

## PRAXIS

*Very special thanks to Carol Stehling for these contributions on Praxis for the Spiritual Director. These first appeared in "Continue the Journey", a newsletter by Forming the Self.*

### 1. Spiritual Fitness

This first topic for praxis takes us to one of our most basic foundations as Spiritual Directors: how would I grade my "spiritual fitness" level as I strive to walk in love with my Directee?

It begins with another question:

- How aware am I of my "spiritual fitness"?

And follows with:

- To what extent am I engaged in disciplines that are building up my spiritual muscle?
- How consistent is my prayer life; is it deepening, varied?
- Concerning desolations and consolations, how aware am I of how the Holy Spirit is moving in my life?
- Am I able to authentically identify feelings, especially towards God and those with whom I live most closely?
- What part does God's Word play in my fitness routine?
- What about the sacraments, how do they influence my life and presence to my Directee?
- How often do my muscles flex to practice Matthew 25?
- How faithfully do I lift the weights of spiritual reading, expressions of joy and gratitude, sitting and BEING?

See you at the gym. I saw the Beloved in the pool the other day!!!

### 2. Stretching the Sacred Space

I could have been upset, but my losing the prepared text for this newsletter came as a gift... maybe not initially. As I prayed this morning, I felt a nudge that said, "Don't waste time trying to retrieve the article. What is coming to you in this moment; what matters to you now?"

I recalled years of formation and being on team. I remembered the boundaries discussed. Now in my twentieth year in the ministry of Spiritual Direction, I find myself walking with an individual who can no longer drive. For several months the spouse braved traffic, loaded a walker, and assisted the directee into my sacred space. After some consideration about what "keeping presence" means, I discerned the wisdom of driving to my directee's home.

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Our journey is not finished; there are stories to be told. There are manifestations of God's love to delight in. There is a surrender to the Paschal Mystery that is deep and abiding. I share a place at the kitchen table, and I am reminded that many blessings are revealed where bread is broken. As diminishment strips the physicality, I am witness to the spirit and soul of an individual I have come to love, respect, and honor. The truth be told, I am the student, the mentee! No class could have prepared me for the darkness and the light I am privileged to share. The "Nada, nada, nada" is real.

Only the Beloved's love matters.

Ponder your own SD practice; have there been occasions when you got stretched as you shared the Beloved's presence? Maybe during your presence at such places as...

- Assisted Living
- Memory Care Unit
- Hospital
- Outdoors
- Retreat team service
- Waiting rooms (spontaneous meeting)

### **3. Experiencing "praxis" with my Director**

It was near the end of my own painful Spiritual Direction session. I had once again touched the tenderness of my wounding. And only now, years later, could I answer my Director's earlier question: "What is the gift in your wounding?"

I could see the gift at last, and following my response, my Director took me even deeper with this question: "And where is the Spirit leading you in this?" Then, to round out the session, my wise midwife asked: "What is your soul's hunger?"

As I pondered this interchange with my Spiritual Director and the Spirit, I realized how deeply I was led to an encounter with my most challenged self – and simultaneously with my most gifted self! There in the crosshairs of the challenge and giftedness stood the Divine, ready to embrace me. I wept for joy at another stride in healing. I rejoiced that the Beloved once again took my heart and filled it with a wonderfully abundant love.

Learning, always learning ....

**SOMETHING TO PONDER:** Identify times in your own Spiritual Direction sessions where your Director has led you to an encounter with the Holy.

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### 4. Spiritual Progress

*If you want to judge your progress, ask yourself these questions:*

- *Am I more loving?*
- *Is my judgment sounder?*
- *Do I have more energy?*
- *Can my mind remain calm under provocations?*
- *Am I free from the conditioning of anger, fear, and greed?*

*Spiritual awareness reveals itself eloquently in character development and selfless action.*

*Authentic spiritual experience changes the way you see the world and the way you live.*

~ Eknath Easwaran

### 5. Openness as Spiritual Directors

The text came: “at my next SD session I would like to discuss chakras”. \*

It is important to know that this directee and I have walked together for 20 years. Imagine the many topics the Holy Spirit has either placed in front of us deliberately or, gently allowed to unfold for the surprise graces that flow from openness to the Divine. The directee, as on other occasions, brought information for clarification. I would describe the directee’s spirituality as “eclectic” or “all over the page.”

“What would you like to explore?”

“Can you tell me where you feel blocked?”

“Where do you sense an openness, a freedom, a free flowing of energy?”

“When you say that you have ‘found your voice’ and ‘I was able to stand up for myself’, where is that coming from?”

“In the midst of all the chaos in your life, how do you manage to stay centered?”

In the course of our session about chakras we were able to explore how Biblical teachings can be applied, laid side by side with the images and words of the chakra chart. The notion of “energy” is easily identified with Spirit. Freedom flows from harmony with the Divine. Self-worth is bestowed on us by our birthright as children of God. Taking care of ourselves is

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reflected in the commandments to love God, neighbor and self. Commitment to a weekly hour of adoration affirmed the “crown” of spiritual connection.

