The Sacred Work of Being Human and the Role of Spiritual Direction

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The term sacred refers to an intrinsic quality within life itself, which is experienced as a call to belong. Whilst the call to belong remains constant throughout history, the shape of human belonging does not. In response to each new era of human history, the shape of belonging varies. Therefore, the work of being human involves both attuning to the primordial call to belong and discerning the shape of belonging within a given time and place in history. Participating in such a venture gives rise to an ever-deepening experience of connection and belonging in the here-and-now, while at the same time contributing to the ongoing evolutionary process of life itself.

Poet T. S. Eliot sheds light on the nature of the sacred work of being human: “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling, we shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time” (145). We humans are both driven and enabled to explore. Our innate desire to explore takes form in two ways. First, we continue to explore the way the observable, or outer, world works. Outer exploration is the domain of the sciences. The sciences continue to expand our horizon of knowledge about how the world came to be and continues to be, including the human body and mind.

Second, as well as the drive for knowledge about our world, we humans also have an intrinsic desire to experience belonging in the world. Belonging is experienced via a coherent story of meaning. Such a story comprises our current view of ourselves-in-our-world. From ancient times until the present, humans have sought belonging through a story of meaning, which responds to the knowledge and beliefs of any given time and place in history. For example: at least forty thousand years ago the indigenous peoples of Australia developed the Dreaming, a story of meaning that offered their account of how the world came into being and their place of belonging within it. Our Stories of meaning emerge through inner exploration. Inner exploration is the domain of spirituality—that is, the intention and practice of listening for inner wisdom’s call towards personal wholeness, authentic communal responsibility, and joyful humility for the mystery of being human in an emergent universe. So, the sciences offer knowledge about the world. In the light of such knowledge, spirituality offers the experience of belonging in the world.

At certain junctures in human history, the knowledge gained through continued scientific exploration breaks through the understandings that had previously been taken for granted. For example in the sixteenth century, the sciences identified that it was actually the earth that revolved around the sun, not the other way around. In turn, such new knowledge breaks open the prevailing story of meaning and for a time, according to Thomas Berry, the population involved lives “in between stories” (Berry 1990, 123). Living in between Stories can give rise to an experience of disorientation in terms of meaning making and displacement in terms of belonging. Such historical junctures require of those involved to begin again and, taking into account human history thus far, to discover a new story of meaning and take up a new place of belonging . . . as if for the first time.

Western culture is currently experiencing one such historical juncture. Joanna Macy has named this juncture as “the Great Turning” (39; see also 78–107). What has given rise to such a juncture? According to Brian Swimme, “We are the first generation to live with an empirical view of the origin of the universe” (28). The ensuing implications arising from such new scientific knowledge regarding the creation of the universe has broken apart our current story of meaning. In response, Berry has named the Call of this historical juncture, to begin again and “reinvent [restory] the human at the species level” (see 159–65). For those individuals who choose to engage in such an undertaking, this historical juncture is inviting them to once again engage in a journey of inner exploration and transformation. Within this context, transformation involves breaking through and transcending a story of meaning, which has now
become redundant. Whilst the task may seem formidable, it is not one that need be feared. It is simply the nature of the sacred work of being human.

In light of the above understandings, the sacred work of being human involves an ongoing dynamic of calling forth, longing, and responding. The calling forth relates to the sacred component. The longing relates to the being-human component. The responding relates to the work component. The following offers an explanation of how the dynamic of calling forth, longing, and responding takes form in human living.

