

Under the radar

The use of contemplative collage in Spiritual Direction

by

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“Worship”

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How it all began...

Marcel Proust wrote that “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” Finding those new eyes has been part of what spiritual direction has brought to my life. There are many ways to describe what spiritual direction is with perhaps the most common quote coming from Barry and Connolly (1982: 8):

“... 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 this consequence of the relationship.”

To me spiritual direction has come to be that companionship through my spiritual journey that helps me, in Proust’s words, find those “new eyes.” Finding those new eyes is vastly enhanced by having someone to talk to and process my life ‘out loud’ with. Someone I can freely ask questions of like: What is God doing in my life? Where is God in all the messes and joys of my life? How are those messes and joys affecting my relationship with God? How is my relationship with God affecting how I respond to those messes and joys? With new eyes I can begin to find some answers to those questions, but also learn to live in the midst of the questions.

Liz Budd Ellmann, (Executive Director, Spiritual Directors International) partially defines spiritual direction as: “helping people tell their sacred stories.” I have found that many of us do not know how to talk about our faith journey. The North American culture predisposes us to approach our journey with God in more academic and rational/logical ways. We are not very open to revealing our emotions or the more mystical experiences that are a part of this journey. Along with the need to “find new eyes” we need to find our voice.

I was intrigued by the possibilities of using collage in spiritual direction after one of my directees asked if she could do a collage in our next session. As she worked she verbalized her process: “Not blue, I don’t want any blue.” “Red is my happy color.” A few weeks later we had a regular session where she brought her collage. It had some very insightful revelations for her. It revealed both some of the lies she allowed to reverberate in her mind, as well as some truths about who she is and is becoming.

Contemplative collage...

Sheila Pritchard (2007) states, “Collage is about letting the truth be revealed. Sometimes it is hard to stand back from our own life and see it from a more objective perspective. Collage is a contemplative way to allow this to happen. Both conscious and unconscious aspects of life find their way into the collage and remain there for ongoing discernment.” Sheila also points out that “Collage is one way to “get under the radar” of our left brain control and allow the right brain to show us things for which we may not previously have allowed space.”

Michael Sullivan (2006:xiv) , in his book “Windows into the soul: Art as spiritual expression,” says of his art: “I knew that signs, symbols and metaphors of art could free the soul. Art helped me to explore places within that I had never imagined or acknowledged....” He continues (2006: 1), “The method I recommend combines artistic expression with soul searching.” This soul searching is part of what spiritual direction is all about for the directee and artistic expression may free them to explore those places within that are hidden and deep. Paintner (2006:49) uses the imagery that accompanies the word pilgrimage. She states, “A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken of spiritual significance, in which an outward physical journey parallels an inner spiritual one.” Collage making can be this kind of a pilgrimage for many and is one that has brought great gifts of self-discovery.

So from the experience with this directee and from my own spiritual discoveries through collage, along with the reassurance that collage is “art for non-artists” (Pritchard, 2007), I

framed my research questions: 1) What might contemplative collage offer to a directee? Does it in fact, “get under the radar?” and 2) Which directees might benefit from doing a contemplative collage?

The way I did it...

I decided on two approaches: a ‘full’ collage and a ‘simple’ collage. A ‘full’ collage is one in which the directee took time in the week or so preceding a session to do a full contemplative collage. Taking as much time as they needed, they followed the guidelines in a handout on Contemplative Collage by Sheila Pritchard¹. The collage was then brought to the next spiritual direction session.

In their book “Awakening the creative Spirit: Bringing arts to spiritual direction” Christine Valters Paintner and Betsey Beckman (2010) describe a form of collage that can be done in a much shorter time. This ‘simple’ collage (see Appendix 2) requires the director to provide a limited stack of images already cut or torn out of magazines. Adapting this approach from a retreat setting to a spiritual direction session, I asked the directee to take a break from talking about an issue when it seemed they had ‘talked it out.’ I invited them to be still and listen. I gave them the option of going to the collage with the issue/situation/question in mind or to set things aside and to let God direct where they would go. I invited them to stay silent until they felt ready to go to the work table where everything was already laid out. I asked them to limit themselves to choosing 3-5 pictures that seem to resonate with them from the stack and then take a few more minutes to arrange them. Ten minutes has been enough time in most cases. Then they began to process the collage. I later added the option of starting the session with making a collage. The set of questions I used can be found in Appendix 3.