A closing question: How open can we be as spiritual directors – to the diversity of traditions, to the influences of spiritual leaders, to psychological information, to the benefit of our directee’s spiritual growth and honest questioning?

\* The origins of Chakra can be traced to India, 1500-500 BC. Chakras refer to the spiritual energy centers in the body. Fern Olivia states: “There are seven chakras, each corresponding to specific organs as well as physiological, emotional, psychological and spiritual states of being.” Rather than “judging” chakras as “demonic” can we open our minds to the richness they can offer? In the example above, the SD and directee clearly referenced Sacred Scripture and could draw parallels, particularly in the healing events in Jesus’ ministry.

### 6. Swim Inward, Flow Outward

Mary Oliver ends her poem “It’s 5 A.M. in the Pinewoods” with this inviting, open ended thought:

*I was thinking  
so this is how you swim inward,  
so this is how you flow outward,  
so this is how you pray.*

My early morning direction conversation was so profoundly moving. The directee brought an image that she had pondered for the entire month. Her beginning stance was tenuous, searching her mind, begging the right words to come. The struggle to articulate was like being in labor, and like a midwife, I reverently gave her my silence and full attention. Then with a deep breath the story unfolded. The image she described started as a single note and then climbed into a crescendo that harmonized into a dazzling song of emotions. (*swim inward*) “This feels very tender and painful. What are you connecting to even here now, in the telling?” More notes. “Your wounds?” Additional notes, forming a tiny duet. Tears, truth, uncovered pain, opening self to inner knowing. “Isn’t this an affirmation of who you are?” Smile through tears. “The real YOU, the unacknowledged YOU?” Then with a massive sweep, her reflection and some coincidences merged to take her back-not just to her own childhood, but into ancestry that she relates to, grabs, holds close.... “Is this a part of your story?” (*flow outward*) Much more, but in the end, a sweet circle back to enfold her own. “In truth, you also are this image?” (*how you pray*) “Thank you for sharing your story.” “This is how you pray.”

And this is how I pray! Swim inward, flow outward. The Gospel alive in pondering, created anew in this encounter.

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Can you describe this inward, outward flow in your own life, when ALL comes together in the ebb and flow of the Spirit's inspiration?

### 7. Glimpses of the Divine

In the course of ministry in Spiritual Direction, it has been part of my prayerful preparation to find an opening prayer that is fitting for the Directee I am about to encounter. Over the years I have often referenced the Liturgical readings of the day. Nan Merrill's *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* often speaks the words of the Holy Spirit. My own Spiritual Director has used Joyce Rupp's *Fragments of Your Ancient Name* for many years, and I continue to find resonance with the images of the Divine.

Though there are several solid "openers," I recently went on retreat and a prayer experience there became another of my ways to engage a Directee, particularly one that is challenged with finding a prayer style that fits into their day AND meets their needs. There are two simple prompts:

- First, "Think of an experience in Jesus' life that is meaningful to you." (Take time to let the Directee pray with this.)
- Next, "Take a few minutes to tell why/how this particular story is touching you. What is attracting you?" (Pause again to give time for thoughtful searching.)\*

Like me, you may discover that this practice is particularly helpful for heady persons; they get to be in their heads, and then the second prompt has potential for taking them to their hearts. Now is the Director's opportunity to invite exploration of feelings, giving the Directee a first-hand experience in conversation with the Divine and feelings of connection to the Word and Person of Jesus.

- Review your own practice of Spiritual Direction. How are you preparing for your directee?
- Do you feel that you are attuned sufficiently to know what your directee may need as an opening?

\*credit to Mary Jo Barker for introducing this prayer experience

### 8. Rediscovering "The Balance"

by Carol Stehling

As recently as 6 weeks ago my copy of "The Tree of Contemplative Practices" was spared the "declutter" stack. When first introduced to the concept, I was fascinated and had a casual relationship with it; I plotted my own journey, feeling satisfied with my branching out.

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A few years later I discovered it again in my “keep” folder. This time I was more intentional; I looked more deeply into what God might be saying to me. The words “comfortable” and “uncomfortable” came to my mind as I climbed the branches. Pay attention.

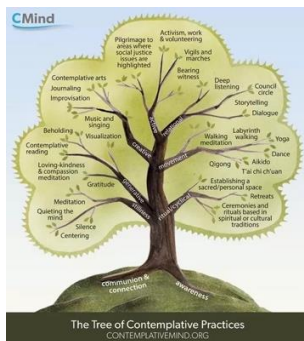
Holding the visual in my hands for the past two weeks has resulted in curiosity about how I might engage it to walk more closely with the Beloved. I took each topic and examined it, finding additional definitions, synonyms, and examples. The view from each branch took on new proportions and I began to personalize the messages more deeply. Where I had perceived “discomfort” I was able to re-imagine and see myself in a new light. Waves of gratitude came over me as I realized my own receptivity to the urging of the Spirit. I saw too that I needed to “go out on a limb;” I was aware of some complacency. With insights gained I know that the “tree work” will be around for some time.