The Dynamic of Calling Forth: The Sacred

Spiritual mentor Anne Hillman offered insight into the dynamic of calling forth: “Our call takes place underground, far beneath our awareness. Like a soundless song, it sings to us all our lives, whispering in a wordless way, ‘Follow!’ . . . I call it the song of the soul . . . I believe this ongoing inquiry into life is the song we are here to learn” (9). In line with Eliot’s quotation, Hillman’s notion of the dynamic of calling forth takes shape in the human species’ innate desire to explore both the outer world and their inner being. The impetus for such exploration is the human capacity to question. Regarding the capacity to question, the late Canadian priest Bernard Lonergan claimed: “While human beings as a species are no different from the higher animals in terms of substance, the one striking difference is the human capacity to wonder, to question and to discover responses” (9–11). Furthermore, Lonergan argued that the human spirit of inquiry allows individuals to ask questions and discover responses, ask more questions, and again discover further responses. In so doing, they gain cumulative and progressive results. Such cumulative and progressive results reveal that humans are capable of breaking through and transcending both the limits of a current field of knowledge and the limits of a current story of meaning. For this reason, Lonergan claimed that open-ended questions were at the heart of the ongoing process of self-transcendence, or in the language of this article, transformation.

It is important to reiterate that we need not fear this dynamic of calling forth. Whilst the destination of the current inner exploration is largely unknown, those involved are being drawn by love, according to Eliot. Further to Eliot’s understanding that love is entwined within the dynamic of calling forth is Berry’s declaration:

“The basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the earth. If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth . . . and finally brought us into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that the guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process.” (137)

We may draw both comfort and inspiration from the understanding that we are not in control of the process. Therefore, the future does not rest solely on our shoulders. At the same time, we are required to play our part. We are required to bear witness to what is currently taking place in the world and to discern and take up our place of belonging . . . now. As we do so, we participate in shaping the evolution of life itself.

The Dynamic of Longing: Being Human

Krista Tippett’s *Becoming Wise* quotes University of California professor John A. Powell: “The human condition is one of belonging” (103). In accord with Powell, Irish poet John O’Donohue wrote:
“Nature’s Bride” — Justine Tatarsky
“The human heart is full of longing . . . we long to discover who we are . . . the voices of longing keep our lives alert and urgent. Yet if we cannot discover a shelter of belonging within our lives, we could become a victim and target of our longing.” (O’Donohue 1997, 10)

The human longing to belong does not sit within a vacuum. Rather, in line with Berry’s quotation above, there is a guiding process within the very nature of life itself that is calling and inviting us to discover a shelter of belonging in the here and now.

Human belonging is experienced on three levels. The first is that of the intrapersonal. The intrapersonal relates to the experience of inner connection, giving rise to a sense of personal wholeness. The second experience is that of the interpersonal. The interpersonal relates to the experience of connection within a wider web of relationships, including familial, social, political, cultural, and religious and spiritual traditions. The third experience is that of the transpersonal. The transpersonal experience is one whereby individuals recognize they participate in the very nature of life itself. In this fashion, Hillman asserted: “We are life, not separate from it” (199). As individuals discover a shelter of belonging on these three levels, they are able to metaphorically walk humbly within the Earth community with wisdom and compassion.

The Dynamic of Responding: The Work

In terms of responding, or the work component, how do we discern the Call of the era, respond to our longing to discover who we are within such a Call, and find a shelter of belonging? Each new era requires of us to once again pose our time-honoured and time-specific spiritual questions, within the light of our current horizon of knowledge. Our time-honoured spiritual questions are ones like: “Where did we come from?” “Why are we here?” “Where do we go when we die?” “Is there a God?” Hillman adds to the list: “What is love?” (12). One time-specific question is: “What does it mean to be human in an emergent universe?” The responses we discover to such questions form our current story of meaning. In turn, our story of meaning offers a shelter of belonging.

Our story of meaning involves the facts as we currently observe them and the interpretation given to such facts. Therefore our story of meaning is subjective. As a result, our story is not an end in itself but rather a means through which we source identity, purpose, and belonging at any given time and place in history. Also, our story shapes our values, which in turn determines the way we will live within and act upon our world. So, even though our story of meaning is subjective, it is not merely fiction. It is the essential pathway of discovery of personal and communal authenticity. For this reason, a coherent story of meaning is truth, as truth relates to meaning making.

