
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: MEANING, PURPOSE, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

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This article introduces the first of two special issues on spiritual direction and mental health. Attention is given to providing a broad understanding of the meaning, purpose, and scope of spiritual direction, and discussing factors concerning resistance to spiritual transformation. It then explores: the diversity of roles assumed by spiritual guides and directors; contemporary contrasts between spiritual direction and psychotherapy; and critical issues concerning the integration of spiritual concepts and practices into the process of counseling and psychotherapy. It is asserted that the present climate of increased dialogue between soul care practitioners provides unprecedented opportunity for the enhancement of understanding concerning the process of spiritual transformation and its implications for the mission of both church and clinic.

Carolyn Gratton (2000) uses the following story in introducing her book, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance*. It's about a wise fish.

It seems that there once were some fish who spent their days swimming around in search of water. Anxiously looking for their destination, they shared their worries and confusion with each other as they swam. One day they met a wise fish and asked him the question that had preoccupied them for so long: "Where is the sea?" The wise fish answered: "If you stop swimming so busily and struggling so anxiously, you would discover that you are already in the sea. You need look no further than where you already are." (p. 5)

For Gratton, the wise fish represents a spiritual director—or that deepest part of a human being—that is in touch with the omnipresence of God. The search is for life in his kingdom; hurry is the devil.

Cultivating an awareness of God's transforming presence as foundational for spiritual direc-

tion is a common theme in the literature of devotional theology. In the words of Richard Rohr (1999), "My starting point [for prayer as part of spiritual guidance] is that we're already there. We cannot attain the presence of God. We're already totally in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness" (p. 28).

These images provided by Gratton and Rohr bring to mind the mission of the ultimate spiritual director, Jesus, and his advice to all who would listen: [Crudely paraphrased] Slow down, be at peace, listen to my words, and you will become aware that the no swimming sign has been removed from the "springs of living water" (see Matthew 6:25-34; John 4:14, 10:10, & 14:27).

The profundity of the simple notion of learning how to experience the presence of God was recently highlighted for me while participating in a roundtable discussion on the topic of Christian spiritual formation. Each person present had two things in common: a long history of involvement in the evangelical world, and a recent, personal captivation by the process of spiritual formation.

The juxtaposition of these two common factors should not be missed. These were long-term, card-carrying members of evangelicalism who had spent their lifetimes in Christian study and service. But only recently, it seemed, had each enrolled in Christianity 101—ongoing enjoyment of the love and presence of God.

Toward the end of our time together, one of the group members mused the following, which seems an appropriate summary to that discussion and an introduction to this one. "Could it be that it [the process of spiritual formation] is simply becoming aware that God is everywhere and then learning how to be with him—in the presence of divine love?" Several heads nodded "yes." None "No."

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I'm not picking on Evangelicals; Catholic or Orthodox Christians—I believe—could have just as easily encircled the table. The point is this; it seems that many in the Christian world have recently reawakened to the truth that wearing the label, “Christian,” is not synonymous with experiencing the intimate, moment-by-moment, relationship with God that souls were designed to enjoy, and have begun to place hope in the practice of spiritual direction as a methodology for finding the way to more abundant living. Across denominational barriers, there seems to be a tidal wave of interest in learning how to experience intimate friendship with God and a chorus line of those singing the praises of “wise fish” (spiritual friends, guides, and directors) who have pointed out what is so easily missed.

To understand the process of Christian spiritual formation does not seem difficult—at least not at a broad-brush level. Concisely put, it involves an experiential awareness of God's presence that leads to conversation, communion, and ultimately authentic transformation of the entire person by an internal yielding to His will. What is difficult to grasp, however, is why it is so easy to miss experiencing the ocean of Divine love for all the water.

Merton (1960) provides indirect hope by reminding that it has not always been this way. Spiritual direction (aimed at authentic transformation through interaction with God) was originally basic and normal to church life. “The individual member of the community was ‘formed’ or ‘guided’ by his participation in the life of the community, and such instruction as was needed was given first of all by the bishop and presbyters, and then through informal admonitions by one's parent's spouse, friends, and fellow Christians” (Merton, 1960, p. 12).

If authentic transformation—becoming like Jesus—was once part of normal Christian living, what happened? If “holiness” for John Wesley meant being consumed by—and transformed into—the love of God, how did that term ever come to connote staying away from beer and chew and dates who do? Why do the words of Dallas Willard (1998) ring true for so many? “The current gospel then becomes a ‘gospel of sin management.’ Transformation of life and character is *no* part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faith and eternal living” (Willard, 1998, p. 41). And why does the modern integration movement—dedicated to the pursuit of wholeness and holiness—now seem as captivated by the life-change possibilities thought to

be present in the ancient practice of spiritual direction as with the modern wisdom of applied psychology?

We will turn our attention to these questions as we examine: the meaning and purpose of spiritual direction; the process of spiritual direction; the role of the spiritual director; how spiritual guidance is similar and different from psychotherapy; training and other critical issues associated with attempts to integrate spiritual direction and psychotherapy.