As the director/companion, I needed to remind my directees at times that in this setting we were focusing on the process not the product.

¹ www.sgm.org.nz/Refresh%20Archive/refresh_6_2.htm#25

What happened?

I had three regular directees at this time, but as two were out of the country and we had to work by Skype, ten additional friends agreed to help me in this project. Of these ten, three are spiritual directors - one of these was a man, another has a regular spiritual director - and the other seven were all quite naive about spiritual direction. Three of the thirteen directees chose to do a full collage outside the session and the others all did the simple collage. One regular directee was able to do both approaches. The very first collage experience, that triggered this research, was a full collage done in two parts.

As I met with directee after directee I was amazed by the diversity of expression and yet the fact that in every case, truth was revealed in a manner that was gentle, profound, and in the case of the simple collage, direct.

Key fruit for the directee...

One directee did both a full and a simple collage over the course of two sessions. Her first collage was a full collage - on her favorite psalm - Psalm 23. It was very large with a great many images. There was a lot to process. It had a profound effect on her prayer life. As she used it, it became an effective prayer tool. She prayed through the psalm first for herself and then for a daughter. Her processing of this collage was meaningful with some significant issues revealed. In this directee's case, the benefit of doing the simple collage was profound



“Psalm 23”

in that it served to really cut to the depths of emotion very quickly. Limiting it to three images narrowed her focus quickly and took her to a deeper level than had happened in all our previous sessions. We had been talking about the importance of learning to pay

attention and this collage invited her to explore what that

might look like.

Another of my regular directee's full collage was more like an "altar of remembrance." This directee had had a God experience that was then reflected and memorialized in her collage. It is serving to remind



"Paying Attention"

her of the truths revealed to her by God in that 'one

moment.' Interestingly, part of her experience with God

included a sort of vision - she described it as 'living in a dark cave - with dust on the floor of the cave.' She felt God saying that the dust was the result of his work in the darkness - he had been carving away the walls of the cave enlarging it. None of the images in her collage were of a cave - but were rather symbols of that dark cave in which she had been living for some time.

In each collage there was an element of truth in their collage that was seen and appreciated.

One directee (an artist) initially found it restricting, even though she was doing a full collage, until she realized it was the process that was important here rather than the product. She found this so freeing that she stated this might become a new way of prayer for her. She also felt it could be a way to document her journey as journaling wasn't working for her.

Several noted that despite there being a limited number of images to choose from, in every case, they were able to find images that spoke into their present moment. One started the session by going to the collage table with a desire to see if God would choose to confirm four things that had been 'spoken over her' at a recent retreat. She also had a fifth issue on her heart. She was astounded and deeply blessed to find that God had included in that limited stack of images (20-30) images that spoke to her of all five areas. In the end she had 3 collages with 3 images on each sheet of paper. She was so affirmed in the images that were

there even to the inclusion of a selection of shoes and “bling” (two of her ‘loves!’). As we looked at the images together and she explained what they represented to her she noticed that one of the pairs of shoes was made by her very favorite designer! All of this was evidence of God’s deep love for her and who he had created her to be! I had mentioned to her that she might not find a picture that looked like the image in her mind - but that she might find an image that represents the idea. This freed her to choose an image that might seem odd - but it spoke to her of the thought or idea she came with.

Several of the directees found messages of profound self-acceptance in the collage images and, in a few cases, in some words and phrases. The ‘simple’ collage did not include words as such. However, in one instance in what I saw as an image - a collection of tags - the



“A new name”

directee saw only the word written on one of the tags. For one who was struggling with her self-image the word “healthy” on the tag was a “new name” given to her by God.