As raised previously, the Western cultural story of meaning has been broken apart, leaving its population in between Stories. In turn, there is a corresponding cultural experience of disconnection and inner disorientation, giving rise to a crisis of meaning for many individuals. And yet, a new cultural story of meaning is emerging: A new story, with core themes for individuals to draw from, rather than specific storylines to which all must adhere. A new story, which is offering new ways of viewing ourselves-in-our-world, leading once again towards meaningful connection within our own selves, within community, and within the deeper rhythms of life itself. And a new cultural story of meaning, which in the teaching of Loch Kelly “is no longer showing us how to transcend or escape the human condition, but helping us discover how to live a fully intimate human life” (27).

Emerging Themes within a New Western Cultural Story of Meaning

Two emerging themes within a new Western cultural story of meaning are: unity with diversity and an integral framework for viewing ourselves-in-our-world. The following shows how these two themes are currently shaping our experience of belonging.

Unity with Diversity

At the centre of unity with diversity is the principle of both/and. Such a principle includes the paradoxical understanding that two coexisting opposing truths can interweave together. The principle of both/and stands in direct contrast to the dualistic opposites of either/or, which were embedded in the old cultural story of meaning. Such an either/or principle gave rise to the view that humans were in competition with each other. Competition gave rise to prejudice against, and fear of,
the other. Within such a principle, there could be no unity with diversity.

Unity with diversity takes shape within the principle of both/and in the following manner. In relation to the human community, it allows for an interweaving of the individual experience with that of the collective human experience. Such an interweaving is experienced in the language of Anthony De Mello’s poem “Identity” as “not one/not two.” De Mello employed this phrase to describe “the sun and its light, the ocean and the waves, the singer and their song.” In each instance, they neither merge into one, nor remain two distinct entities. In a similar manner, the interweaving of both the individual and the collective experience does not mean they merge into one singular entity. Neither do they remain two distinct entities. Rather, the individual and the collective become not one/not two.

In light of the above paragraph, the principle of both/and gives rise to the following view of ourselves-in-our-world: 1. That we know ourselves to be distinct individuals yearning for autonomy. 2. That we know ourselves to be intrinsically connected within and responsible to a much wider web of relationships, which includes our family of origin, our local communities, our particular cultural and religious and spiritual traditions, the wider human community, and the wider Earth community. Such a new view breaks through the Western cultural notion of individualism, while recognizing the uniqueness of each individual. The new view also reveals that in spite of the personal, cultural, and religious diversity within the human community, we are all in this together.

In terms of Stories of meaning, the principle of both/and reveals that human living involves Stories within Stories, with no one story taking precedence over the other. Such an insight involves the recognition that personal and cultural stories of meaning are each unique in their own right, whilst also being intrinsically connected within and responsible to many other personal and cultural stories of meaning. Furthermore, world religious traditions are both unique in their own right, while at the same time being intrinsically connected within and responsible to what Foundation for New Monasticism & InterSpirituality cofounders Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko named as “the human tradition . . . [which] sees all of humanity in the evolutionary process of maturation” (26). In turn, the human tradition is unique in its own right and intrinsically connected within and responsible to the wider Earth community. And again, the planet Earth is unique in its own right and intrinsically connected within the 13.8-billion-year universe story, as we currently know it. Within such an understanding of Stories within Stories, unity with diversity is experienced by way of a wondrous and vibrant patchwork quilt.

The patchwork quilt metaphor brings to light a shift in the experience of unity. Rather than seeking unity through sameness, or simply tolerating difference, the shift is one of welcoming difference. The shift, according to Macy, “does not sacrifice, but instead requires the uniqueness of each part . . . the distinctiveness of its functioning and its perspective” (179). Within such an understanding, difference is welcomed. Difference both inspires and challenges us to engage in what McEntee and Bucko named as “the possibility of weaving together a new pattern of creation” (80). It is a new pattern of creation whereby we no longer view ourselves in competition with each other, even though we may hold disparate views regarding Stories of meaning.

The new pattern of creation allows for the experience of communion with one another—communion experienced in the form of Center for Courage & Renewal founder Parker Palmer’s notion of “truly seeing and hearing each other” (117). In choosing to see and hear one another, we remain open to another’s norms, beliefs, and values, without rushing to either defend or relinquish our own. The experience of being truly seen and heard gives rise
to what psychiatrist Daniel Siegel named as “a kind of resonance” (167) whereby each participant experiences “feeling felt” (166). Siegel argued that such an experience of resonance cultivates an environment of “trust” (167). It is within an environment of trust that we experience communion with one another.