MEANING AND PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

At the heart of spiritual formation, I believe, is becoming aware that God is everywhere, and learning to practice his presence and yield to his transforming grace. Yet, the actualization of this discovery often is illusive? Perhaps this is, at least in some measure—because the resistance of self-sufficiency stains the fabric of the fallen soul. Three specific avenues of resistance to authentic spiritual transformation are proposed below as off-ramps from the process of authentic transformation. We will examine each as we simultaneously work toward understanding the meaning and purpose of spiritual direction.

It is Easy to Forget Who We Are

According to Gratton (2000), ever since the Fall, we human beings have shown a striking tendency to forget who we really are. We were designed to live in a place, Eden, which literally means “pleasure” or “delight.” We were created to thrive in loving relationships with God and each other. Life was meant to be full and abundant, interactions authentic, and the fruit of God's spirit the fabric of our character. The only requirement for keeping the party going is to trust that God had our best interests at heart. To allow him to be God and us “not God.”

But after the Fall, human beings have tended to show profound memory loss—about how life was supposed to be lived—and, instead have developed a “false self,” a counterfeit of the deeply buried image of God (of Christ-form). It is the “false self” that typically sits behind the control panel of a person's life—preferring the management of religion to the mystery of spirituality. As Thomas Merton (1961) suggests, the core of this false way of living is always a sinful refusal to surrender to God's will. The “true self, and it's desire to live in transforming friendship with God, remains buried in the depths of our souls” (Gratton, p. 67).

Yielding to authentic transformation is difficult because it is easy—to make the same choice as Adam and Eve—to choose to be God and consequently to live out of a false identity. Having let go of God, false attachments—what we *have*, *do*, and *control*—become seductive and the illusion of our divinity becomes strong. In the words of Leo Tolstoy, “all men of the modern world exist in a continual and flagrant antagonism between their consciences and their way of life” (1936, p. 136).

Christian spiritual formation involves awaking from the dream that we are God and remembering our true identity—our “beloved-of-God-in-Christ” identity and then saying “yes” to the pain associated with the mortification of our false self. Dethroning the false self is a pillar of spiritual direction—and a primary cause for business and anxious “swimming” that distracts from the process of enjoying the “water.”

Union with God is a Scary Proposal

Arguably, the most quoted modern definition of spiritual direction is provided by Barry and Connolly (1982).

We define Christian spiritual direction 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 the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on religious experience, i.e., any experience of the mysterious Other whom we call God. (p. 8)

This definition is important because of both its simplicity and breadth. Spiritual direction here is grounded in the experiences associated with the development of an intimate relationship with God. Conversing with an invisible friend, if you will, until we become just like him.

As with any “romantic” involvement, developing a relationship with God requires lots of time: For conversation, communion, and—in the unique situations of marriage and intimacy with God—union. Barry and Connolly (1982) place relationship at the heart of their definition of spiritual direction. And by “relationship with God” they mean something that is, “established by the creation of the human person and exists even when the person is unaware of its existence” (p. 32). They expand on this theme by casting spiritual direction as “an interpersonal process in which two people work together toward the

goal of a deeper, more explicitly intimate and mutual relationship with God” (p. 155).

To be alive is to be in relationship with God and in the process of spiritual formation. Each is unavoidable given breath and consciousness. But all formation is not good formation and all relationships do not lead to transforming friendship.

The possibility of one (the directee) walking the path of experiential relationship with God is always before the mind of a discerning director. As Merton (1960) reminds, at its root meaning, spiritual direction is a “continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encouraged *in his special vocation*, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God” (p. 13).

For some Protestants, this notion of developing intimacy with God that crescendos in union may be as unsettling as a Mother’s Day sermon taken from the Song of Solomon. But it is at the heart of spiritual direction. Again in the words of Merton: “This union with God signifies not only the vision of God in heaven but, as Cassian specifies, that perfect purity of heart which, even on earth, constitutes sanctity and attains to an obscure experience of heavenly things” (1960, p. 13). It also goes to the heart of the words of Jesus in his commencement address to his disciples, when he prayed for them saying: “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20b-21, NIV).

Dallas Willard (1999) has these poetic words to say about the development of this type of intimate relationship with God.

So our union with God—his presence with us, in which our aloneness is banished and the meaning and full purpose of human existence is realized—consists chiefly in a conversational relationship with God while each are consistently and deeply engaged as his friend and co-laborer in the affairs of the kingdom of the heavens. The process of having a personal relationship with God becomes a concrete and common sense reality rather than a nervous whistling in the dark. (p. 56)

The pursuit of union with God is a major on-ramp to the process of spiritual direction. But it can also be a crowded exit. Union with the almighty, all-seeing God is a death-nail threat to the sense of wanting to control life and have autonomous existence. It defines both the ultimate goal of spiritual formation and much of the reasons for its resistance.

A House Divided

We have stated that spiritual direction involves remembering who we are and then choosing to enter into a relationship with God that leads to union of the entire being with his being. But another factor is important in understanding spiritual formation and the avoidance of this process. Many schools of both psychology and theology have focused their attention on one or more of the component parts of the person and have subsequently lost a vision for a holistic understanding. This is more than unfortunate as authentic transformation involves the whole person.

