Encounters occur in every instant of living. Our daily encounters offer us the invitation to grow, ponder, listen, and respond. We encounter people, places, critters, emotions, thoughts, sorrow, injustice, love, joy—and these are just a few types of encounters! What is consistent in every encounter is our personhood, our ability to show up. Or to put it another way, our personal, passionate, presence that is awake and alive, or dull and stilted.

On most mornings I begin my day by brewing a cup of organic green tea grown in the Xianju Tea Forest located in China. Then I nestle into a rocking chair and gaze out a window to the east, slowly inhale the fragrant tea leaves, feel heat between my palms, and breathe gently, but deeply. I listen to a new day dawn.

Some mornings I encounter the motions of activity beyond my window. On other days the darkness is tinged with moonlight and a multitude of stars. Regardless, I abandon myself into stillness and solitude, until I sense a time of awakening. In this brief beginning to my day I encounter myself, the physical world I inhabit, the lands and locations that brought tea leaves, electricity and water into my home, the people and places of concern in my heart of prayer, and possibly the Mystery that is pure wildness, presence, and love.

As I enter a new day, I pray for the encounters of living that will occur. I ask for guidance in my interactions and invitations. I pray for the courage to love freely. I desire to be present to all the visible and invisible encounters that time will bring throughout the day … and what will encounter me! I offer thanksgiving.

Before entering into rest and sleep in the evening, I consider the hours I’ve just lived. I have begun asking myself a question poet John O’Donohue poses, “From the evidence—why was I given this day?” When I ponder the “evidence” I notice both familiar and unexpected encounters, and I am often surprised by the responses generated within me. Sometimes I receive new insight into where I focus my energy and how awake I am in the here and now of present time. This nightly reflection enables me to encounter mystery, activity, and the beloved in unforeseen places, people, and times of my life.

Perhaps you too may want to ponder the encounters of your daily living. I invite you to join me in asking these questions:

- Which encounters bring my heart and mind most alive?
- How do particular encounters cause me ache or delight?
- What encounter do I long for?
- Who needs the shelter of an encounter with me?

—Pegge Bernecker

Ordinary Life Encounters

SEEDS OF INTEREST:

Field Notes: Live in the Present Moment
Field Guide: Opening the Heart
What is Spiritual Direction?
I’ll Take Anything You’ve Got!
Share Listen
Blessing: At the End of the Day: A Mirror of Questions
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TEA

An old companion, tea
warms our hands, can accept sweetness.
Its steam bends with living breath.

To imagine a war fought over
tins of dry, crushed leaves
is not impossible, however ironic.

Thoreau swore it off, along with coffee, wine.
He believed in the ceremony of cold
spring water and often sat alone.

Practitioners of Zen can focus
an entire afternoon on the whisking
of green tea in little, porcelain cups.

Between them, two adepts may speak of nothing
for hours. Yet I prefer the example
of Po Chü-i, who, finding himself

without tea for guests, led them
into his garden. There, he pulled
a peach blossom under

the kettle’s steaming lip,
served tea fragrant with the delicate
gold of pollen-dust.

—Temple Cone
“Tea” won honorable mention in the 2007-2008 Spiritual Directors International poetry contest
was crammed into the seats of a Cessna airplane with four fellow passengers, ready to fly from Anchorage to Homer, Alaska, USA. The pilot grinned back at us, “Ready?” Strong winds at takeoff caused us to tip; we were flying into a storm. In between deep breaths to soothe my rolling stomach I watched the pilot and held on tight.

Such moments of fear stand out in memory because we do something effortlessly then that we normally can barely do at all: live in the present moment. During that flight I wasn’t thinking about who might publish my next book. There were no thoughts at all. Only a plane buffeted by the wind and my complete attention to what was happening.

All we have is the present moment. It’s been said so often that we no longer hear the truth underneath the words.

All we have is now. In Who Shall Be the Sun? poet David Wagoner writes that wherever we are is called Here, a place that we must treat as a “powerful stranger.” But it’s not easy to do.

Being fully present requires discipline. Noticing that I’m drifting away in thought, I can pull myself back. Seconds later, my mind may again wander to the past or the future. I notice, and shift attention back to the present. It requires persistence. The observer, the one who notices that thoughts are distracting me and that I’ve left Here, is my key. This observer (consciousness) guides me to the powerful stranger I must know.