Another directee came to process a dream. This dream had a very strong word and image associated with it - “bathe.” I wondered as he went to work on the collage how it would go as I

was fairly sure there was no image of the quiet, relaxing scene he described of a bathtub encircled with candles. Interestingly, again, a different image was found that led to a new understanding of God - the tub was replaced by the ocean and the intimacy of the bathroom by the vast unknown depths of the sea. The collage ended up with only one image - a school of fish near the surface (but shot from below) and a number of strips of blue getting darker

and darker towards the bottom of the page. The directee felt invited to look down into the darkness and vastness of God - a much bigger and mysterious aspect of God.

Other directees found images that reflected their sense of “dissonance.” As Paintner (2006:52) puts it, “Collage can be especially helpful in noticing images of resonance or dissonance.” She defines resonance to refer to the positive, full and significant, while dissonance refers to a conflict and negative reactions. One collage was in two halves. One side was dark; two of the three images were black and white and the one color image muted and greyed. The other side of the page was filled with a large photo of a great many types and colors of flowers with another image of a dining table on top of the flowers. The directee used the words “a feast” to describe what the images on this side of the page were about.

So far I have been detailing the effect of collage on the directee and their ability to “tell their story.” That is what my research questions were directed towards. However, I have been amazed at what using collage in a session has done for me as the director/companion.

Key fruit for me, the director...

One of the largest challenges I have faced in offering spiritual direction is my unthinking falling into “fix-it” mode. A large portion of my supervision has been given to working at ways to pay attention to this tendency and to counter it. I found that in having a collage as the focal point of a session two have things happened. My directees were less likely to ask for or seem to ask for advice, and secondly, I was able to resist my default response of advice giving. In fact, I was able to recognize that an advice-like question had been asked, was able to reflect on that, and finally was able to reject responding to it from my default mode.

Silence is often an uncomfortable thing in my culture and my second challenge was in how to introduce it into a session - to provide times to just listen - for both of us. However, with the collage silence became something easy and natural to suggest and to sit through. First, the

preparation for doing a simple collage was usually one of a space of silence - with the invitation stated as “when you are ready go to the table and start.’ Secondly, having a collage in front of us made introducing silence much easier again - as we could both gaze at it quietly - listening for anything else God wanted to reveal to the directee.

I suggest...

In conclusion, I revisit my research questions: What might contemplative collage offer to a directee? Does it in fact, “get under the radar”? Jacqueline Fehlner (2001) states, “Creating artwork makes visible what is within the heart, and mind and soul, bringing it to conscious awareness in a very concrete way.” There are great benefits to using collage, both the ‘simple’ and the ‘full’ approaches, in spiritual direction for both the directee and the director.² Some of those benefits were that the directee was less focused on performing for the director and was able to listen to the Spirit and him/herself better. It was easier to accept their emotions and to do so with less rationalization. Silence was focused and relaxed. The tendency to ask for help in fixing problems decreased and I (director) was able to avoid the “fix it” mode of operating. The directees often seemed much more open to listening to their inner voice. Surprise gifts from God were recognized and were memorialized in the collages. Since collage is something that reveals hidden and somewhat unconscious aspects, a secondary layer of meaning may surface some time later as the directee takes time to continue to contemplate the art work while remaining open to God’s voice. Each directee took their collage and expected to revisit it and to wait on the Lord before it again over time. For some it became an “altar of remembrance” - a way to remember the truths revealed during the process and the processing. In the words of one directee, “Sometimes when I am struggling I draw on the images from the collage, in my mind, to sort of reboot my thinking and keep me focused on the things I consider important.”

² see Appendix 1 “Tips for using collage in a SD session”



“Vocation” access.

I realize that a great deal more could be pursued as the directee works with a collage: the process itself, questions that request the directee to interpret the images, the multiple layers that might emerge. Over time, I hope that some of these directees will revisit their collages and find new layers of meaning that time will enable them to

The question of which directee might benefit from doing contemplative collage and when to offer it in a session remains. The directees who participated in this project were married, single, male, female, artistic, not artistic, a regular directee or a single occasion directee and all benefited from the collage experience. Paintner (2006:53) once again sums it up so well, “The arts open up ways of listening to the new possibilities and ways of being that are being birthed within us.”