As Barry and Connolly (1982) have observed, “inviting God to communicate with us in prayer and trying to respond to him in prayer tend to involve all of our selves. Feeling, mood, thought, desire, hope, will, bodily gestures and attitudes, activity, and direction of life” (p. 41). Spiritual direction must involve the whole person.

In his latest book, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, Dallas Willard (2002) devotes considerable energy to describing various components of human beings and how change (Christian spiritual formation) takes place.

In figure 1 we see that Dallas posits six basic and inseparable aspects in human life: thought (images, concepts, judgments), feeling (sensation, emotion), choice (will, decision, character), body (action), social context (relation to God and others), and soul (the factor that integrates all of the dimensions to form one life). He goes on to describe Christian spiritual formation as allowing the word and Spirit of Christ to enter into the depths of one’s being and begins to transform each component of the human being to Christlikeness—under the direction of a regenerate will and with constant overtures of grace from God (Willard, 2002). Willard acknowledges that such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by direct human effort. It is a matter of cooperating with grace and desiring to have Jesus live his life through me.

Willard’s (2002) input seems important for at least three reasons: his description of the person, his description of the process of spiritual formation, and his holistic view of the self—which may help in identifying another factor (the tendency to compartmentalize the person) which may cause spiritual formation to be illusive.

In examining Willard’s (2002) model of the person, reader’s of this journal may be tempted to

reflect on the history of psychology as being—until recently—more focused on specific components of the person than the entirety. The ancient parable of six blind men encountering an elephant quickly comes to mind. In the field of psychology, the past several decades have witnessed a jockeying for pre-eminence by various psychologies, each devoted to one of Willard’s different dimensions of the person (e.g., behavior, cognition, relationship, etc.) each attempting to explain changes in emotion.

Until recently—but continuing for some venues of thought—attempts have been made to understand the complex human being by her singular dimensions. And while some schools have posited deeper levels of explanations for actions and reactions, the absence of the concept of a unifying soul has left the field of psychology very compartmentalized.

Spiritual direction—with its soul talk and holistic view of the person—is seen by many as a refreshing alternative to the compartmentalization posited by modern psychology. As Thomas Merton expresses it, “You don’t go to a spiritual director to take care of your spirit the way you to a dentist to have him take care of your teeth. The spiritual director is concerned with the whole person” (1960, p. 14).

But the history of psychology mirrors the difficulty a person may find in being able to raise the microscope high enough to get the big picture—which, according to Willard, is necessary if we are to gain a vantage point that will allow us to view the person in its interactive entirety. Authentic transformation, it follows, must involve the whole person or it will be something other than authentic and less than transforming.

THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Kallistos Ware (1993) tells the story of a fourth-century desert father, St. Sarapion the Sindonite, who traveled on a pilgrimage to Rome. Once there he was told of a respected recluse who spent all of her time in a small room. Sarapion was skeptical of her way of life, because of its contrast to his own approach that included much travel. He called on her as asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this she replied: “I’m not sitting, I am on a journey” (Ware, 1993, p. 7).

To be a Christian is to be on a journey—from the pignen of self-rule to the outstretched arms of a loving father. Not surprisingly, one of the most ancient names for Christianity is simply “the Way” (see Ware,