A former college professor talked about spending forty years walking a one mile path from his house to the college. The path became intimately familiar. Yet he recalls that even after many years, with the knowledge of the path in his bones, he still didn’t know it exhaustively. The present moment continuously invites us in.

The more present I am, the more I begin to recognize life (Spirit) flowing through everything. Slowly I meet each person as he or she is, not my idea of them. Only then can I truly care for others and the world. But first I have to be Here.

—Paula D’Arcy is a writer, speaker, retreat leader and playwright. Her ministry grew from personal tragedy when her husband and daughter were killed in a drunk driving accident in 1975. She survived, along with the child with whom she was pregnant. In 2001 she founded Red Bird Foundation which is dedicated to healing and hope. Among her books are Gift of the Red Bird and Sacred Threshold.
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Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, is a community-builder, lecturer, and writer who awakens a mysticism rooted in the beauty of daily living here and now. His books include The Holy Longing, Against an Infinite Horizon, and The Restless Heart, and his weekly column is carried by more than sixty newspapers worldwide.

“Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and the habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration....”

— Ron Rolheiser, The Holy Longing

WWW.SDIWORLD.ORG
My Sufi teacher said the heart is a divine temple created by God to house the divine within us. This heart temple is more precious than the holiest places on earth. Earthly temples were built by human beings, but the heart temples were built by God to house God.

One of the fundamental practices of Sufism is to repeat, *la ilaha illallah*, literally, “there are no gods; there is God.” One level of meaning of this sacred phrase is, “there is nothing worthy of worship but God.” The discipline of Sufism includes cleansing our hearts of the idols we have enshrined there, making our hearts fit temples for God’s presence. This does not mean to give up all worldly goals and ambitions. It means to stop worshipping the things of the world, to worship only God, the only One worthy of worship.

**Practice.** The knowledge of the heart is deepened by the practice of what we know. One of my teachers once said, with great humility, “I don’t know a great deal about Sufism, but I have loved what I have learned, and I have lived it for over forty years.” These are the words of a real Sufi and a real master. Knowledge that is applied brings wisdom, while unapplied book learning results in mental and spiritual indigestion.

Nasruddin was a legendary Sufi master who taught with a great deal of humor. When Nasruddin was serving as the local judge, a woman brought her son to him and complained that her son had an uncontrollable sweet tooth. She asked Nasruddin to tell the boy to stop eating sweets all the time. Nasruddin nodded sagely and told her to come back in two weeks. When they returned he said to the son, “Boy, I order you to stop eating sweets!” The mother asked, “Why did you make us wait for two weeks? Couldn’t you have said this to my son when we first came to you?” Nasruddin answered, “No, I couldn’t possibly have said that to your son two weeks ago.” “Why not?” asked the mother. “You see, I love sweets myself. First I had to stop eating sweets, and only then could I tell your son to stop.”

How can we teach or guide others effectively unless we act on what we know?

Every action we take affects our hearts. My master taught that every kind word or action softens and opens our hearts, while every harsh word or harmful act hardens our hearts. He added that our actions also affect the world around us—every kind word or action causes a rose to bloom while every harmful word or act causes a thorn to grow.

—Robert Frager, PhD is the Founding President of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, USA and is the Director of the ITP Spiritual Guidance program. For over twenty-five years he been a *sheikh*, or Sufi spiritual guide, and has provided spiritual direction to members of his Sufi community.
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What is Spiritual Direction?
Reflections from Different Spiritual Traditions

Spiritual direction is, in reality, nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey the real Director—the Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our soul.

—Thomas Merton, Trappist monk

Presbyterian spiritual direction requires a scriptural foundation and theological familiarity in our case with the Reformed faith and tradition, that's our lens. But direction is primary interested in our universal spiritual experience and that necessitates the capacity and willingness to notice God through many lenses. Direction is not about telling people what to believe or how to act but working with the Spirit to discover, surface, name for themselves, and engage in what God is doing.

