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Becoming an Interfaith Spiritual Director

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Mt. Adams; original art, Liz Gill Neilson

I left rabbinical school in December 1977 disillusioned with orthodox religion and skeptical about most things spiritual, including the reality and value of my own spiritual life. It was not an easy decision to give up the vocation I had been called to when I was only twelve years old. Nor was it easy to walk away from a religious tradi-

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tion that had nurtured me since birth. But at age 22 I could no longer bear the ethnocentrism and sexism I found in orthodox Judaism, and could not accept the divine authorship of the Bible.

I wanted to be a kind of interfaith rabbi, drawing on all the great spiritual traditions and working with anyone desiring to cultivate a spiritual life.

For years after leaving rabbinical school, I wanted to have nothing to do with anything religious. Then, in my late twenties, my mystical soul began to revive and once again I started to sense the presence of spirit in everyone and everything. Over the next two decades, I began exploring various spiritual traditions – nature mysticism, Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, mystical Christianity – as well as the creative arts. Indeed, through writing and other creative endeavors I felt a spirit powerfully fresh and alive in me. I even discovered the small but growing Jewish Renewal movement and through it reconnected with the Jewish mystical tradition I had first encountered as a teenager. Jewish Renewal offered a progressive, nondogmatic and creative way to reconnect with Jewish spirituality.

Throughout those twenty years of spiritual exploration, there was always a part of my soul that continued to yearn to do what rabbis do – teach, counsel and write – but without the dedication

to a particular religious tradition or community. In effect I wanted to be a kind of interfaith rabbi, drawing on all the great spiritual traditions and working with anyone desiring to cultivate a spiritual life.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS' INSTITUTE

In early 1998 a close friend from the Jewish Renewal community told me about the Spiritual Directors' Institute (SDI). Michael Lisman is a big-hearted guy with a deep spiritual life and openness to other religious traditions. He said SDI was run by the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame, CA, and was accepting non-Christian trainees. In fact, he mentioned two rabbis – Rabbi Burt Jacobsen and Rabbi Zari Weiss – who had recently gone through the program.

Spiritual direction is a process aimed at helping individuals to notice, savor and respond to the presence of divinity/spirit/essence in their lives.

Wow, I thought, rabbis studying spiritual direction from Catholic nuns – I've got to check that out! I knew both rabbis from the Jewish Renewal community but had not realized they were studying spiritual direction with the Sisters of Mercy! When I spoke with them, they both said SDI was a fine and worthwhile program.

That summer I applied and was accepted to the 3-year training program that began in September. At the time, I was teaching at St. Mary's College of California and was able set up my work schedule so that I could attend the monthly sessions. There were about forty students in our cohort, four from the Jewish Renewal community. I remember being excited to be in a room full of people dedicated to deepening their own

connection to the divine and to helping others deepen their connection in their own unique ways.

THE NATURE AND HISTORY OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Spiritual direction is a process aimed at helping individuals to notice, savor and respond to the presence of divinity/spirit/essence in their lives. This companioning process generally serves



Companions; photo, Cetta Kenny

to deepen individuals' connection to divinity/spirit/essence and so transforms how they experience and live their lives. Most spiritual direction sessions involve the sharing of sacred stories.

Spiritual direction has been a practice in the Catholic Church for centuries, and traditionally the director was a priest or monk. About fifty years ago, a few organizations began training lay Catholics in the art of spiritual direction. The Spiritual Directors Institute was one of these organizations. Three decades ago, other Christian denominations began teaching spiritual direction to their lay people. In the last decade, spiritual direction training centers have sprouted in the Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim communities, often founded by individuals who were trained as spiritual directors at various Christian centers. There are also several interfaith spiritual direction programs.

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It is important to emphasize that most religious traditions have some form of training in spiritual guidance or pastoral counseling for their spiritual leaders, but the spiritual direction movement I am connected with grew out of the Catholic tradition, and its particular approach to spiritual guidance has been adapted by practitioners of various religions. In many cases, these practitioners

have modified and integrated Christian approaches with their own traditional approaches.

