

# Spiritual Direction as Choosing Life

Excerpts from An Interview with  
Jeffrey S. Gaines, MDiv  
Former SDI Executive Director

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## *What is Spiritual Direction*

**HHN:** The first question people usually raise about spiritual direction is, "What is it?"

**JSG:** Spiritual direction can mean different things to different people, but in my understanding it is *the art of Christian listening carried out in the context of a one-to-one trusting relationship*. It is when one Christian is trained to be a competent guide who then "companions" another person, listening to that person's life story with an ear for the movement of the Holy, of the Divine.

**HHN:** For many people spiritual direction is a new concept, and some people are uncomfortable with the word "director" because of what it might imply. Is it a problem for you?

**JSG:** I would say that "director" really is a misnomer, because God is the Director and I am simply one who companions. There is a tradition of using the word "director", and I don't see that being changed, but truly God is the Director, and the spiritual director simply assists the seeker in uncovering and discovering the *direction of God* in that person's life. This enables the directee to see, claim, receive, own, and reverence God's voice, God's nudging, and God's acting, in such a way that it elicits a natural and genuine response.

Spiritual direction -- or mentoring, or companioning, or spiritual friendship -- has been part of the Christian tradition for centuries. It's part of the discipling model. People sought out Jesus because they saw that he was wiser, and they respected his walk with God. John Knox sought out Calvin in Geneva and walked with him. In monastic communities a novice might have the abbot as his/her spiritual director. These kinds of prayer relationships have existed down through the ages.

### ***Distinctions Between Direction and Therapy***

**HHN: Can you say something about the relationship between spiritual direction and pastoral counseling or psychotherapy? Are they the same thing?**

**JSG:** If you were to be looking through two one-way mirrors and on your left was a spiritual direction session and on your right was a pastoral counseling or psychiatric session, they may look quite similar, but actually there are important differences.

In the spiritual direction session there would be a candle or some other non-verbal symbol representing the Holy. It may be an open Bible, a plant, a cross, or maybe some water -- something that is understood to represent the Holy.

Spiritual direction, unlike pastoral counseling, always happens in the context of prayer and spiritual intimacy. This is where intimate engagement happens. Whereas in psychotherapy the clinical distance is crucial to bring about objectivity and healing, in spiritual direction discernment is based upon the *intimate engagement* of two people walking into the sanctuary of God.

Another difference is that people usually enter pastoral counseling, because something is *wrong* in their life, whether it is an area of shame, or guilt, or abuse, or addiction, or poor self-image. They're coming because something is wrong and they want it to be made right.

**HHN: So they're in some sort of crisis . . .**

**JSG:** Yes. I really believe a crisis is what initially gets a person into therapy. It may not, however, be what keeps the person in the therapy, but it often is the initial threshold crossing. Spiritual direction deals with the assumption that the person is already whole, but hasn't yet fully embraced this truth for themselves.

Another important assumption of spiritual direction is that it is not for everyone, because it presumes some degree of psychological health in one's life. . .

. . . We're really listening for the stream *beneath* the stream of the person's life, . . . for those moments of encounter with the Holy. A classic question is "Where is God in the midst of this experience. . .?" "Directors do not *create* relationships between God and their directees, they simply foster these relationships so that they may deepen and grow. . ." (William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. New York: Seabury, 1981.)

## *Hearing the Inner Call*

**HHN:** What will impel someone to seek out spiritual direction then? Assuming that the person who is coming to explore this for the first time is not in crisis, is there something else that usually will draw them to this?

**JSG:** . . . a yearning for God -- to understand meaning in their life; to gain a sense of discernment; to understand where they are going and how to live their life more fully.

**HHN:** So there might be some hunger or sense of something missing, but the real motivation is being drawn toward the possibility of living a more abundant life, as John 10:10 puts it?

**JSG:** Absolutely. I believe it really is a call . . . an inner longing and hunger for God -- which is confirmed outwardly when the person finds the right director. . .

## *Making the Connections*

**HHN:** How does someone who feels this yearning --this inner call -- go about locating a spiritual director?

**JSG:** Well, they might initially begin by approaching someone whose spiritual life they respect, and asking that person to walk with them. That person may not be "trained" in the discipline of direction, but the directee respects that person's walk with God. This experience will often lead to further reading, which will then lead people to finding out there is such a thing as a discipline of spiritual direction. In terms of resources to learn more about spiritual direction, a wonderful book is "Holy Listening" by Margaret Guenther.

For people seeking a more formal spiritual direction relationship with someone who has been trained in this discipline, they might then ask their pastor or their friends to recommend a director in their community. **Spiritual Directors International (SDI) does not endorse or recommend any particular directors, but we do assist in helping a person . . . by giving him or her the name of one of our regional contacts who may know spiritual directors in their locale.** The mission of SDI is to connect people with one another as an individual network of spiritual directors.

### *Training of Spiritual Directors*

**HHN: Is there any kind of credential or specific training that you would look for in a spiritual director?**

**JSG:** I don't think you can be *trained* to be a spiritual director. First, you must have the gift, the charism -- the gift then can be fine-tuned by training. I think this is a really key distinction.

There are about 100 training centers worldwide to train spiritual directors, that we are aware of, but there is no certifying body as of yet. SDI may do that in the future. . .

**HHN: So you would look for someone who had gotten some kind of formal training in spiritual direction?**

**JSG:** It would be a caution for me if a person hadn't been trained. And if a person was not in direction him or herself, I definitely would not go to him or her.

**HHN: Does it matter if the director is a member of your own faith tradition or denomination?**

**JSG:** . . .I don't think that the director needs to be a member of your own faith tradition or denomination, because if a person is truly listening for the movement of God, they are listening beneath all the externals. . .

### *What to Expect*

**HHN:** What might a directee expect?

**JSG:** . . . A one-hour session per month which focuses on listening to and noticing what the movement has been in a person's life.

### *Reaping the Harvest*

**HHN:** One last question. What kinds of benefits or fruit could someone expect from ongoing work with a spiritual director?

**JSG:** A sense of inner peace and inner calm, a sense of direction in their life, and discernment. And the fruit would be actually living in and embracing the wonder and awe of God.

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