—Rev. Kenton Smith, Presbyterian

Spiritual guidance is being present in the moment, seeing and honoring the sacred mystery of the soul of another. It is witnessing this mystery and reflecting it back in word, prayer, thought, presence, and action. Spiritual guidance is modeling a deep relationship with the Divine and standing in faith and love with the other as that relationship unfolds. Spiritual guidance is a journey of deep healing and an affirmation of Holiness (wholeness), the Sacred, and the Mystery of all of life.

—Carol A. Fournier, MS, NCC, Interfaith

The object of spiritual direction is to cultivate one’s ability to discern God’s presence in one’s life—to notice and appreciate moments of holiness, to maintain an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, to explore ways to be open to the Blessed Holy One in challenging and difficult moments as well as in joyful ones. The director serves as a companion and witness, someone who helps you to discern the divine where you might have missed it and to integrate that awareness into your daily life, your tefillah, your tikkun olam work, your study, your ritual practice.

—Rabbi Jacob Staub, Jewish

Islam means to surrender to God in peace. The journey of surrender is the lifelong work of transforming the ego, opening the heart and becoming conscious of God. We need to bring Divinity into the center of our lives. The guidance, inspiration and support of a spiritual director, spiritual teacher or spiritual friend is crucial to this process. The Thirteenth century sage Rumi says that whoever travels without a guide needs two hundred years for a two-day journey. A Muslim spiritual director, teacher or friend has abiding faith in the spiritual guidance abounding in the Quran, insights of the Prophet Muhammad, and teachings of Islamic sages.

—Jamal Rahman, Muslim

Spiritual direction is encompassed in the Buddhist student-teacher relationship; the connection between director and directee is most reminiscent of the spiritual friend relationship—known in ancient Pali as kalyanamitta. This sacred friendship is one in which there is a depth of connection and commitment—a joining together through empathy and wisdom. In Buddhist spiritual direction, the director, in mindful presence, shares in a heartfelt way the feelings expressed by the directee—meeting the directee’s inherent goodness—the sacred still place within. Through empathy and wisdom, the director skillfully leads the directee to know his or her inherent goodness, inspiring the directee to envision and meet his or her true potential.

—Karin J. Miles, MA, Interfaith

Spiritual direction is the contemplative practice of accompanying (or joining with) a person or group as they awaken to the spiritual in everyday life, and it is the shared intentions and supports for the directee to have a deeper relationship with spirit through all phases of life.

—Dale Rhodes, Taoist

Spiritual direction, from the perspective of Yoga, is founded on the understanding that God lives within the hearts of each of us and of all creation. The aim of spiritual direction is the formation of a partnership between God, the directee, and the director in a holy alchemy, which lovingly upholds the directee during exploration and deepening of one’s relationship with God, others, all creation, and the higher Self. Through deep listening, powerful questions, and reflection of the thoughts and feelings conveyed by the directee, spiritual direction provides an opportunity to regularly reflect on life’s events and circumstances from a spiritual perspective.

—Donna Woods, Philosophy of Yoga

To read other descriptions of spiritual direction, or to share from your spiritual tradition go to www.sdiworld.org.
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A few years ago I learned that the Hebrew word Shabbat, Sabbath, means, simply, stop. Stopping creates possibilities—for rest, attention, encounter, and so forth. As a spiritual director I create opportunities for others to stop, or, as I sometimes hear it sing in my mind, “Stop! In the Name of Love.” I try to accept that supreme invitation myself, but sometimes need help. On a chilly evening last January, that help came from a stranger.

In a week of long days of teaching, I fulfilled a monthly commitment to serve dinner to young adults in Berkeley, California who live on the streets. When I left the kitchen it was after ten o’clock. I was tired, and a bit irritated that so few other volunteers had shown up, making the serving hours hectic and bereft of the breathing spaces for conversation and connection that I had hoped for.

As I walked past the dark buildings of the church where the dinner guests were settling into sleeping bags for the night, I mulled over snippets of conversation from the evening: “Would you like cheese on your chili? Chips? Some salad?” One man across the serving counter from me had exclaimed at each successive serving station, “I’ll take anything you’ve got!” His toothless grin and enthusiasm lingered with me as I picked my way around cigarette butts and discarded bottles.

