

Spiritual Direction: An Alternative to Gurus

by Siobhán Houston

Once a month I take a long lunch break from my job as an administrator at Harvard University and journey on the subway to the crowded streets of downtown Boston. Escaping from the furious pace of shoppers and businesspeople outside, I venture into the serene precincts of St. Anthony's Shrine to meet with my spiritual director, a Franciscan nun named Sister Margretta Flanagan.

Entering her small, cozy office, I gratefully sink down into an easy chair and prepare to explore my relationship to the Holy One of Being with the help of my mentor. Sometimes she will light a candle to symbolize the presence of the Divine, and then she may lead us in a meditation, play a tape of chants, or read a verse of scripture that we reflect upon together. The session continues for an hour, and during that time, Sister Margretta and I discuss my recent meditation and prayer experiences, my dreams, and any other aspect of life that affects my devotional practices. I leave with a strengthened commitment to a daily practice and a host of insights to mull over for the coming month.

About a year ago, my longtime meditation practice became lackluster and irregular, to say the least. I had heard of "spiritual direction," a tradition primarily found in the Christian tradition, where the seeker meets, usually monthly, with a teacher of the interior life.

Although I felt this would be helpful, I was unsure how to contact a suitable person. My search was made more difficult by the fact that I, like many GNOSIS readers, am transtraditional in my spiritual orientation. Where could I, with all my heterodox and esoteric leanings, find a companion? Serendipitously, I came across a brochure from the Franciscan Center for Spiritual Direction at St. Anthony's Shrine and made an appointment with Sister Margretta, who holds graduate degrees in education and holistic spirituality. From our first meeting, I knew that she was someone who could work with me in a nonjudgmental, supportive manner, a premonition that has proven true over the last few months.

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have a centuries-old heritage of spiritual direction, and this practice exists in other traditions as well. Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky, co-author of *Jewish Spiritual Guidance*, suggests that in the 18th and 19th centuries spiritual direction began to gain ground in the Protestant church. Furthermore, Olitzky's recent book seeks to invigorate the long-neglected tradition of spiritual mentoring within Judaism. The ancient Celtic tradition of *anamchara*, or "soul friend," and the Orthodox Christian "staretz" both reflect the same custom — an ongoing, one-to-one relationship with a person who walks the spiritual path with the quester, providing comfort, suggestions, instruction, and above all wisdom. As the flyer from St. Anthony's points out, however, the term "spiritual direction" is a misnomer in the sense that we can only be "companions" by another human; the Holy Spirit is the ultimate spiritual director.

Multitudinous programs (over 300 at last count) exist to train those who hear the call to become spiritual directors. Many of these people do not have traditional theological educations, but come to the vocation with backgrounds in such fields as law, social work, and medicine. Priests, pastors, monks, and nuns who have a calling to this ministry may also pursue studies in a field called “formative spirituality,” which includes academic work as well as a practicum.

Directors typically meet with clients for an hour once a month. Some provide this service for a donation, while others charge a fee (usually in the \$20-50 range, and often based on a sliding scale). The majority are comfortable working with people from a variety of backgrounds and faiths. Although most trained directors are Christian, one does not generally have to be a Christian oneself to work with a director.

Although spiritual direction does overlap pastoral counseling, there are differences. Spiritual mentoring has as its primary focus the client's relationship with the Divine, while a pastoral counseling session usually addresses a specific crisis or problem in the client's life. Rev. Jeffrey Gaines, a **Presbyterian minister and** executive director of Spiritual Directors International (a professional organization with over 3000 members worldwide), discussed the differences between the two modalities in an interview in *Hungryhearts News*. In spiritual direction, according to Gaines, “discernment is based upon the intimate engagement of two people walking into the sanctuary of God.” A spiritual director “‘companions’ another person, listening to that person's life story with an ear for the movement of the Holy, of the Divine.”

Gaines notes that spiritual direction assumes a certain amount of psychological health on the client's part, and that not all people would benefit from this type of relationship. When I spoke with Sister Jane Zimmerman of the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago, she noted that while “counseling guides a client through a particular problem . . . and then comes to closure,” companioning is an open-ended process; “it seeks to call forth one's own inner wisdom in order to be attentive to the spiritual journey.”

While it may seem that a director's connection with a client mirrors the guru-disciple relationship, this may be a misleading assumption. The contemporary Western model of a spiritual instructor is peer-based, recognizing that the director is also human and fallible. The ideal is to have two people working cooperatively to enhance the client's daily meditative and prayer life, rather than an “enlightened being” instructing a benighted, eternally devoted disciple.

Modern spiritual directors use a variety of techniques to facilitate awareness in their clients. For instance, the Haden Institute's two-year training program for spiritual mentors offers instruction in active imagination, dream work, Centering Prayer, the Labyrinth, the Jesus Prayer, fairy tales, poetry, and Desert spirituality. The enneagram also seems to be a popular tool these days, along with the more traditional exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola and the spirituality of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

While many directors concentrate on contemplative prayer, others highlight the more outwardly dynamic charismatic spirituality, which emphasizes the gifts of the spirit, such as healing and prophecy. The Pecos Benedictine Monastery in New Mexico offers a "School for Charismatic Spiritual Directors" for those dedicated to charismatic renewal. And ecumenically-oriented instruction for spiritual directors exists as well. The Morning Star Mystery School in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, which educates "cross-cultural spiritual counselors," focuses its two-year curriculum on universal shamanic practices and hands-on healing. Morning Star's brochure says "the work of soul-friending is not an organized religion . . . it reaches across all faiths and creeds and goes directly to the spiritual emptiness being felt by so many in contemporary society."

On a practical level, how does one go about locating a compatible teacher? Carl McColman, an Episcopalian spiritual director who administers a Web site dedicated to contemplative prayer (www.anamchara.com), advises those in search of a soul-friend to first pray and seek divine guidance. He also suggests that one might ask friends and clergy for referrals, and then inquire at a local monastery or convent for someone trained in direction. One might also contact an organization that trains guides for possible contacts (many of these groups are listed at the Spiritual Directors International Web site at www.sdiworld.org). But one should only begin this search when one is sincerely committed to a deepening of the interior life within the context of daily practice.

For those who are so dedicated, though, working with a spiritual director can be immeasurably rewarding. As Sister Jane Zimmerman says of modern spiritual guides, "We come to our companionship role today as people who ourselves have our own woundedness, our own hungers and thirsts for wholeness and for the God we seek. The role is ever ancient, yet ever new and evolving."

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