While the scope of this research (due to time limitations) did not allow for much looking into the issue of when to invite a directee to use collage I have found that 1) when a directee has talked out an issue but has not come to a place they are ok with where they are at - they may benefit from doing a collage, 2) two of those who came to ‘help me with my project’ have asked to continue as regular directees and 2) a directee requested using collage as she thought that it might help her sort things out. I suspect that I’m going to have to work hard to discern when to use it because my temptation will be to use it all the time! For those wanting to know more about when to use expressive art in a spiritual direction session may find the the research paper written by Patricia O’Donnell (1994) helpful.

Resources

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Appendix 1 Tips for using contemplative collage in a session

Take an opportunity at the end of a session to introduce the idea of using contemplative collage to a directee. You may want to give them a handout on contemplative collage ahead of time (see www.sgm.org.nz/Refresh%20Archive/refresh_6_2.htm#25 for a possible handout) to take home to read over and to consider if this is something they may want to try at some point. Explain how a short collage (see Appendix 2) could be done in a session and that you will have supplies on hand.

1. Have the materials ready:
 - a. background paper of various colors and sizes
 - b. a stack of images precut from magazines (20-30)
 - c. a glue stick
 - d. scissors
 - e. a table to work at a bit separate from where you meet with the directee
2. Remind the directee that they may not find an image that exactly represents what they are thinking of - that they need to be open to choosing an image that symbolizes it.
3. At the end of 'talking out an issue' and it seems unfinished, and they indicate a willingness to try collage, invite them to sit in silence before the Lord quieting themselves and listening until they feel ready to move to the work space. Remind or explain the process (see www.sgm.org.nz/Refresh%20Archive/refresh_6_2.htm#25). Give them 10 - 15 minutes to work on it.
4. Invite them to sit in silence and look at the images, to listen again. The reflection questions I used are included in Appendix 3. It does seem really helpful to ask them to describe what they see in the images they chose. Often details that they initially missed become apparent and important.
5. At any point, but especially once they have worked through describing what they see and sense, invite them to listen in silence again, to see if the Lord has anything else for them today.
6. Encourage them to keep the collage where they can see it and revisit it over the coming month. Encourage them to continue to process what they see there and to be open to new insights as time passes.

Appendix 2 Simple Collage Instructions

1. Sit with whatever the prayer exercise has left you with for a few minutes. Let the Lord speak to you about that which he wants to reveal to you.
2. Go to the collage table, pick up a sheet of card stock in a colour that appeals, scissors, & a glue stick.
3. Choose 3 pictures that seem to be “right” to you. Don’t take long, don’t analyze - just pick.
4. Go to your space and trim, shape, arrange them on your paper. If there are words you need to add - use a marker to do so - but don’t be afraid to just have pictures.
5. Glue down your images once you are pleased with an arrangement.
6. Asking God to use them to speak to you - take time to look at the images and the arrangement. There are some questions on the next page to help you process your collage.
7. Take time to journal these thoughts, ideas, images, and invitations...

“How God sees me”



Appendix 3 Questions to help process a collage

1. What do you see? Describe the key images...
2. What attracted you to these images?
3. Is there anything that repels, frustrates, confuses you? Is there an image that you don't understand what it is doing in your collage? Are you ok with that?
4. Are there any links between the various images? In what ways are they similar? in what ways are they different?
5. What did you discover about God and/or yourself through the collage?
6. What was it like doing this? Any surprises? struggles?
7. What might you take from this exercise into your spiritual life? Is there an invitation or message here for you to consider?
8. Can you give it a title?

Questions for after some time has passed:

1. When you look at your collage again - what do you see? Is there anything you missed seeing earlier?
2. Is there another layer of meaning that might be emerging?
3. Have you put your collage where you can see it daily? In what ways has that impacted your prayer life and your relationship with God?
4. If you have not kept it where you could see it frequently, what do you see today? Does it hold anything new for you?