Spiritual direction is often distinguished from both psychotherapy and pastoral counseling. Unlike psychotherapy, spiritual direction does not aim to solve psychological problems, nor does it focus on the client-counselor relationship. Unlike pastoral counseling, spiritual direction does not concentrate on working through psychological problems that hinder faith development. Moreover, spiritual directors are trained to honor their directees' spiritual orientations and to not promote or impose their own.

THE DIFFICULTY OF NAMING THIS MINISTRY

The first year of the SDI program focused on the nature and practice of spiritual direction, including explorations of religious experience, adult development, spiritual discernment, healing, growth, social compassion, supervision and psychological perspectives on the spiritual journey. One of the first things we learned was that the spiritual director is more a companion and a supporter than a director. Indeed, my teachers were fond of saying that God (or Spirit or the Holy) is the true spiritual director, and our main task is to help directees stay focused on their experiences of divinity.

I have never liked the title "spiritual director" since it suggests that we are somehow directing the process.



original art, Liz Gill Neilson

Unfortunately, none of the other substitute terms – such as “spiritual guide” and “spiritual companion” – work well either. Because many people are familiar and comfortable with the term “counselor”, I now call myself a “spiritual counselor” and call my directees “clients”.

ECUMENICAL TEACHERS

Each year of the SDI program we had two or three regular teachers plus a series of guest presenters. All of the teachers and presenters were Catholic. Roughly half the teachers were Sisters of Mercy, and the other teachers were priests, nuns and lay people. Most had

an ecumenical outlook. My main teachers were Mary Ann Scofield, Lorita Moffatt, Janice Farrell, Jim Neafsey and Mary Ann Clifford. I greatly appreciated their devotion, wisdom and openness but would have also liked to have had guest presenters from other traditions. Nearly all of the books we read were also written by Catholic authors, mostly priests and nuns. The rabbis had told me that SDI basically used a Catholic model of spiritual direction, but they also said that the program was evolving in a more ecumenical direction. One thing that struck me, and that I greatly appreciated, was that most of the teachers made an attempt to use more inclusive “God

language”. For example, the majority of teachers used the word “God” instead of “Jesus Christ” to refer to the divinity, and some even used the phrases “the Holy” or “the Divine” or “Spirit” or “the More”. We often sang a song that included the phrase “tending the Holy”.

FACING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

One of the program requirements was to see a spiritual director throughout the three-year training. SDI provided a list of directors living in the Bay Area but also said we could choose someone not on the list as long as we

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received approval. Though I considered choosing a rabbi as my spiritual director, I decided I wanted to explore and deepen my spiritual identity as a human being, not as a Jew. I also knew that if I wanted to expand my spiritual identity and life, I would have to confront my prejudices against Christianity. Born a decade after the Holocaust, raised in a strong Jewish community, schooled in the history of Jewish persecution, and having personally experienced a few episodes of anti-Semitism, I still carried some fears, scars, resentments and stereotypes from my childhood about “anti-Semitic Christians”. In my teens, I started to face and work on overcom-

ing these concerns, but I discovered that it would not be easy. After leaving rabbinical school, I began more actively developing friendships and romantic relationships with Christians. Shortly after moving to California in my early thirties to attend graduate school in English literature, I started exploring many different spiritual traditions, but I noticed I still had some resistance to exploring Christianity because of the whole history of anti-Semitism. In graduate school I became interested in the Christian heritages of many English and American writers from the Romantic and Modern periods. In addition to taking a course on the Christian Bible, I engaged in informal study of the Gospels with some Pentecostal friends (a married couple). In the middle of one of our study sessions, my friends suddenly declared that they wanted to convert me. When I expressed no interest, they soon abandoned me as a friend. That experience brought up childhood fears that “all true Christians want to convert the Jews”. At age 41 I began teaching at St. Mary’s College, which is run by the Lasallian Brothers, and noticed that my interest in Catholicism was more intellectual than spiritual.