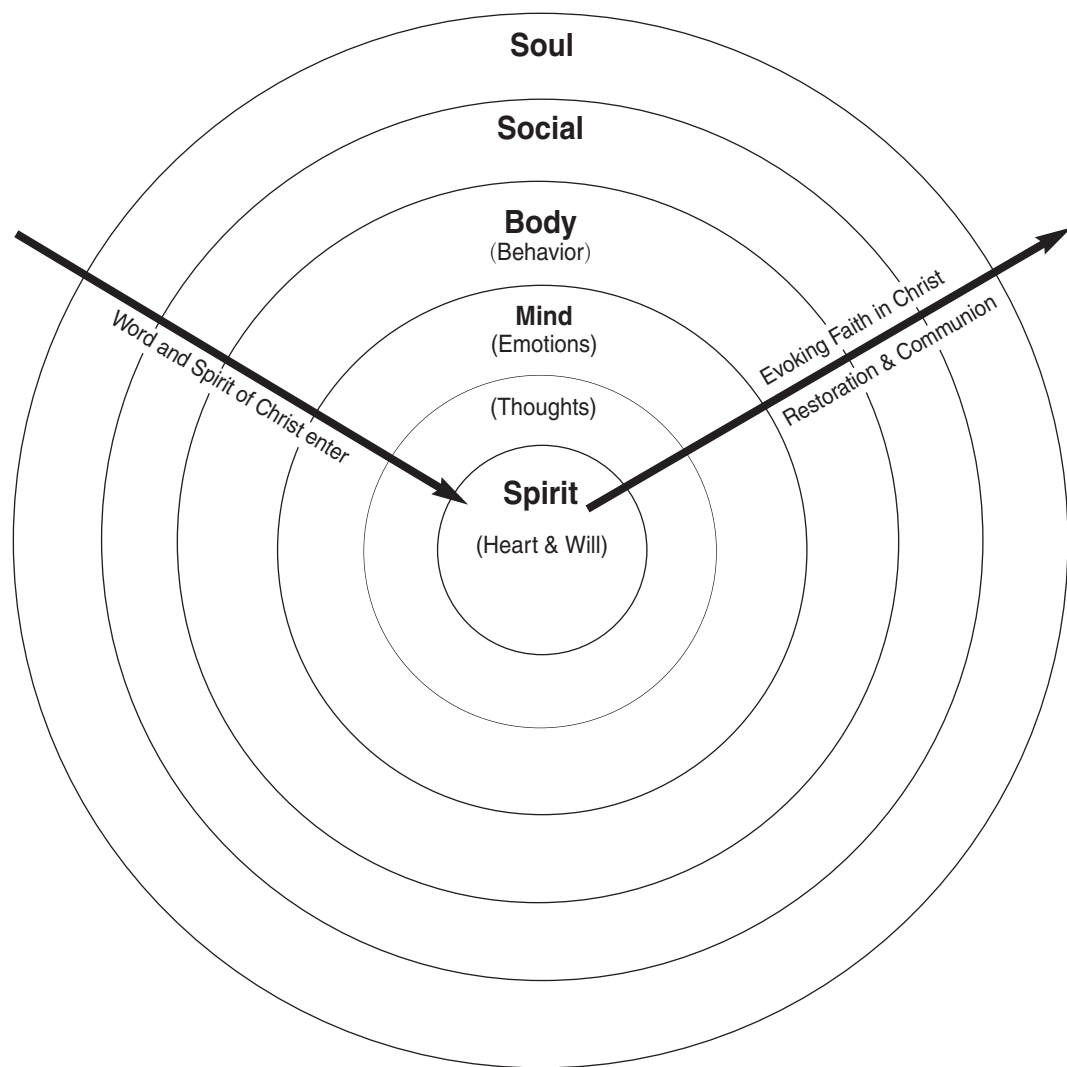


Figure 1. Willard's Model of the Person

1993, p. 7; Acts 19:23). David Benner (2002) echoes the benefit of using a journey motif to describe spiritual formation. In his most recent book, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, Benner (2002) devotes his first chapter to describing “The Transformational Journey” of Christ following. He discusses spiritual guidance in terms of accompaniment on a voyage of becoming.

It is possible that some Protestants have become so fascinated with spiritual direction because of the partial loss of the richness and texture in viewing Christian transformation as a journey. Even though Reformers such as Calvin discussed three broad

stages of the journey—conversion, sanctification, and glorification—in practice it seems that many modern Protestants are more likely to expect a microwave (ultra-quick trip) instead of a crock pot (slow and simmering) approach to transformation.

As Rogers (2002) observes, one of the most striking differences between ancient and modern Christianity concerns the view of salvation. “At the risk of oversimplification,” he states, “Protestants generally define salvation in legal, juridical, or forensic terms. Christ’s death pays the just penalty for man’s sin. We receive salvation (forgiveness of sins) by virtue of our faith in His meritorious sacrifice on our behalf.”

While not denying the sacrificial aspect of salvation, ancient Christianity, Rogers suggests that it is better to view salvation as a process of transformation and the fulfillment of the image of God in humankind.

Perhaps it should not be surprising to hear Christians described as “forgiven sinners,” instead of as “beloved children of God on a transformational journey that will lead to restoration of the *imago dei*, and spiritual union.” Nor is it startling that someone whose identity is that of absolved reprobate might dance for joy at the notion of being offered a personal invitation to live in union with God.

Three Stages

The journey motif for spiritual formation was adopted by both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians and is conceived of as including three stages: purgation, illumination, and union. These movements will be briefly summarized below.

According to Benner (2002), *purgation* is the process by which one’s character is purified through confession of sin and a growing detachment from worldly values. Using the imagery of Dallas Willard’s model of the person (see figure 1), foundational to purgation is a *metanoia*, or a radical reorientation of all the dimensions of the person (thoughts, emotions, will, behavior, social interactions, and life of the soul) toward God. It is here the seeker battles, along with the grace of God, against the passions and habit patterns of sin within the human body and soul that corrupt human nature.

In the imagery of the parable of the prodigal son, purgation describes the stage of thinking things through again, leaving the pigs and pig inclinations, to begin the journey back home.

Illumination refers to a deepening experience of the love, joy, and peace of God along with a growing desire to surrender to the will to God. It is characterized as a time of becoming dispassionate for all things not God, and passionately attached to God and his kingdom. During this stage conversations with God increase and begin to deepen into communion and movement toward unceasing prayer/longings from the heart.

With reference to figure 1, illumination can be visualized as an increasing interior surrender to the presence and passion of the indwelling Spirit of Christ within each dimension of the person until the person’s character becomes a better mirror of

Christ. For the prodigal, illumination describes the time of staring into the eyes of the father, realizing the extent of his boundless love, and then becoming lost in his embrace.