Mind ruminating, I began to cross the wide, open space of the parking lot. The silhouette of a man rose up between me and my car. Suddenly vigilant, I quickened my pace and gripped my car keys. Drawing close to the looming figure, I saw he was someone I’d just fed.

In the cold, clear air the moon shed a bluish light on the young man’s dark face. I nodded at him, and kept walking. I heard him say, “Goodnight, Susan.”

Startled that he knew my name, I stopped to respond, “Good memory! What’s your name?” I asked. “John,” he answered, meeting my eyes. “Have a good night, John.” We smiled, our bodies bowing ever so slightly toward each other. Silently I remembered the Hindu salutation, Namasté: I salute God’s Spirit in you. Benediction seemed to flow down from the moonlight onto the two of us. John’s greeting brought me to a stop, and a prayer: Shabbat. Namasté. I’ll take anything you’ve got.

—Susan S. Phillips, PhD is the Executive Director of New College Berkeley in California, USA. She teaches spiritual direction for the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction program at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and is the author of Candlelight: Illuminating the Art of Spiritual Direction, the newest book in the Spiritual Directors International series.

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"Spiritual direction is, in reality, nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey the real Director—the Holy Spirit—hidden in the depths of our soul." —Thomas Merton

To search the Seek and Find Guide, go to sdiworld.org/Listen2.2. If you are a spiritual director who would like to be included, you will find information at sdiworld.org/Listen2.2.
How do you accompany someone whose mind is unraveling? How do you live into chaos while keeping an open heart? What spiritual practices can help you guide another person as he or she moves toward diminishment and death?

These are some of the questions that inform this moving memoir of a couple’s emotional and spiritual journey through Alzheimer’s. The story begins with Olivia Ames Hoblitzelle’s husband getting lost—he was tentatively diagnosed with Alzheimer’s the year before—while driving to Vermont on a route that he has traveled countless times. Of course, in a sense we know how the story will end: Alzheimer’s is a progressive and ultimately fatal disease. However, what we could never have expected—and what makes this book so extraordinary—is the way in which Hoblitzelle and her increasingly confused husband navigate uncharted terrain and apply what each has learned from a lifetime of Buddhist spiritual practice.

Reading The Majesty of Your Loving: A Couple’s Journey through Alzheimer’s is like listening in on a spiritual direction session between two gifted people. Hob, an accomplished teacher of Buddhist meditation, has maintained a lifelong interest in words and the mind. Even as Alzheimer’s increasingly assaults his cognitive function, he has an uncanny ability to describe what is going on.

“I’ve got this galloping brain drain. I know what I want to say, but the word horde is locked up.”

“The words get stuck,” he says. “I’ve got this galloping brain drain. I know what I want to say, but the word horde is locked up. It’s like a corral filled with horses, all pushing against each other to get out, but they can’t find the gate” (p. 188).

Hoblitzelle, meanwhile, herself a respected teacher of psychology and contemplative practice, describes in candid, sometimes lyrical detail her effort to keep company with her husband as his mind deteriorates. She describes the spiritual practices that inspire her—for instance, remembrance of the paramitas, six qualities that Buddhists cultivate as “a blueprint for how to live life” (p. 204) generosity, discipline, diligence, contemplation, wisdom, and patience. She also mentions some of the practices she invented to keep herself steady—the doorway practice, for example, which strengthens her readiness to enter a room to find that her husband has died.

Practical suggestions for caregivers follow each chapter. The book concludes with a bibliography and three appendices: a guided meditation for the dying; a short essay on how to reclaim all aspects of what happens at death; and a collection of discussion questions on such topics as aging, living in the present moment, and handling fear.

The journey toward aging and death is ultimately about letting go. Therein is the paradox of grace: as we surrender in trust, we grow in love. The book’s title echoes a poignant verse by Sufi poet, Rumi: “Your loving doesn’t know its majesty until it knows its helplessness” (p. 157).

Hob and Olivia were helpless in the face of death, but the honesty and compassion with which they faced the inevitable deepened their understanding of what Teilhard de Chardin called “the grace of diminishment” (p. 231). Hob considered Alzheimer’s “the best ... education I’ve ever had” (p. 276), and one of the last things he said before he died was fitting for a man convinced that happiness could only be found in the present moment: “Be happy only” (p. 277).