An Integral Framework

An integral framework offers an interpretive lens for viewing ourselves-in-our-world, one that takes into account human history as a whole, within the awareness that history is forever and continually in the making. And again, such an understanding has given rise to the term the human tradition. An integral framework, according to Ken Wilber et al., is one that both “transcends and includes” (xvi) all previous human experience, from ancient times until the present. Therefore, an integral framework breaks through and transcends the limitations of past knowledge and Stories of meaning. At the same time, it also includes that which continues to resonate in the here-and-now.

Whilst an integral framework considers human history as a whole, it does not aspire to establish a new singular human story of meaning to which all must now adhere. In this way, an integral framework is consistent with the theme of unity with diversity. Neither does an integral framework involve individuals simply grabbing bits and pieces from here and there in the desire to boost their ego-self. The Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön is one who warns against such an approach. Furthermore, an integral framework is not simply about seeking a broad range of knowledge. According to the late Indian social activist Vimala Thakar: “Intellectual study of theories never leads to a transformation of your being and your life” (28). So knowledge alone about the wider human tradition will not give rise to transformative shifts in our view of ourselves-in-our-world.

In light of the above, an integral framework allows individuals to seek their story of meaning within the context of the wider human tradition. Within such a framework they are choosing to take the time to discern that which continues to resonate for them in this present time. In line with such an understanding, The New Monasticism quotes the late Roman Catholic scholar Raimon Panikkar: “Our task and responsibility are to assimilate the wisdom of bygone traditions and having made it our own, to allow it to grow. Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once a continuance and rupture. Life is creation” (McEntee and Bucko, 21). Therefore, an integral framework does not involve taking on past belief systems in the same manner as they were practised. Rather, an integral framework involves taking the time to discern what former knowledge, beliefs, values, wisdom teaching, and spiritual practices continue to resonate and how they may be implemented in today’s world.

Where does the notion of truth sit within an integral framework? Lonergan’s transcendental method of conscious intentionality responds to the nature of truth in this context. The method involves individuals posing their open-ended questions within the light of their current horizon of knowledge and discovering their responses through engaging with the dynamic pattern operative within human consciousness. Such a pattern involves four precepts: 1. Be attentive to lived experience, particularly the affective experience, which the late theology professor Walter Conn asserts is the “drive and power” (40) behind authentic self-knowledge. 2. Be intelligent with rational curiosity. 3. Be reasonable in making rational judgments. 4. Be responsible in coming to decisions and carrying them out. So within human consciousness is the ability to experience, understand, judge, and decide. Engagement with the transcendental method gives rise to personal objective truth. Center of Concern founding director Father William Ryan and Gonzaga University philosophy and religion professor Bernard Tyrrell, writing about Lonergan’s method, stated: “Objective truth is not the same as belief. Objective truth is what one has found to be true through engaging in the transcendental method. One’s objective truth will orientate their value system from a place of inner freedom” (80). Therefore, in relation to a coherent story of meaning within an integral framework, there is a method for discovering personal objective truth.

In light of all of the above, the sacred work of being human is known to be all inclusive, in that it involves all peoples, since the beginning of the human community through the present and beyond. Even so, in response to the knowledge, beliefs, values, and lived experience of any given peoples at any given time and place in history, the Stories of meaning will vary. Hence, the place of belonging will vary also. Within such a context, what are the implications for the practice of spiritual direction?
The Role of Spiritual Direction in This Chapter of the Sacred Work of Being Human

The practice of spiritual direction is more necessary now than ever, particularly within a Western cultural context. Current scientific understandings have broken apart the old cultural story of meaning and the emerging themes of a new story are in their infancy. In response, individuals are now required to repose their spiritual questions and discover their own internal source for personal identity, purpose, and belonging in their world. Where can individuals pose their spiritual questions within a receptive atmosphere? Spiritual direction is intended for such a purpose. Furthermore, within this information technology age, there is an overload of seemingly competing spiritual practices and religious belief systems. For many individuals the deluge of information is confusing at best and overwhelming at worst. How do individuals find their shelter of belonging within so many competing voices? Spiritual direction, with its emphasis on contemplative self-enquiry, is an exceptionally effective practice for sifting through the competing voices and discovering personal objective truth.