So as I began my adventure in spiritual direction, I was aware I still had some real obstacles to overcome in connecting with Christian spirituality. I also knew that given Christianity’s roots in Judaism, I owed it to myself to explore this sister Abrahamic religion, which shared so many values and which had also gained new spiritual insights and developed new spiritual practices.

CHOOSING A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR FROM ANOTHER FAITH

The spiritual director I chose was recommended by my dear friend Michael Lisman. Michael described Dr. Patrick Horay as a healer, a former monk and an open-minded person. He also called Patrick “a mensch” – a decent, kind and caring human being. That combination sounded perfect to me! I wanted to have an open-ended exploration of spirituality that was grounded in a commitment to basic human goodness.

I was committed to deepening my interfaith outlook and wanted to be more at peace with Christianity.

Patrick’s office was in his home, which felt as peaceful as a retreat center. We sat on adjacent couches, and he always offered me water or a soft drink, which made me feel very much at home. The room was filled with plants, and through the back window I could see a lovely patio and garden that looked ideal for meditation. In our first session together, Patrick briefly shared his spiritual journey with me in an open, honest and humble way. I learned that he had been a devout Catholic monk for many years but eventually decided to leave the monastery when he finally came to terms with his gay identity. He acknowledged that he knew other monks and priests who were also homo-

sexual, but he felt that his awakening identity was not compatible with a traditional monastic life. It had been a difficult and important decision for him to leave the vocation he loved. He was still very much a Catholic but not a dogmatic follower. He now lived with a wonderful man whom he considered his lifelong partner.

After hearing about Patrick’s journey, I shared my own spiritual path and decision to leave rabbinical school. Though I had given up Judaism for several years, I had returned to it in the early 1990s through the Jewish Renewal movement. By the end of my first session with Patrick, I felt that our common call to ministry, our leaving behind of that traditional spiritual office, and our new call to a more open type of ministry were indeed a wonderful common ground. I was excited to have the chance to explore and grow my spiritual life with a man who was committed to living an authentic spiritual life that embraced tradition and change. I also desired to change my relationship to Christianity, and Patrick seemed like a great person to help me do this. I sensed that sharing my inner life with a kind and nonjudgmental Christian would help to heal some of my soul wounds. I was committed to deepening my interfaith outlook and wanted to be more at peace with Christianity.

GIFTS RECEIVED

In working with Patrick, I received three wonderful gifts. The first gift was the practice of bringing my everyday decisions to prayer. After leaving rab-

binical school, I had stopped praying. Indeed, I had rejected both traditional Judaism and belief in the existence of God. Even when my natural spirituality returned in my late twenties, I found it hard to pray because I still did not affirm a personal deity, only an impersonal divinity that created, enlivened and sustained the universe. In my mid-30s, my Pentecostal friends had, through their daily practice of prayer, influenced me to start praying again.



Blue Wings; original art, Setsuko Yoshida

But I still prayed irregularly and somewhat tentatively. When I would tell Patrick that I was uncertain about something in my personal or professional life, he would usually say, “Have you considered taking that question to prayer?” or “Why don’t you take that question to prayer” or “Why don’t you pray on it?” “Pray on” was an expression I never

heard in the Jewish community, but which I often heard from my SDI teachers. The first few times Patrick asked me to “pray on it”, I was astonished because I thought of prayer more in terms of formal prayer. Most Jewish prayers are writ-

The second gift that Patrick gave me was a deeper connection to my Jewish heritage and to the Jewish dimensions of my own soul.

ten in the plural form “we”. Of course, I saw myself included in the “we”, but I was not used to spontaneously and informally asking God for help in making personal decisions. As a child I often spoke to God, but by my teens my conversations with God had become relegated mainly to times and types of formal prayer. As a result of Patrick’s gentle but continued suggestion that I bring all aspects of my life to prayer, I simultaneously deepened my prayer life and my connection to divinity.