The final stage of spiritual formation is union with God. This state will not reach ultimate fruition until heaven. It is the stage of complete interior surrender to the presence and will of God. As this stage is approached there is nothing to distinguish the character of the believer from that of Christ. The mystery of “Christ-in-me” (see Colossians 1:26, 27) is realized as an interior surrender of all components of the person—thought, emotion, will, behavior, relationships, and soul functioning—is made to the transforming presence of Christ. For the prodigal son, union would mean a full re-entry into the family and taking on the mind of the father with such a deep appreciation for his love that he has become pig-proofed for life.

Willard describes the process of spiritual transformation as the renovation of the human heart. He believes that “spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (2002, p. 22). In so saying, Willard puts in digestible terms the classic notion of union with God. In his words,

Our union with God—his presence with us, in which our aloneness is banished and the meaning and full purpose of human existence is realized—*consists chiefly in a conversational relationship with God while we are each consistently and deeply engaged as his friend and co-laborer in the affairs of the kingdom of heavens*. It is then that having a personal relationship with God becomes a concrete and commonsense reality rather than a nervous whistling in the dark. (Willard, 1999, p. 56)

As the process of Christian spiritual formation reaches fruition several things become evident: (a) The directee begins to awaken to her true identity and with God’s grace, dethrones the false self; (b) conversation and communion with God increase and deepen into a sense of spiritual union; (c) the various dimensions of the person become united by the presence and love of the indwelling Christ. The truly important thing, the common thread of spiritual formation, according to Thomas Merton (1960), is the journey of surrender to the will of God and his love.

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

It should not be surprising that much disparity exists when it comes to describing the role of a spiri-

tual director. This seems in many ways analogous to examining the literature for descriptions of a psychotherapist. It appears that it is desirable for both capable counselors and spiritual directors to possess a cluster of personal qualities that transcend both techniques and theoretical orientation—while at the same time maintaining the skill to employ sound technique when warranted.

It may be helpful in attempting to sort out the descriptions of an ideal spiritual director, to consider two axes: level of authority and orientation.¹ Let's begin with level of authority.

Spiritual directors who assume a low level of authority may be described as a "trusted friend," or "God's usher" who walk with directees as they attempt to find God's path (Merton, 1960). The gift these "spiritual friends" give is the gift of their self—hospitality, presence, and dialogue (Benner, 2002). Those who emphasize a low-authority position may shy away from the term "director" because of the high-authority implication and either explain the unfortunate connotations of "director" or instead, use descriptions such as "spiritual friend" or "guide."

Others, such as Rogers (2002), while emphasizing the need for compassion and relationship skills, take a position that the director who is also in the role of priest, is ultimately in a position of high authority. High authority descriptions are sensitive to the roles the director may sometimes be called upon to perform, such as that of confessor or soul physician.

The role played by a particular spiritual director will also be influenced by orientation. As with the practice of psychotherapy, it may be helpful to consider broad orientation categories such as: support (accompaniment and friendship), teaching (instructive and focused on classic devotion practices), or reconstructive (explicit focus on the process of transformation), when considering the role of a spiritual director. But even with these three orientations, when combined with a continuum of different levels of assumed authority, present a broad spectrum of possible roles a director may assume. Kallistos Ware (1990), for example, discusses five such roles that are common in the practice of spiritual direction. These are: doctor, counselor, intercessor, mediator, and

sponsor. For a more detailed treatment of these categories see Rogers (2002).

While the specific role a spiritual director adopts in working with a directee will certainly vary with the factors we have discussed—assumed level of authority and specific orientation—other parameters such as personality variables, relationship stages, and level of training, are important in considering the nature and rich variety of roles a spiritual director may assume in working with a directee.

Regardless of the aforementioned nuances, as a rule of thumb, spiritual directors are: (a) committed to the journey of transformation—including their own pilgrimage (Benner, 2002); (b) good and kind listeners (Barry & Connolly, 1982); (c) dedicated to helping another to recognize and follow the inspiration of grace in his life (Merton, 1960); (d) moved by the mystery of God's transforming love (Gratton, 2000); and (e) discovered by the community of believers—rather than self-proclaimed—because of the un-worldly manner in which they lead their lives (Barry & Connolly, 1982).

PSYCHOTHERAPY VERSUS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Are psychotherapy and spiritual direction different animals? In contemporary practice the obvious answer is yes. I close my eyes and observe what appear to be two distinctively different photo-albums of associated images.

My pictures of spiritual direction include a drive to a nearby monastery. I turn on to the grounds I drive down a long tree-lined driveway. Often a monk wearing black and white walks by the road, appearing lost in prayer. Prompted by speed bumps I slow the car and my racing thoughts. My routine includes unpacking a few things in a small cell that would make a room at the Motel 6 look like a suite. I walk to the church and notice how much noise my leather shoes make on the stone floor. I'm inspired by the lighting, stain glass mural, and smell of candles. My thoughts become even slower, so slow that I may become keenly aware of the ocean of God's presence that engulfs me. I sense he wants to talk and that he's been anticipating our time together. I become awake to how rare it is for me to think like this.

Later, I sit in a small room with an eighty-year-old monk who is wearing a long robe and work boots. He says nothing and waits for me to talk. I can say anything, but I sense he's only listening when my sen-

¹I am indebted to many conversations with Marty Goehring for these categories. For more information see, Goehring, M. (1985). Analysis of a model for assessing client therapeutic role preferences. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Fuller Theological Seminary.