Within the emerging new story of meaning, many individuals will continue to explore their spiritual questions within a world religious tradition. Therefore, they will continue to seek models of spiritual direction that are framed by such a context. Nevertheless, a growing number of individuals profess no religious affiliation. Neither are they seeking a deeper relationship with God. For example, in the 2016 Australian Census, 30 percent of people ticked the box marked no religion. Also, there is a growing number of individuals in Western societies who identify as spiritual but not religious. And yet, many of these individuals long to engage in a spiritual practice that allows them to explore, discover, integrate, and celebrate their shelter of belonging. Such a cultural shift begs the question: Is this era calling forth a new model of spiritual direction, a model that is specifically intended for individuals who seek to engage in spiritual direction beyond the context of relationship with God and/or religion? If so, what would be the overarching premise, if not a religious tradition? Also, what would be the inner guiding reference point, if not a deepening relationship with God? Furthermore, what would be the underlying transformative question, if not “who/what/where/how is God in this?”

A New Model of Spiritual Direction

That which follows is one spiritual director’s response to the questions listed above. Whilst the spiritual director was contemplatively sitting with the questions, an insight emerged: a new model of spiritual direction would continue to offer the same contemplative process. The difference would be in the departure point and intended destination.

The intended destination—the overarching premise: To continue to embrace our humanity fully, in response to the dynamic energy of love, which reverberates throughout the very nature of life itself. Within this overarching premise, individuals would pose their spiritual questions within the human tradition as viewed through an integral framework of understanding.

The overarching premise draws particularly from the writings of Hillman, where she declared: “We stand at an evolutionary juncture, called to awaken to a new kind of love. This love is not a feeling, it is a great power” (7). Furthermore, she maintained: “Love holds all of our humanity. We have not believed it was enough to be forms throughout history” (5). The late theologian and psychiatrist Gerald May, in agreement with Fischer, named some of the shifts that have taken place: “an intimate heart journey” to “matters of conscience and vocation” to “discerning good and evil spirits” to “psychological growth and individuation” (2). Therefore, Christian spiritual direction has not been confined to one particular prescriptive model.
human” (161). In response to Hillman’s understandings, the intended destination involves an unqualified yes to our humanness, within the light of love. Therefore, we consent to being human with all the attendant strengths and limitations involved, rather than seek to transcend the human condition. In choosing to consent to being human, we are also choosing to take responsibility for our own beliefs and the way we live within and act upon our world.

Even though love is fundamental to the intended destination, it is with some hesitancy that the term has been employed. Why the hesitancy? First, within Western culture the term love is frequently used in menial ways. For example: “I love those shoes.” Second, love and sexual intercourse are often portrayed as one and the same. Third, within this model of spiritual direction, the term love has been removed from a qualifying marker like Divine love or God’s love, which may give rise to a misinterpretation of its intent. Therefore, it is pertinent to clarify its meaning within this model of spiritual direction.

Whilst love is the overarching principle, the term itself may never be explicitly stated within a spiritual direction session. Rather, love involves a quality of presence within the spiritual director, a quality of presence that is imbued with wisdom and compassion, inner stillness and outer responsiveness, courage and commitment. Through such a quality of presence, spiritual directors are able to truly see and hear spiritual directees, which in turn cultivates an environment of trust. Within an environment of trust, transformative shifts are more likely to emerge within the conscious view of spiritual directees.

