



Meeting the Challenges of Interfaith Spiritual Direction

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It is an awesome privilege to companion another person on his or her spiritual journey. And it is a special joy and blessing to accompany individuals with diverse religious backgrounds and spiritual orientations. I have been practicing the sacred art of interfaith spiritual guidance ever since I received my training as a spiritual director at the Spiritual Directors Institute (1998–2001, now called Spiritual Direction Institute at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, USA). During the past decade, I have discovered that working with spiritual directees with a wide range of backgrounds and orientations presents some special challenges. These challenges include (1) learning, in as comprehensive a way as possible, about the world's spiritual traditions; (2) entering as fully as possible into the diverse spiritual worlds of spiritual directees; (3) refraining from imposing my own spiritual views, values, and practices on spiritual directees; (4) finding spiritual language that works for each spiritual directee and also feels comfortable for me; and (5) discerning when it is appropriate to share a spiritual teaching or practice from my own spiritual path. In this essay, I will offer various perspectives on meeting these five challenges.

Individuals throughout history have occasionally sought spiritual guidance from others outside of their own religious tradition, but the formal practice of interfaith spiritual direction is still in its infancy. This contemporary practice has its roots in American religious pluralism and in the postmodern appeal of an integrative spiritual life. During the past two decades, spiritual direction has gained greater popularity in a variety of religious communities, and new training centers have been established to meet this growing need for guidance and companionship. Interfaith seminaries have also responded to this need by offering training in spiritual direction to both ministers and laypeople. In 2001, the Chaplaincy Institute for the Arts and Interfaith Ministries in Berkeley, California, initiated one of the first interfaith spiritual direction programs. The following year, I had the privilege of directing that pioneering program. Today, interfaith spiritual direction is a small

but growing trend in the United States. It has yet to take hold in more homogeneous countries like Australia and Ireland, but as these and other countries become more religiously pluralistic—and as integrative approaches to spirituality gain even wider currency—we can expect to see more interfaith guidance around the world.

Learning the World's Spiritual Traditions

One of the greatest challenges—and delights—of being an interfaith spiritual director is developing a broad understanding and deep experience of the world's major religions. In a way, being an interfaith spiritual director is an impossible calling. It is hard enough to learn the depth and breadth of one's own spiritual tradition or traditions, let alone learn the depth and breadth of other traditions. Interfaith training centers are continually faced with the challenge of how to offer sufficient knowledge and experience in two or more traditions. Given the time constraints, there is an inevitable reduction of coverage in any one tradition. However, learning several traditions yields its own special richness and scope of understanding.

Although there are many exceptions, I generally affirm the rule that the more spiritual directors can understand their spiritual directees, the more they can help them. At a minimum, I think it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the core beliefs, values, prayers, rituals, and spiritual practices of the spiritual directee's religious tradition(s) as well as an historical overview of that tradition(s). Being an interfaith spiritual director involves a lifelong commitment to studying the world's major spiritual traditions as well as maintaining ongoing connections with various spiritual communities.

I have been studying and practicing Judaism all my life, and I have been studying world religions for almost two decades. For the past fifteen years, I have been practicing Buddhist meditation and mindfulness. I also participate in *zikr* with my Sufi friends, in Mass with my Christian friends, and in *kirtan* with my Hindu friends. Nearly all of my spiritual directees come from one or more of these backgrounds. I am open to working with individuals from other backgrounds—for example, Jains and Zoroastrians—but I know very little about their spiritual



traditions and so might not be as helpful as I'd like to be and as they deserve. When I am approached for spiritual direction by individuals from backgrounds I know little about, I disclose my lack of knowledge, and if he or she still wants to work with me, I make an effort to learn as much as I can about that person's religious heritage.

Many interfaith spiritual directors deal with the challenge of understanding spiritual directees' religious heritages by seeing only individuals who have spiritual backgrounds that they are deeply familiar with. For example, one interfaith spiritual director with a Christian background and a strong knowledge of Judaism limits her practice to working with Jewish and Christian spiritual directees. This is often the best approach because it avoids the confusions, misunderstandings, and distortions that could arise when trying to help someone from an utterly unfamiliar background.

Some interfaith spiritual directors do not feel that it is necessary to know much about the spiritual directee's spiritual tradition. Their goal is more centered on the moment-to-moment experience of the spiritual directee during the session: helping the spiritual directee notice, savor, and respond to the presence and movement of divinity in his or her life. Such spiritual directors feel that they can facilitate the process of spiritual discernment without knowing all of the details of the spiritual directee's religious background. They focus on the spiritual directee's present experience and understanding, not on their own desire to understand.

