it may be better to talk about guilt when broaching the subject of sin. The concept of sin is foreign for non-Christian people who believe they live a good life. Spiritual direction is not about word definition it’s about experience and fellowship which leads the directee to God. Orthodox Christian language must be restricted to situations where it is comfortably understood by both. A spiritual director in the secular context will necessarily be involved in deconstructing religious language and reconstructing it in mutually accessible language.

- **The directee’s experience and not the Church tradition or Scriptures, is authoritative.**

When directing mature Christians a director can use the Bible with authority because it is the sacred writings accepted by the directee. When working with people in a secular context one must start with what the directee considers authoritative. For example they might have a history of Judaism or Buddhism. Or they might have their world view contained in the writings of Wicca or Ghandi. Some people have no known spiritual connection to any group, tradition or philosophy. For all these people the Bible is something you swear an oath on in court, or something to be found in the top drawer of a motel suite, but very little more. Whatever the Bible is to these

people it is not authoritative. This does not mean there is no place for the Bible in Christian spiritual direction in secular society. To the contrary, the stories of Jesus often bring fresh revelation to struggling pilgrims. People in this context love the person of Jesus they meet in the Gospels as long as He is presented in a non-structured open ended way. The Scriptures are often life-giving to pilgrims outside the church and can be a real source of inspiration to all.

- **God is in it.**

The Spirit of Christ is not confined to the stony walls of church buildings in this age, any more than He was in first century Palestine. When Jesus was brought to the temple on the eighth day the prophet Simeon was recorded by Luke as saying, *“...my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.”* Lk 1:30ff

Let's not make the mistake the first century Jews made by rejecting all other forms of spirituality. God is active in the 'Gentile' world. It is His intention to redeem it. He invites us, as spiritual directors, to participate in that redemptive process.

- **Verbal prayer in this context is often profound.**

Contrary to popular opinion it's not often that the offer of prayer is rejected when directing a person like Jenny, Jack, Jed or Jane. In fact it is quite likely that the pilgrim will become deeply affected by verbal prayer prayed on their behalf. For people who have never had someone pray for them before the experience can be truly profound and healing. The director would be wise to invest some time before praying into explaining what is about to happen and what the directee needs to do while the prayer is in progress. The pray-er would also be wise to keep the prayer short, free of jargon and specific to the needs of the pilgrim. Touch during prayer can be powerful but needs to be talked through with the directee before starting the prayer. Many times a person will experience the presence of God in prayer, when this happens the director has something authoritative to work with because the experience is unquestionably true and lasting.

- **Stories are shared.**

All stories are equally valid and acceptable. Christianity and the occult sit side by side in spiritual direction. In the story of Jenny we see the co-existence of two very different spiritual world-views. Jenny discovered the incompatibility of witchcraft and Christianity in her own time. Directors must reign in their instincts to correct another person's world-view. Jesus went into the house of Simon the leper not to condemn or correct him but to listen and befriend. Another person's world view, story or religion may seem scary to us, even leprous at times, but with Christ in us the *leper's* story can do us no harm. We can be free to listen and love.

- **There are few, if any absolutes.**

As post-modernism continues to emerge in western civilisation one characteristic has become evident. According to George Barna 81% of, what he calls 'Generation X' (those born between 1964 and 1985) do not believe in absolute or universal truth¹⁶. In a post-modern society Gene Veith Jr records four activities this emerging culture consider to be major sins;

Dogmatism,

Intolerance,

Being judgmental,

Trying to force your values onto someone else.¹⁷

The problem post-modernists have with the Gospel is the same problem the first century Romans had with it; it claims to have the only truth. This is a major stumbling block to Christian spiritual direction outside the church. The director must come, not from the position of dogmatic truth, but from a position of fellowship, acceptance and love. The truth will be discovered as time and love work together to present truth organically. This of course requires a certain degree of patience and trust.

¹⁶ Taken from Russell Brown's article, "What's all this about Generation X". Planet Mag. Ed 14, pg33

¹⁷ Veith "Post-Modern Times" A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture". Crossway Books, Illinois. 1994

In this essay I have argued for a broadening of Barry and Connolly's definition of spiritual direction to include all people regardless of age, culture or religion. I have posited a new beginning point for spiritual direction which is, wherever God is doing something in a person's life regardless of age, culture or religion. I have presented four case studies where spiritual direction took place outside the confines of the church which lead five previously non-Christian people into a personal revelation of, and relationship with, Christ.

I now conclude this essay with the question, is there a place for mission in the art of spiritual direction? If the answer is yes then a second question must follow. What training component is being developed in New Zealand for this growing edge of God's mission?

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