The new departure point—the inner guiding orientation: To be and become self-in-love. The new departure point for the spiritual directee involves the intention to be and become self-in-love. Such an intention does not refer to a narcissistic, ego-centred state. Neither does it refer to a negation of selfhood. Rather, to be and become self-in-love gives rise to a robust experience of selfhood, one that embraces the ongoing dance of formation and transformation. Formation here involves living daily life with a clear sense of identity, purpose, and belonging. Transformation involves shifts within our awareness, which break through and transcend the limitations of our current formation. Within such a dance of formation and transformation, spiritual directees are not, in the words of Kelly, “trying to land in either one” (90). They are choosing to remain in the dance, whereby they continue to explore who they know themselves to be in the present, whilst at the same time remaining open to transformative shifts in their view. The experience of self-in-love gives rise to an inner clear-sightedness through which spiritual directees may respond to their world, rather than react through egocentric drivers.

The underlying transformative question for the spiritual directee: Who do I now know myself to be and how does such an understanding offer a shelter of belonging?

The Contemplative Process

Whilst the departure and destination points of this model of spiritual direction differ from the traditional
practise, the process is consistent. First, the spiritual directee sets the agenda for each monthly session. Second, the agenda draws from the spiritual directee’s story of meaning. Third, each session is conversational in tone and contemplative in nature. Contemplative here involves patiently discerning inner wisdom’s invitation towards a shelter of belonging on the three levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal. Contemplative also involves surrendering the desire to control the process, a process that Hillman named as “not linear, but a deepening” (12). As such, this model of spiritual direction continues to involve spiritual directees in their interior journey of contemplative self-enquiry within the light of love.

The term surrender is one that can give rise to strong reactions. Therefore it is important to clarify its meaning within the context of this model of spiritual direction. According to Dr. Amy Johnson, surrender simply means to “stop fighting against ourselves, stop pushing against our reality at this moment in time.” Surrender also involves the letting go of an attachment to a particular story of meaning that has now become redundant. It is worth noting here that grief will often go hand in hand with letting go a redundant story of meaning. Grief is a natural and healthy human response to loss. Remaining stuck in grief is not. Therefore, conscious grieving may be part of the surrendering and letting go process.

How do spiritual directees discern inner wisdom’s invitation? They choose to gently reflect upon their inner landscape, noticing and integrating inner movements towards self-in-love and dissolving counter movements. Such a process draws from Upper Room Spiritual Center codirector Maureen Conroy’s understanding of inner movements (13–14). It also draws from Sister of Mercy Janet Ruffing’s understanding of inner movements as “motivations, temptations, confusions, ambiguities and painful and pleasant psychological and spiritual experiences” (117) that are part of a spiritual directee’s narrative. The entry point to such inner movements is through attending primarily to a spiritual directee’s present-moment affective experience. Such an entry point draws from Lonergan’s transcendental method.

The Function of the Spiritual Director

Catholic priest and Benedictine monk Laurence Freeman claimed that the function of a spiritual director is “not to tell us what to do but to help us see who we are” (63). In line with Freeman’s understanding, spiritual directors assist directees to see who they are, by way of being a presence of love through which directees can express, explore, discover, integrate, and celebrate their own growing awareness of their experience of self-in-love. With self-in-love as their orientating reference point, spiritual directees can metaphorically stand in their own ground, openheartedly.

Why the need for a spiritual director? As individuals choose to undertake this inner exploration, they are often unable to identify and make sense of the diverse responses within their inner landscape. Therefore it is valuable to be accompanied on the journey by an accredited, experienced guide who can recognize the lay of the land. Even so, the spiritual director does not guide from the front; he metaphorically walks alongside the directee on the directee’s path, being a presence of love who bears witness to the directee’s experience.

Further Questions

The new model of spiritual direction as presented gives rise to further questions; for example: Does this model qualify within existing insurance guidelines? Who would train spiritual directors in this model, given that most formation centres are religion based? To which code of ethics would spiritual directors adhere, given that most refer to some form of Divinity or God and a religious tradition? Also, many codes of ethics require that spiritual directors “maintain responsible association with their own faith community” (AECSD). How do spiritual directors fulfill such requirements when their story of meaning does not involve a religious faith community? Therefore, if a new model of spiritual direction was to take its place of belonging within the wider spiritual direction community, such questions require attention.

In conclusion, the above understandings on the sacred work of being human and the role of spiritual direction are offered as an entry point for further conversation within the wider spiritual direction community.
References