The second gift that Patrick gave me was a deeper connection to my Jewish heritage and to the Jewish dimensions of my own soul. When I left rabbinical school, I dropped my connection to Jewish tradition and in effect dropped my Jewish identity. I wanted to be a secular human being, not a traditional Jew. Though I still felt some connection to Jewish culture, I was more interested in exploring the world and other cultures and peoples. And though I had reconnected with Judaism in my early 30s, I still felt ambivalent about my

Jewish identity. Oddly, it was Patrick, who helped me overcome a good deal of that ambivalence. He was intrigued by my early identification with Moses. My

I also began to reflect on Moses's own interfaith upbringing:

Hebrew name is Shmuel Moshe (Samuel Moses). When I was a kid in Hebrew school, my classmates teasingly called me "Shmu" and "Shmo", so after a year or two, I dropped the name Shmuel and went with Moshe. I can remember

feeling a strong connection with Moses not only because I carried his name but because he had such a close relationship with God. As a kid I used to talk to God a lot, especially when I was alone in my room or in the woods behind our house.

Patrick encouraged me to explore my childhood connection to Moses and examine how it was still operating, or might be able to operate, in my adult life. In doing so I realized that I still profoundly admired Moses's spiritual intensity, humility, courage, wisdom, strength and perseverance even though he was



Michelangelo's Moses: public domain

more “tribal” and less “universal” than I wanted to be. I also began to reflect on Moses’s own interfaith upbringing: he had been raised in Pharaoh’s court and had doubtlessly been exposed not only to Egyptian religion but also to other great religions of the time. These religions would have influenced him in some vital way. It also occurred to me that if he had been living today, his spiritual outlook would probably

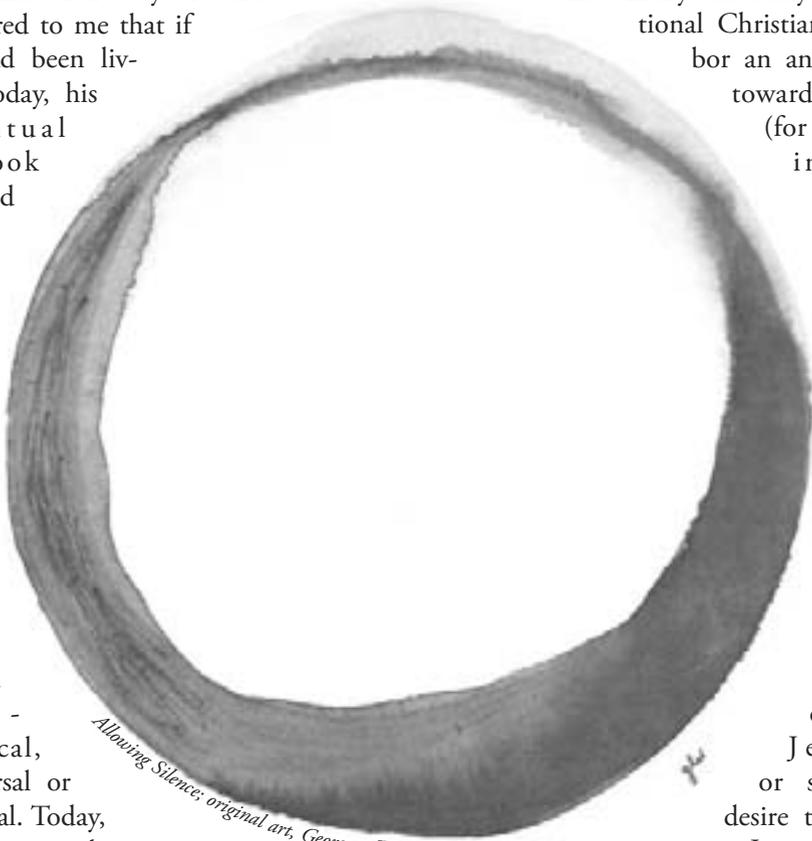
have been ecumenical, universal or integral. Today, so many people are moving toward a more inclusive spiritual outlook – so how could Moses, one of the greatest spiritual masters of all time, not be at the forefront of the interfaith and integral movements? This was a profound realization that was incredibly inspiring. It

helped to move me forward in my own interfaith journey.