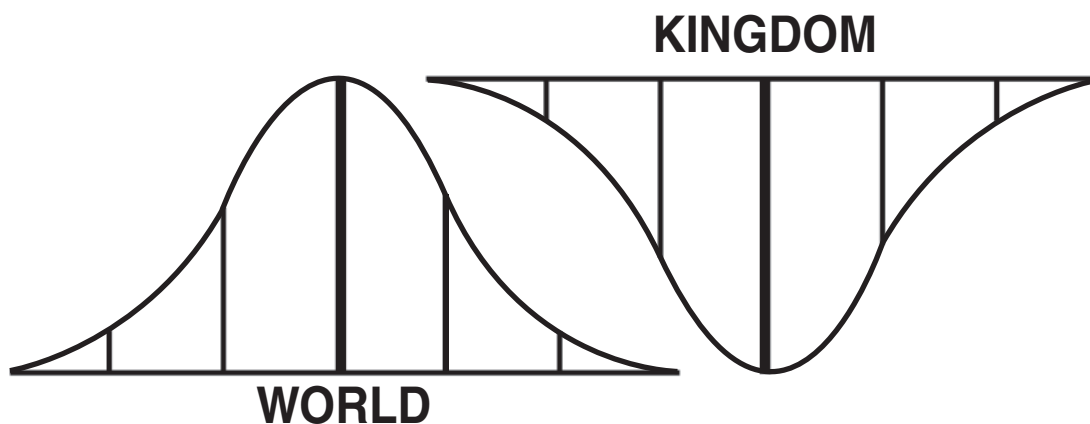


Figure 2

tences refer to God. He doesn't seem to care much about "how I feel about this or that." His interest is more focused on how I experience God when this or that happens. Our time ends when I finish talking—sometimes 10 minutes, some times more than an hour. Sometimes he slips me a pamphlet one of the monks has written on contemplative or centering prayer. He seems confident God will finish what he has begun in my life.

The experience of professional psychotherapy is very different and brings to mind a contrasting pallet of images. Office buildings, receptionists, waiting rooms, warmth with distance, forms, testing, large desk, comfortable chairs, a prominent clock, more forms and testing, specific questions, health questions, medical questions, psychosocial history, techniques and conversation that flow seamlessly together, problem oriented, solution focused, polished shoes, a prominent clock, health insurance, super bills, six sessions, avert your eyes when you see each other in checkout lines.

Spiritual direction and psychotherapy are not the same thing in contemporary practice. But perhaps we should not lose sight of the fact that psychotherapy means soul healing and the direction in spiritual direction is toward union with God—and ostensibly, soul healing.

And there are things other than history and definition that muddy the waters of distinction. What if a Christian client is seeing a Christian psychotherapist and both view the goals of healing differently than their non-Christian counterparts? What if, as Evan (1992) proposes, it is legitimate to view the

ultimate goal of therapy as building Christian character. Or, as McMinn and McRay (1997) have stated, "For the Christian psychotherapist, mental health cannot be defined in a neutral or value-free way because the Christian faith implies a definite view of what mental health is" (p. 103). You don't have to wade in very far here before the water becomes both cloudy and deep and the images of psychotherapy and spiritual direction begin to bleed into each other.

Let's turn our attention to a couple of diagrams that may help with this discussion. Each is used to both highlight differences and points of intersection between psychotherapy and spiritual direction.

The Normal Curve

Figure 2 displays two normal curves—actually one is a bit abnormal in that it is upside down. The normal curve labeled "world" is presented to call to mind the typical task of a psychotherapist. By in large, individuals seek a psychotherapist when some aspect of their lives has become abnormal—away from the mean. Depression, anxiety, anger, relationship problems, substance abuse, etc. is typically present at abnormal levels of depth or duration. The task of the psychotherapist is to employ generally accepted practices from applied psychology to help the person journey toward the center of the normal curve. Psychotherapy is about normal making.

Spiritual direction, however, is about abnormal making. For the most part, spiritual directors work with individuals who are already living close