—Margaret Bullitt-Jonas is an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, and author of Holy Hunger and Christ’s Passion, Our Passions. She can be reached at mbj@gracechurchamherst.org.
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Question: I’m seeking a spiritual director, and I noticed the Spiritual Directors International Web site suggests I should “interview” at least two or three people. Interview seems like an odd word to me to use in this context. And why would I want to talk to more than one person?

Hoot Hoot: Thank you for your great question! First, when you imagine yourself interviewing a potential spiritual director or guide it might be helpful to think in terms of a conversation—the interview is a time to ask questions, dialogue and listen. Your initial interview offers you the ability to assess and discern. A relationship with your spiritual director or guide is a confidential, significant, and often cherished relationship. You and the person you ask to accompany you will prayerfully discern if meeting together has the potential to be a good match. So, the initial conversation or interview is important! If after the interview you both determine that you will begin to meet on an ongoing basis, it is valuable to mutually assess the relationship every three to six months.

You asked why it is important to interview at least two or three people. Finding a spiritual director is a very personal and spiritual quest! Conversing with at least two people will give you a sense of personality and style differences. You will want to talk about what draws you to spiritual direction during this time in your life and notice how comfortable it is for you to tell your faith story. You will not share your entire spiritual story, struggles, or joys during this first conversation. Ethically, a spiritual director will want you to be free to leave the initial interview, and never talk or meet again. It is up to you to take reasonable steps to verify the competency of any potential spiritual director. As a ministry in many nations and many faiths, spiritual direction does not have a centralized certifying body that verifies qualifications of spiritual directors. Faith traditions may view the role of a spiritual director differently. Some valuable questions to talk about when you meet with a potential spiritual guide include:

- What enrichment, spiritual formation, and theological education do you have in spiritual direction?
- What is your personal experience tending your own prayer, meditation, and contemplative life?
- What is your experience as a spiritual director? How many years? In what environments? What are you most interested in spiritually?
- How do you continue your education and remain accountable, often through supervision for your spiritual direction ministry?
- What ethical guidelines do you abide by, such as those published by Spiritual Directors International?
- What type of engagement agreement will we establish to clarify roles and responsibilities in our spiritual direction relationship, such as samples provided on the Web site of Spiritual Directors International, www.sdiworld.org?

Interviewing a potential spiritual director is a way to carefully listen to how you are being guided in your selection process. Questions for your personal reflection as you seek a spiritual guide are on the Spiritual Directors International Web site. Remember, it is up to you to choose your spiritual director wisely. Hoot hoot!

If you have a question for Owl, please e-mail Listen@sdiworld.org.

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WWW.SDIWORLD.ORG

When you visit the Spiritual Directors International Web site at www.sdiworld.org, you can learn about retreats, programs, conferences, and other events related to spiritual direction. You can read descriptions of the spiritual direction relationship from a variety of spiritual traditions, and discover excellent questions to ask of yourself, and any potential spiritual directors you choose to interview. To locate a spiritual director or guide, go on-line to Seek and Find: A Worldwide Resource Guide of Available Spiritual Directors. More than 5,500 available spiritual directors are listed by geographical location at www.sdiworld.org.
“Tending the holy around the world and across traditions …
Al servicio de lo sacro alrededor del mundo y a través de las tradiciones …”

—Translated by Marta Rios and Xavier Ortiz Monasterio

Fourth Annual Poetry Contest

Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction announces its fourth annual juried poetry contest.

The grand prize winner will be awarded a US$100.00 cash prize.
Three runners up will receive US$75.00 each.

The top four selections will be published in the September, December, March, and June issues of Presence, respectively. A number of honorable mentions will also be selected for future publication.

Anyone may enter. However, there are a few simple guidelines to follow.

- All poems must be submitted by e-mail, preferably by MS Word attachment.
- Write “Presence Poetry Contest” in the subject line.
- Only one submission per person is allowed.
- Poems may be no longer than 30 lines.
- Poems should pertain to a spiritual theme or should relate to spiritual direction.

For a full list of entry guidelines and to submit your poem, go to: sdiworld.org/publications/poetry-contest.html

The winners will be selected by a three-judge panel.

The deadline for poetry submissions is May 15, 2008!