The third gift I received from Patrick was a softening and warming of my relationship to Christianity. Though I had several Christian friends, most of them were lapsed or highly progressive Christians. I had developed a sense

that many devoutly traditional Christians harbor an antipathy toward Jews (for being instrumental in the

death of Jesus) or secretly desire to convert Jews (since the conversion of the Jews would hasten the Second Coming). Indeed, my experience with my Pentecostal friends had confirmed this sense. But Patrick was a very different kind of Christian: though deeply spiritual and religious, he was neither



Allowing Silence; original art, Georgene Wilson

dogmatic nor missionizing. I knew that Patrick experienced God's presence most powerfully through his relationship with Jesus, but I sensed in him no desire to convert me. Rather, he desired that I cultivate my own most authentic and profound relationship with God. To me Patrick embodied the best of ecumenical Christianity and interfaith spiritual direction. Before meeting him, I knew other Christians who were also devout yet not dogmatic, but I had never before opened my heart so wide and connected so deeply to them. Through Patrick I was able to trust in a more visceral way that a deep Christian spiritual life was compatible with full respect for and affirmation of non-Christian spiritual paths.

IMMERSION IN THE WORLD'S SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

A few months into the SDI program, I was invited by Dr. Mathew Fox to join the faculty of his University of Creation Spirituality (UCS), a pioneering school that honored the creation-centered wisdom, spirituality and creativity within the world's mystical traditions and within modern cosmology and the arts. I was invited to teach courses in sacred literature, Jewish mysticism, creative writing and reinventing work. My fellow faculty members at UCS were Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sufis, Wiccans, Taoists and Native Americans (from various tribes). I had a chance to sit in on their classes, to co-teach with them, and to attend meditations,

prayers, rituals and ceremonies that they led. I also developed personal friendships with several colleagues.

Teaching at UCS intensified my exploration of other spiritual traditions. My study of other traditions and immersion in their rituals and practices has been a crucial part of my education as a spiritual counselor. I believe that a love and knowledge of other spiritual traditions is essential for becoming an interfaith counselor.

BUILDING SKILLS

In my second and third years at SDI, greater emphasis was placed on skills building, prayer, contemporary gender and ethical issues, as well as discerning our personal call to be directors. We also learned the basics of group spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius as well as examined more closely how culture and social structures shape spiritual experience and the practice of spiritual direction. Most significantly, we honed our intuition, interpersonal skills and psycho-spiritual knowledge by working in triads in class and by taking on our own directees outside class. In the triads, one person would be the director, the second person would be the directee, and the third would be the observer. We would engage in a spiritual direction session lasting 10 to 20 minutes and then give each other feedback. From session to session, our roles would change. I found the longer sessions to be very helpful, and the shorter ones to be too brief – not enough time to delve deeply into an issue.

Outside of class, we were required to have at least three directees and meet with them individually once a month for an hour. Several students from Naropa University volunteered to be my directees. I was a little concerned about “wearing two hats” – one as university teacher and one as spiritual director – but I discovered that other teachers and administrators were also serving as spiritual directors at the school.

CHOOSING A SUPERVISOR FROM ANOTHER FAITH

As a director-in-training, I was required to have a supervisor. I chose Jim Neafsey, a deeply spiritual and knowledgeable man who was experienced in working with men’s groups and who also valued the creative arts as potent expressions of the spiritual life. He also led retreats on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius. Once again, I sensed there would be great value in working with a Christian supervisor.

What was to be done was mostly to listen deeply.

Jim and I used the form as a springboard for discussing the session, how it affected me, and what I had learned or could learn from it. As a director-in-training, I was initially self-conscious about whether I was “doing it right” – correctly applying the basic skills, knowledge and procedures. As Jim reviewed the sessions with me, he offered many helpful suggestions but also affirmed

that my intuition was offering me good advice on how to be and act. By the end of my first year as a director-in-training (which was my second year in SDI), I realized I could largely rely on my intuitive sense of what needed to be done or not done. What was to be done was mostly to listen deeply.