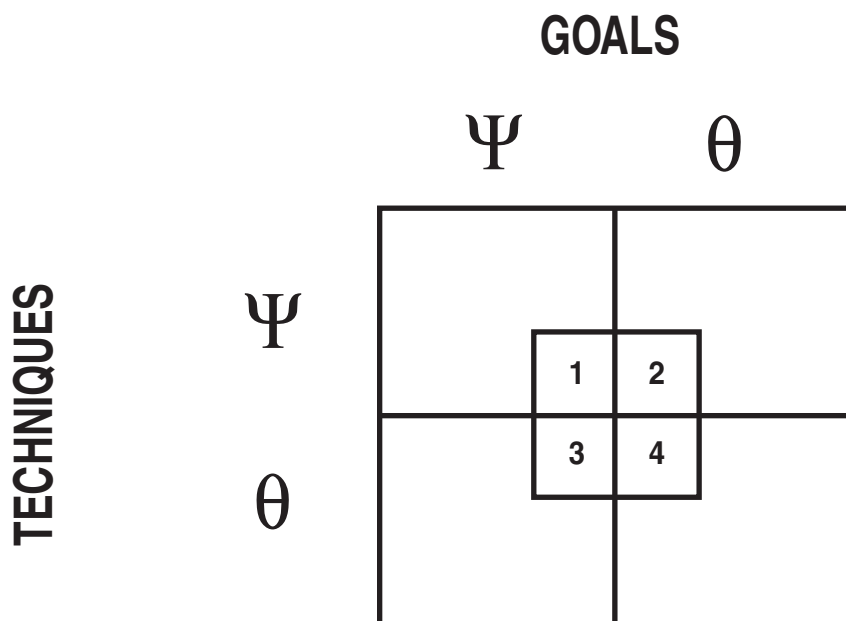


Figure 3

to the middle of the normal curve, but desire to become abnormal—abnormally loving, peaceful, joyful, abnormally aware of God, and his loving presence. In spiritual direction, the goal is to accompany directees on a journey toward normal kingdom living—far from the center of the world’s normal curve.

This illustration is used to highlight an important distinction between psychotherapy and spiritual direction, but it also underscores obvious problems in attempting to make such simplistic separations. Those experiencing abnormal levels of depression, anxiety, anger, etc. are not automatically excluded from entering into the process of spiritual direction; and it is becoming increasingly more common place for psychotherapy to emphasize wellness or the “positive side” of the normal curve.

The Matrix

Figure 3 is presented to aid in our discussion of psychotherapy and spiritual direction. Others (Benner, 2002; Sperry, 2001; West, 2000) have given comprehensive analysis to the distinctions between psychotherapy and spiritual direction along a variety of dimensions—such as clientele, goals, relationship, intervention strategies, use of spiritual practices, etc.

Figure 3 lowers the microscope to examine just two points of comparison, goals, and techniques. As with Figure 2, it is presented to highlight distinctions while simultaneously pointing to the pitfalls of pushing such differences too far.

Cell 1 of figure 2 could be labeled “traditional psychotherapy.” Here techniques drawn from applied psychology are employed to alleviate psychological distress—normal making. Until recently the modern integration movement camped here. While the helping process may have involved Christians trained as psychotherapists and working with clients also holding a Christian worldview, the goal (most typically) was normal making and the techniques (though sometimes based with a sacred glaze) were taken from the field of applied psychology.

Cell 4 could be labeled spiritual direction. Here—within a Christian context—theological goals (i.e., the formation of the life and character of Christ within an individual through developing a growing awareness of and surrender to His indwelling presence) are pursued through the employment of theological “techniques” (e.g., the teachings of Christ, application of spiritual listening, wisdom, and a variety of Christian disciplines).

The distinctions between cells 1 and 4 seem pretty clean. But three problems exist—cell 2, cell 3, and

the fact that the human soul defies being so easily compartmentalized.

In *cell 3* the goal is labeled as psychological—to become less depressed, anxious, or angry, for example. But, what if both the therapist and client are Christians and it has been determined, in the paraphrased words of McMinn and McCray (1997), “the problem goes deeper than diagnosis?” What if it has been determined that the best way for a particular client to become less depressed is for him to come to experiential awareness of the loving presence of God? In this scenario spiritual techniques (such as Christian guidance and disciplines) are employed in the service of a psychological goal.

But what if for a particular individual, it is difficult to effectively employ spiritual techniques because of past psychological trauma? Perhaps the client was the victim of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse by a parent and inadvertently the head of that parent has been transferred to the shoulders of God. The prescription of practicing God’s presence is tantamount to prescribing hell. In this event it may be important to employ psychological techniques (cognitive/imagery restructuring) in the service of a spiritual goal (becoming more comfortable in the presence of God). *Cell 2* depicts this type of intervention.

Simply stated, it appears that the modern integration movement is becoming intrigued with *cell 4* (classic spiritual direction) while beginning to consider the appropriateness of dabbling outside the boundaries of *cell 1* (traditional psychotherapy). This appears to be happening at the same time that unitive views of the person (as a complex interplay of thoughts, emotions, behavior, will, relationships, etc.) are being championed at the expense of previously championed compartmentalized conceptions.

Conclusions: Psychotherapy Versus Spiritual Direction

According to Barry and Connolly (1982), “spiritual direction differs from moral guidance, psychological counseling, and the practice of confessional, preaching, or healing ministries (though having affinities with them) in that it directly assists individuals in developing and cultivating their personal relationship with God (p. ix). But what they do not address is the notion that developing an experiential relationship with God may be the best way to achieve certain goals of professional counseling—

given an appropriate alignment of client/counselor factors.

Sperry (2001) provides a helpful distinction between spiritual direction and non-spiritually-attuned psychotherapy while pointing to the need for an intermediate category he calls “spiritually-attuned psychotherapy and counseling.” He contrasts these disciplines across four variables: clientele, goals, relationship with the therapist or director, and intervention methods.