All three approaches are valid as long as they support the spiritual directee's particular spiritual needs and growth. Some spiritual directees will want the spiritual director to have an intimate knowledge of their spiritual tradition; others will expect only a modest familiarity; still others will be fine with a more here-and-now approach that emphasizes being present together to the Mystery. The spiritual director needs to continually remain sensitive to a spiritual directee's particular needs and character as well as to the goodness of fit—the spiritual rapport—between spiritual director and spiritual directee. Two important signs of spiritual rapport are joy and gratitude. When the rapport is good, both spiritual director and spiritual directee often experience joy and gratitude in working together. Indeed, when a session ends, they usually look forward to the next one! Even

when difficult and uncomfortable issues arise during the session, they still feel an underlying joy and gratitude that they were able to encounter these issues together. Both spiritual director and spiritual directee appreciate the spiritual companionship they have developed.

In the end, spiritual rapport may be more important than the spiritual director's approach or technique. When two souls share a genuine intimacy, the spiritual director's approach matters less. Yet it remains true that the approach can serve to either foster or impede rapport as well as help or hinder the spiritual directee's progress. If the approach is not supporting the spiritual directee's growth, then the spiritual director needs to try another approach or compassionately let the spiritual directee know that she or he would be better served by working with another spiritual director.

Entering the Spiritual Directee's Spiritual World

Related to the general challenge of learning about other spiritual traditions is the specific challenge of understanding the spiritual directee's unique inner life and spiritual experiences. It is hard enough to understand how one's own family and community members experience their spiritual lives; it is even more difficult to understand how a person of a different religious background experiences divinity. Certainly, it helps to know something about the mystical and theological views of the spiritual directee's religious tradition(s).

Many of my spiritual directees have spiritual paths that draw on two or more spiritual traditions. When, for example, I have worked with individuals who integrate Catholic and Sufi traditions, I have found it valuable to be familiar with the mystical writings of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart, and Hildegard as well as those of Muhyiddin Ibn Al-Arabi, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Hafiz, and Hazrat Inayat Khan. Yet every person's spiritual experiences are unique, and studying mysticism and theology only partially helps with the process of understanding the particular person in the session with me now. Moreover, many deeply mystical individuals are unfamiliar with the mystical traditions within their own religious heritage.

One obvious but powerful approach to better understanding spiritual directees' particular spiritual experiences is to simply ask them to further clarify or elaborate on



their experiences. While contemplative listening is surely the most important skill of effective spiritual direction, contemplative questioning is probably the second most important. I find that effective questioning is helpful for both the spiritual directee and me. Indeed, appropriate questions help facilitate the spiritual directee's process of spiritual awareness, understanding, and unfolding, as long as the questions don't become overly intellectual. Most of my questions focus on how the spiritual directee experiences a particular issue or event in his or her body. These questions steer spiritual directees toward what philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin calls their "felt sense"—the embodied blend of sensation and feeling. The deepening of the spiritual directee's felt sense of Spirit usually leads to a deepening of intuition and can catalyze further spiritual breakthroughs.

Another approach to the challenge of understanding is simply being okay with not fully understanding a spiritual directee's experiences. "Not knowing" can sometimes be a more profound, authentic, and effective response than understanding. After all, the Sacred is ultimately incomprehensible and ineffable. Spiritual directees will never fully understand all of their own spiritual experiences, so why should the spiritual director expect to understand them fully? As was said, the main purpose of spiritual direction is to help spiritual directees notice, savor, and respond to the presence of the Holy in their lives. Perfect understanding—on the spiritual directee's part or on the spiritual director's part—is not needed for the spiritual directee to respond effectively. Indeed, the Holy is what Rudolf Otto called the "mysterium tremendum." The spiritual directee's "good enough" understanding is usually sufficient. What matters most is that the spiritual directee, not the spiritual director, gains greater spiritual clarity, conviction, and understanding. Conviction, like

faith, can happen without understanding. The spiritual directee can move forward even when he or she does not understand what has transpired. And the spiritual directee can certainly move forward when the spiritual director does not understand what has transpired. Every competent spiritual director understands that the Infinite operates mysteriously. Indeed, I have gained spiritual conviction from witnessing or participating in spiritual directees' spiritual experiences that I did not understand.