CONTEMPLATIVE LEARNING

One of my teachers described contemplative listening as “a long loving look at the Real”. Janice Farrell was quoting Walter Burghardt’s definition of contemplation. Before entering the program, I was an empathic and intuitive listener as well as a long-time meditator, but the program gave me additional skills for helping directees to explore their spiritual lives. These skills included helping directees to focus their awareness on the here and now, to be concrete and specific in reporting their experiences, and to probe the depths of these experiences. I also learned how to gently challenge directees when they seemed to be stuck in a limited or unhealthy perspective. One of the most important skills I learned was allowing silence. Oftentimes, something powerful is present in that silence. If the director does not rush in with a question or a remark, the silence may yield a remarkable insight or disclosure or outpouring of tears. Literally, those silences are often pregnant, as if something vital is pressing to be born: a new way of seeing or being in the world.

Another powerful lesson was learning to draw directees’ awareness to how

they were feeling about and seeing the experiences they were recounting. For example, as Tina was describing her intense and frustrated longing to connect to God, I noticed a certain tense energy in her throat, so I asked her, "What are you feeling in your body right now? See if you can bring your attention to your bodily feelings and sensations?" As Tina brought her attention to her bodily experience of longing and frustration, she began to cry. These tears opened her heart and her eyes to seeing various ways in which God had actually been present in her life. She came to realize that her very rational mind had kept her from noticing and valuing these experiences. She even acknowledged that God had been present in her very yearning for God!

Another important contemplative skill was monitoring my own internal responses to the directee and not letting those responses interfere with my focus on the directee's experiences. I had always thought it was best to give all of my attention to the person I was listening to and to ignore or screen out any mental chatter coming from my own mind, but I discovered there is great value in simultaneously being aware of the other person's experiences and my responses to them. In that way I am less likely to allow my own emotional and cognitive responses to unconsciously color how I hear, understand or react to the person I am listening to. I soon discovered that feelings and judgments arise when a directee's experiences, actions or values conflict with or elicit my own personal values, dreams and desires.

This is the spiritual direction equivalent of what psychotherapists call "counter-transference".

One of my personal challenges was responding to traditional views of divinity that struck me as narrow or dogmatic. Since I had struggled as a teenager with such rigid views, I sometimes felt annoyance, concern or judgment when listening to directees describe their dogmatic beliefs. I learned to silently note my inner responses, but not to express them or let them interfere. If, however, I sensed that a directee's traditional beliefs were causing her undue or unnecessary suffering, then I might gently probe and challenge those beliefs.

GROWING AN INTERFAITH MINISTRY

Nearly all of the directees I have worked with since 1999 have been ecumenical or eclectic Christians, Buddhists and Sufis. Most have been women, probably because women are generally more open to talking about

I feel as though we interfaith spiritual counselors are helping to create the spiritual paths of the future: spiritual paths that honor difference and diversity

their spiritual lives. Some clients have gone on to become interfaith ministers and chaplains. The year after I completed SDI, I was asked to serve as director

of the Chaplaincy Institute's Interfaith Spiritual Direction Program. In 2005 I trained as an interfaith chaplain at Kaiser Hospital and then volunteered the following year, doing bedside visits and leading a bereavement group. This spring I taught a course (the first of its kind) on interfaith spiritual counseling at John F. Kennedy University, where I direct the undergraduate psychology program. Our practice sessions and class conversations were so intimate that I often forgot where I was and what time it was!

Over the years, it has been truly exciting to work one-on-one in a deep

and loving way with individuals from diverse spiritual traditions. I feel as though we interfaith spiritual counselors are helping to create the spiritual paths of the future: spiritual paths that honor difference and diversity and have a more expansive and inclusive sense of unity. Nearly all of the individuals on these paths refuse to shun, degrade or hate others who do not share their spiritual beliefs and practices. Our vital encounters in spiritual direction prove to me that all human beings are capable of developing deep spiritual connections that can overcome our religious, ethnic, racial and gender conflicts.