Then I wondered in what manner I might offer this “tool” to a directee. Almost immediately I realized that such a directee needed certain qualities, such as possessing the maturity to be reflective, open to challenge, honest, and willing to do inner work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for consideration:

- In what areas do you already have a contemplative practice?
- Are there some areas to which you feel attracted? What does that mean for you?
- Are you presently aware of any resistance? What does that mean for you?
- Are you willing to experience “discomfort” as you explore and respond to the Spirit?

“The Tree of Contemplative Practices” was created by Maia Duerr. She is a cultural anthropologist, writer, and ordained Zen minister on a “mission to cultivate compassion, awareness, and social transformation.” Her illustrator is Carrie Bergman. Generous permission is given to use the illustration. We give credit to The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.



## 9. Fine Lines, Honesty and Holy Ground

Our formation process in becoming Spiritual Directors was quick to distinguish between Spiritual Direction and Psychological Therapy. We discussed at length that spiritual direction was about one’s relationship with God, and therapy was about one’s relationship with other people. Perhaps a particular direction conversation reveals over time that what the directee presents involves a challenge with one’s spouse or dear loved one, a difficult work situation, or

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even a health crisis that deeply impacts the directee's ongoing prayer and relationship with God. And the line between what is direction and what is therapy can get very thin. Having an awareness of that fine line is crucial to the session. Moreover, bringing that fine-line discussion to supervision is a timely topic.

Here are some examples of fine lines:

A 35-year-old female, successful in her career, is stuck in a relationship. She can't decide (nor can he) if they want to get married. They both have significant issues for which therapy has been suggested and tried, but without resolution. She admits to control issues and discomfort with her family not fully embracing this young man, nor them. Initially, her prayer life was robust, but I see this dwindling. Though I can listen and can even recognize and name some issues, it is not my expertise to wade deeper into this situation. In a very honest conversation, I discussed this with my directee and told her that I felt her need was for more time committed to therapy and that I felt we were stretching the relationship by calling it Spiritual Direction. I no longer see this directee.

An 85-year-old comes with knowledge of a block somewhere in her life; though faithful to her prayer life, she does not have a sense of God's presence, even when I suggest seeing the Divine in nature. She has done therapy around this but has not been able to come to grips with the REAL issue, though she suspects it has something to do with her mother. In this situation, the unnamed block is in the background. She is willing to continue to work on it. In our sessions, the emphasis is on her relationship with God. She brings journaling where she can name emotions. As we sort through the writings, she often says, "But I feel at peace." That sense of peace is a place where God resides...though she has difficulty acknowledging it. We will continue to walk together, living in the Mystery and exploring how God IS present even when we don't feel it.

A question to ask ourselves as Spiritual Directors: What are some steps I can take when I become aware that I am treading on a thin line?

### **10. Resistance to the Movements of God**

Resistance is a necessary element in the development of every interpersonal relationship, including our relationship with God. Alongside the desire for greater knowledge of and intimacy with the other, there is at the same time resistance to change and development.

Resistance to intimacy with God is almost always unconscious. It is important for the spiritual director to notice the level of resistance in the directee and to explore it. Resistance is a positive aspect of spiritual direction, for the place of resistance signals the place where God is active and where the directee's transformation can occur.

The following are some of the manifestations of resistance:

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Denial or repression of an experience of God.

Rationalizing or intellectualizing the experience.

- Resisting the director (appointment canceling or resisting what the director says or who he/she is).
- Transference of the resistance onto the director.
- Displacing the longing for God.
- Dodging or sidestepping the conversation or keeping it a secret
- Shifting from first-person dialogue to third-person dialogue.

What does a spiritual director do in the face of resistance? Notice, ponder, and respond to the movements of God just like any other movement by:

- Helping the directee notice resistance and let it be. The "art" is in the timing.
- Identifying when the movement away began.
- Finding out what is being threatened/resisted.
- Differentiating among resistance to God or prayer, resistance to certain issues, (e.g., dreams, experiences of God, their past, hurts or traumas, secrets, fears, or inadequacies), and resistance between director and directee.
- Helping the directee look at the resistance and savor it as a gift of God.
- Being very gentle... non-judgmental... and empathetic.
- Exploring desires (e.g., "Now that you have discovered this, what do you want?").
- Assuring the directee that both of you are involved in the exploration of what is happening.
- Helping the directee notice how or when and perhaps why they are avoiding the God encounter or the implications of the God experience.
- Recommending therapy at the appropriate time if a wound is uncovered.
- Staying with the directee - pray with them and encourage them to pray.

The relationship with God is dynamic!

For further reading:

*Sacred is the Call* by Suzanne Buckley (editor)

*Care of Mind and Care of Spirit* by Gerald May