I would like to relate one of those mysterious experiences. It was my first session with Luke (a pseudonym). Ordinarily, during a first session, I offer an overview of the spiritual direction process, inquire about what the spiritual directee is seeking from the process, and ask about his or her religious background. Luke was feeling distracted and harried from a busy day and requested that we begin with silent meditation. I gladly agreed and asked him to let me know when he was ready to conclude the meditation and begin our conversation.

Luke went into a deep meditation, as did I. He remained in meditation for about ten minutes.

As our conversation commenced, we were both still in a deeply contemplative state. When I asked him to reflect on the meditation, he closed his eyes again and seemed to reenter the meditation and speak from that place. He said, "Things have changed. The right side of me feels different now. It no longer feels warm and comforting like a burrow. It feels hurt. Yes, hurt, hurt, hurt. The hurt is getting stronger. Hurt, hurt, hurt." His voice got a little louder, and I began to feel a little fear as his emotion started to mount. His terse labeling of his dynamic feeling states seemed to indicate familiarity with the Buddhist practice of insight meditation.

Luke continued, "Delicate. Yes, it must be very delicate to hurt so much. Delicate. The hurt is getting stronger, and now I feel fear. Fear. Fear. It's so vulnerable."

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He began to sigh and moan and make animal-like noises. I felt alarmed that his feelings might be intensifying out of control. I worried I might not be able to handle the situation if he broke down. But I tried to stay centered, using my breath as a guide. Then he was silent for a while and eventually began to sing a melody, almost like a blues melody.

Luke then said, "Sad. I'm very sad, sad." He almost seemed to whine. After a while he said, "There's a lot of pain and suffering. Yes, suffering, suffering."

Throughout this period I was mostly silent. I focused my attention on him while also monitoring my own inner responses to him. He spoke very slowly, a few words at a time, and then sat in silence. Mostly, I sat in silence with him. Occasionally, I echoed back his words—*sadness, hurt, pain*—or asked him to say more about his feelings. This echoing had the effects of deepening his focus on the feelings he was expressing and of encouraging him to speak a little more about them. On several occasions, he mentioned how novel this experience was: connecting with this part of himself, connecting with these profound feelings, voicing these feelings, and making inarticulate sounds to express them. It was also a novel experience for me (even though every spiritual direction session is unique in some way).

After this period, Luke's feelings of sadness, hurt, vulnerability, and suffering began to lessen, and I felt more relaxed and confident. He began to discuss the conflict within him between the monk, which he tied to the right field of his meditation, and the technologist, which he tied to the left field. During this period, my own contemplative state continually deepened, and I felt incredibly expansive and connected to him. He spoke of his desire to integrate

these two sides of himself and especially of his longing to allow more space for Spirit. I asked him brief questions that served to deepen his response. Toward the end of the session, I inquired if he had ever prayed for guidance to integrate the two sides. He said, "Yes, I have." When I asked him if he wanted to pray right now, he said, "Yes."

Luke sat in silence for some while and then began to say his prayer out loud. It was mostly a prayer of gratitude to all the people who had helped him get to this point in his life. After he concluded his prayer, I closed the session.

The hour-long session was profound for both of us. It has remained a mystery for me. In the next session I learned that Luke was raised as a Christian and later adopted a Buddhist practice. But my subsequent knowledge of his religious background helped little in understanding our first session. What was important was not that I understood the experience—nor even that Luke understood it—but that it involved a profound sense of connection with the pain, grief, and vulnerability in his life as well as a deep spiritual realization of and appreciation for all who had supported him on his life's journey. It was also important that we had a spiritual rapport.

Refraining from Imposing One's Beliefs and Values on the Spiritual Directee

A crucial tenet of interfaith spiritual direction is refraining from imposing one's own spiritual (or other) values on the spiritual directee. This tenet goes hand in hand with honoring the spiritual directee's spiritual orientation and experiences. Interfaith spiritual direction becomes fraudulent when the spiritual director has a secret agenda of converting the spiritual directee. Interfaith spiritual



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directors are not undercover missionaries; yet if interfaith spiritual directors are truly honest with themselves, they will admit that they do have some spiritual views and values that they want their spiritual directees to share. The majority of interfaith spiritual directors that I know have an inclusive, affirming view of the world's spiritual traditions, and most of them want others to share in this inclusive and pluralistic perspective. Generally, they see the different spiritual traditions as unique yet ultimately united. They affirm the significant differences among spiritual traditions but tend to emphasize the profound commonalities. Indeed, it was their love of both religious commonalities and differences that motivated them to become interfaith spiritual directors. Moreover, most of the spiritual directors I know, including those in single-faith spiritual direction, operate under the assumption—backed by personal experience—that divinity is present everywhere and that it is their task to help spiritual directees notice, savor, and respond to the divine omnipresence. This was certainly the message I got from my teachers at the Spiritual Direction Institute, which is run by the Catholic Sisters of Mercy.