Whereas, according to Sperry, traditional psychotherapists are likely to employ “various psychotherapeutic interventions” (intervention) in their work with “disordered clients or patients with symptoms” (clientele) toward the end of “reducing symptoms and/or impairment, personality change and/or fulfillment” (goals); spiritual directors are more likely to use “listening, instruction in prayer, and other spiritual practices” (intervention) as they work with “relatively healthy spiritual seekers” (clientele) in achieving “spiritual growth” (goals). In Sperry’s model, spiritually-attuned psychotherapists are afforded much freedom and flexibility in the employment of therapeutic goals and techniques.

Arguably, Benner (2002) provides the tightest summary in distinguishing psychotherapy and spiritual direction. The most important distinction is this: “counseling is problem centered, spiritual direction is Spirit centered. The goal [in spiritual direction] is growth in one’s relationship to God—not resolution of problems” (p. 88). But Benner also adds a category he calls “spiritually sensitive psychotherapy” as a way of describing the possibilities of integrating spiritual sensitivity and resources into the process of appropriate professional practice as a psychotherapist—dabbling outside the box while staying within the bounds of professional practice.

The modern integration movement is pursuing avenues of explicit integration to the cry of both voices of excitement and caution. Tan (in press) does a commendable job of echoing both voices. Amid his review of the calls for attention to professional ethics, he states,

Christian counseling or psychotherapy often aims at the ultimate goal of facilitating the spiritual growth of clients, and not just the alleviation of symptoms and resolution of problems. Integrating spiritual direction, including the use of spiritual practices and other religious resources, into psychotherapy is therefore often seen as an integral part of such religiously oriented Christian counseling. (Tan, in press)

CRITICAL ISSUES

Dialogue Versus Hostile Takeovers

The present level of dialogue in the Christian community among those passionate about both psychotherapy and spiritual direction is exciting. Each discipline brings ideas, images, and methodology that could inform and strengthen the other. Hopefully the dialogue will continue and grow in both width and depth and crescendo into mutual enrichment. There is much each can add to the understanding of the dynamics of the soul, the process of transformation, resistance to transformation, and the mental health consequences of increased spiritual vitality. But caution should be exercised to avoid importing rich resources across disciplinary boundaries that are only nominally understood, and perhaps incorrectly used. Lunch was a good idea until McDonald's got involved. Hopefully, the modern and professionalized practice of psychotherapy will not come to have the same overly processed effect on spiritual direction.

Need for More Training Opportunities

The above caution is not intended to imply that Christian psychotherapists should stay out of the arena of spiritual direction. I believe Christian psychotherapists should practice medicine, if they are first willing to go through medical school. For the dialogue between psychotherapy and spiritual direction to deepen and center on issues of bilingual praxis will require dramatically increased training opportunities. It is noteworthy, however, that while Christian psychotherapists frequently engage in spiritual practices with their clients (Moon, Willis, Bailey, & Kwasny, 1993), training in the use of spiritual practices are conspicuously absent from graduate training programs (Moon, Bailey, Kwasny, & Willis, 1991). Graduate programs will need to offer more formalized training opportunities in the integration of spiritual formation into professional practice. As Benner (2002) observes, "Both spiritually oriented psychotherapists and spiritual directors should, therefore, be literate in both the psychological and spiritual domains of inner life." This will add years—not just courses—to current training models.

Ethical Guidelines

As Tan (in press) observes, since Christian counseling or psychotherapy often aim at the ultimate

goal of facilitating spiritual growth—not just the alleviation of symptoms or problem resolution—including the use of spiritual direction and other religious resources into psychotherapy is often seen as an integral part of such religiously oriented Christian counseling. However, he goes on to survey the literature and summarize lists of ethical guidelines for the application of spiritual practices in psychotherapy. Broad themes—that echo those of Richards and Bergin (1997)—include avoiding: dual relationships, displacing religious authority, imposing religious values on clients, violating work-setting boundaries, and practicing outside the boundaries of competence. Eck (in press) has lowered the microscope to explore ethical considerations for the specific use of spiritual disciplines in clinical practice. Among other recommendations, he suggests that therapists should: employ the disciplines in a way that is consistent with and respectful for their religious intention, be sensitive to issues of spiritual discernment, and work toward better integration of spiritual disciplines into existing treatment models. Growing commitment to guidelines for ethical practice is crucial if Christian psychotherapists are to practice with integrity and professionalism.

Empirical Demonstration of Efficacy

As McMinn and McRay (1997) observe, "There are at least two ways that spiritual formation can contribute to the practice of integration: by providing a means of growth and maturity for the Christian therapist outside the consulting office, and through the prudent application of spiritual disciplines in providing clinical service to Christian clients" (p. 104; see also Tan, 1996). The authors appropriately call for the science of psychology to do one of the things it does best—begin to empirically validate the efficacy of both the "internal" and "external" use of spiritual formation practices in clinical service.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to introduce the first of two special issues of this journal on spiritual direction and mental health. Attention was given to exploring the meaning and scope of spiritual direction, the process of Christian spiritual transformation—as well as reasons for resistance, the diversity of roles assumed by spiritual guides, contrasts between spiritual direction and psychotherapy, and critical issues concerning this venue of integration. The

intention is to serve as a catalyst for future dialogue across disciplines and denominations and to increase desire to explore the articles on spiritual direction that follow in these two special issues of this journal.

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