Appendix 4 Summary of the collages on which this paper was based
 (NOTE: permission has been granted by each directee to include the following)

person	approach	benefits & some disadvantages
1	full collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lies and truths revealed • her husband had left her just before she did this collage • a background scrap of handwriting turned out to be a listing of the lies that 'replay over and over' in her head • she processed out loud as she made her collage • impetus for this research paper
2 #1	full collage: focused on Ps 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a successful prayer tool - took her a long time to get it glued down as she "kept praying" with it • some surprises from juxtaposition (mask next to feast) • a lot to process in an hour session
2 #2	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrowed it down quickly • went deep • stayed focused on a main issue • by passed her tendency to be 'academic' and 'logical' • showed me how this tool can help me stay away from 'fix it' mode AND how to naturally introduce silence to a session
3	full collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it gave her some handles to address some issues she'd been dealing with for several months • she included some hidden messages (under flaps) - these were truths she partially understood and some that she was not fully ready to deal with • it brought some clarity and the promise of more clarity to why she was finding it so hard to let it rest • a lot to process in an hour - this is a disadvantage of a full collage, but it gives a lot of scope too
4	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this collage was full of invitation - to rest, to trust in God and his ways even if the situations she was finding herself in were unexpected and difficult

person	approach	benefits & some disadvantages
5	full collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in her journal • a prayer tool - the process is what is important not the outcome (she's an artist) • likes having an 'assignment' - at this stage needs more 'directives' as she has to be creative in her work • thinks this might be a way to record without journaling which has NOT worked for her • she used an old hymnbook
6	full collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A memorial altar of a recent God experience - where he revealed some things • the collage images were the 'stones of remembering' • God had shown her that the darkness she'd been living in had given his time to shape her - expand her soul ("the dark times prepare us")
7	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exploration of a dream - "bathe" • an invitation to look deeper to let go • "don't let the fish bother you" was a final invitation to not let the details, work, the anxieties bother him
8	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • she wanted me at the collage table with her and she processed out loud • did not want to work on the collage alone • chose the images fairly quickly but took a long time to arrange them to her satisfaction • She is dealing with some huge issues revolving around her imminent engagement and differences of cultural and Xn beliefs btwn them • in wondering how to deal with them her collage issued her an invitation to trust God even to the extent that if she is silent (in church) she can trust God to make her voice heard

person	approach	benefits & some disadvantages
9	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her three images were vibrant and colorful (as is she) • she found the process of collage to be restful and a form of listening to God as she collaged • she discovered truths about herself and is now able to use these images to “reboot my thinking” • she responded to a questionnaire I wrote a few weeks after the collage experience about what its continued effect had on her - she said: “I feel a deeper sense of self-worth when I look at it now, through the Holy Spirit. At the women's retreat I experienced God's love for me in a deeper way, and that is what added the element of self-acceptance when I look at the collage.”
10	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • started with collage • It clarified for her that she was wondering what her responsibility was in a particular relational situation • This collage also had a ‘bigger’ picture impact - each image carried a meaning not just for this situation but also for where her life is at right now
11	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • was given a new name by God: “healthy” • was affirmed in her role as mother • had an element that she isn't sure what it is there for • felt she had to burn (using the candle) the edges of one of the images...
12	simple collage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • she talked about what she needed to be more grounded • She discovered a cycle - she needs the quiet place to get to joy (God's presence), she can only GIVE hugs and love and care for the kids that she's been given to care for at this time when she has been quiet and in God's presence and has received Joy from him • needs some stability in relationships (older friends) and needs someone her age - deeper than what she has now.
13	simple collage - 3 pages with 3 images each - linked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confirmation from God regarding a “word” spoken over her recently • ALL of the images plus an extra one were there in the stack I'd laid out and special details like shoes and bling! • the images will serve as a way to remember the confirmation she received

Appendix 5 More pictures of the collages this paper was based on



“Truth and lies³”



“Untitled”



“Hydration”

³ This photo was a shot taken prior to the pieces being glued down, a few changes were made in the final version.