Perhaps in a "perfect spiritual direction situation" I would be able to completely set aside my beliefs in spiritual pluralism, unity, and omnipresence. But I am unable to do so and really don't want to do so. I handle this "bias" by letting spiritual directees know that my orientation is pluralistic and unitive. The very fact that I am an interfaith spiritual director already suggests to most people that I value different spiritual traditions and recognize deep commonalities among them. Moreover, the ministry and practice of spiritual direction itself—including traditional

spiritual direction—is largely based on the view that divinity is present in every experience, even when we are not conscious of that presence. One of the main purposes of spiritual direction is to help spiritual directees become conscious of that ongoing numinous presence.

I do not impose my experience of spiritual omnipresence on my spiritual directees. I simply question them when they say that the Divinity (or Spirit or Buddha nature or Being or the Sacred) was not present during a particular experience. In effect, I encourage them to consider whether divinity was absent or whether they simply did not notice or consciously attend to its presence. When a spiritual directee responds, "God was not present in my experience," I accept this response. However, during subsequent sessions, when similar "nonspiritual" experiences are recounted, I may raise the question again. I am not trying to force the spiritual directee to experience Spirit everywhere, but I am encouraging the spiritual directee to look again and see if maybe Spirit was present but unnoticed at the time.

Poet T. S. Eliot says in *The Dry Salvages* that "We had the experience but missed the meaning." Likewise, a spiritual director might say, "We had the experience but missed the Holy." Eliot goes on to say that "approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form, beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness." Similarly, a spiritual director might say that when the spiritual directee recounts and explores the presence of the Holy in an experience, a kindred experience may emerge during or after the recounting. When this occurs, the spiritual directee is not reliving a former spiritual experience. Rather, the recollection of a former spiritual



experience is catalyzing a new, yet related, numinous encounter here and now.

Finding a Spiritual Language That Works for the Spiritual Directee and the Spiritual Director

As I have indicated, in my initial sessions with my spiritual directees, I ask them to give a brief history of their religious and spiritual upbringing and development. I note the language they use to speak about the Divine. If they use a variety of terms (e.g., Jesus, God, Lord, Spirit, Essence), then I ask them which ones they feel most comfortable using at this time in their lives. Generally, I simply adopt whatever terms they use.

When I first began practicing spiritual direction, I sometimes felt some inner discomfort or awkwardness when a spiritual directee used religious language that didn't resonate with my own spiritual life. For example, I sometimes felt a little awkward when a spiritual directee was praying to Jesus or Allah. (For a full discussion of my early experiences as a spiritual director, see "Becoming an Interfaith Spiritual Director" in *Interreligious Insight* [Oct. 2009]: 41–54.) But over time, I came to feel comfortable with many religious languages and traditions. Perhaps I have been able to do this because my own spiritual belief and experience is that divinity both encompasses and transcends everything—it is infinitely immanent and transcendent. This inclusive vision allows me to affirm a diversity of spiritual perspectives and experiences. Throughout history, different forces, beings, persons, events, and images have been experienced as manifestations or symbols of divinity. Obviously, different communities and individuals have different ways of experiencing and conceptualizing the Divine. My own approach is to honor but not become attached to any one name or representation of divinity, because the infinite One is ultimately beyond human expression and comprehension. Because I experience the ineffable Unity as multifaceted, I don't have to share the theological beliefs of my spiritual directees to support their spiritual development.

Discerning When to Share a Spiritual Teaching or Practice

Some spiritual directors offer spiritual teachings and suggest spiritual practices to their spiritual directees.

Sometimes they do so in response to their spiritual directees' requests; other times, they initiate the teaching or suggestion. The spiritual directee's character should be considered when offering teachings. Spiritual directees who are more intellectually oriented may value hearing about spiritual principles, scriptural interpretations, or spiritual books that bear on their own experiences. Spiritual directees who have strong feelings and active imaginations may value hearing sacred stories drawn from their own tradition or from others. Of course, it is also important to not overly classify our spiritual directees: most spiritual directees can benefit from a variety of teaching approaches. It is crucial, however, if the spiritual director chooses a teaching from a tradition other than the spiritual directee's, that it be one that illuminates the spiritual directee's path and is not aimed at steering or converting the spiritual directee to another path. The approach should always serve the spiritual directee's spiritual needs, character, and growth.

Suggesting appropriate spiritual practices is an even more challenging situation. Even suggesting practices from within the spiritual directee's own tradition is not always so easy. Why? Because when the spiritual director begins to suggest practices, she or he is acting more in the role of clergy or pastoral counselor. The approach to spiritual direction that I learned at the Spiritual Direction Institute was decidedly nondirective. My own style of spiritual direction, influenced by my training and my own contemplative disposition, emphasizes contemplative listening and questioning—not offering teachings and practices. For example, when spiritual directees tell stories about their sacred experiences, I often invite them to focus on how they experience the divine Presence in their bodies and then to relate the inner sensations, feelings, images, and intuitions that emerge. Although I do suggest that a spiritual directee pray or meditate about something he or she is struggling with, I rarely recommend a particular spiritual practice. Usually, I only make recommendations if requested by the spiritual directee.

Because I believe that the spiritual directee's soul knows what is best for her or his spiritual growth, I like to present several options and let the spiritual directee choose. For example, I have many spiritual directees who consider the creative arts to be an important part of their spiritual lives. When they ask me to suggest a spiritual practice to



free up their sacred creativity, I often suggest several practices, such as meditating on the breath, sitting in silence, taking a walk in nature, lighting a candle, chanting a sacred word or phrase, and singing an inspirational song. I encourage spiritual directees to try out one or more of these practices and discover which works best for them. I also emphasize that no one practice is effective for everyone. If spiritual directees ask for a spiritual practice from a tradition I am not familiar with, I simply suggest that they seek out a respected minister, teacher, or spiritual guide in that tradition. I may also research the tradition myself.

Despite my own nondirective bent, I believe that it can be appropriate and effective for spiritual directors to suggest spiritual practices to their spiritual directees. The main consideration is that the suggestion fits with the spiritual directee's particular path and needs. Some spiritual directees will only want to learn practices that come from their own traditions. Other spiritual directees will welcome practices from other traditions as long as these practices do not take them away from their particular path. I have worked with several Christians who did not want to do breath or heart meditations because they were taught that all forms of meditation are a focus on and preoccupation with self. To them, meditation had egocentric, even blasphemous, connotations. They believed that their focus should be wholly on God or Jesus, not on self. When I suggested that these meditations were based on the premise that God or Spirit can be present within self or breath or heart, they remained unconvinced. I honored their beliefs and resistances but also informed them of the contemplative tradition within Christianity. Most were surprised to hear that there was one. I also described *lectio divina* (an ancient contemplative approach to reading scriptural verses) and centering prayer (a contemplative prayer practice developed by Father Thomas Keating, OCSO among others).

Loving One's Spiritual Directees

One of my spiritual direction mentors often quoted Walter Burghardt's definition of *contemplation* as "a long loving look at the Real." I believe that the essential ingredient in good spiritual direction, whether interfaith or single faith, is loving one's spiritual directees and expressing that love through caring attention, presence,

questioning, challenging, and support. When the spiritual director comes from an inner place of abiding love and respect, the optimal conditions for spiritual awareness and growth are created. The great Jewish sage Rabbi Akiva ben Yoseph insisted that "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the most important commandment in the Bible—even more important than "Love God." Why? Because genuine love of one's neighbors is the best indication that one's love of God is both real and expansive. Any of us can claim to love God—but how real and expansive is our love if we don't love God's holy creations?

Spiritual directors have been called spiritual guides, companions, friends, and midwives. We are also spiritual lovers. As we lovingly companion our spiritual directees, we express our love of Creator and creation. ■

Something Beautiful

There is a place
 where rain,
 it falls upon the earth at night;
 the ground,
 its tireless ways,
 collects it into thirsty pebbles;
 and time becomes lost in any eyes that will hold it.
 The slightest word dissolves it.
 Some say there is nothing out here worth believing in,
 nothing to hold onto.
 I say maybe.
 Maybe the entire rhythm of the universe
 is locked away inside each droplet,
 and if I stand here long enough, noticing,
 at least one tiny particle will break open
 wide enough for me to catch it,
 all wet and shining from the morning,
 full, and glittering with promise. ■

Sarah Rehfeldt