

# Connections

The Newsletter of Spiritual Directors International

## From the Executive Director:

A friend and colleague, Bill Grace, uses a metaphor of a campfire to raise awareness of marginalization in a society. The campfire represents the warmth, comfort, and relative ease that accompany access to resources, power, and influence. Those nearest the campfire enjoy all of those benefits, while those in the progressively widening perimeters of the circle enjoy less and less, as their distance from the fire increases.

One theme that emerged from Spiritual Directors International's twenty-fifth anniversary *Listening for Wisdom* efforts last year was an interest in offering spiritual direction to those living on the margins. Rather than defining those on the margin, we might simply acknowledge the people located on the outer rings, far removed from the campfire of ease, privilege, and position, are marginalized in that system.

Some dismiss spiritual direction as ministry and service only for the elite—those close enough to the campfire to access resources of time and leisure to engage in spiritual pursuits. I am curious if this was the case in centuries past. If this perception is accurate today, it may be so due to the forms and structures that have built up around it. If spiritual direction looks only like two people able to block out time to sit together in a pleasant, contemplative space, with some sort of compensation offered, it may indeed remain unavailable to those on the outer perimeters of society.

But there are those who are exploring alternate ways to accompany typically marginalized individuals, assisting them in attending to their own interior movements and gaining freedom to respond to inner promptings. Authors of articles in this issue of *Connections* highlight work with those who are incarcerated, impoverished, addicted, of

minority ethnicity, or simply out of step with the "norm" of society.

These innovators are discovering that they are changed through encounter with those who are traditionally marginalized. Inspiration comes from witnessing the courage and resourcefulness of those living daily on the edge. Awareness of oppressive systems and structures grows as stories unfold of futile attempts to break through social barriers that maintain the status quo. And self-understanding evolves as one sees oneself as part of the oppressive system, yet more able to recognize and critique the system.



At the twenty-fifth anniversary reunion of Coordinating Council members, four people who were among the founders of Spiritual Directors International reminded the group of the compelling needs and hopes that inspired them to become involved. Jack Mostyn mentioned the need for spiritual

directors to be attentive to the lives of people made poor and to pay attention to the institutional frameworks that impact those seeking spiritual direction.

The articles in this issue describe the experience of those who are manifesting this aspect of Spiritual Directors International's founding vision in their life and work. They invite each reader to consider how their ministry and service can be more available to those currently sitting far removed from the campfire. ✱

Gratefully,

Larry Pennings, DMin



## Group Spiritual Direction ... in Prison

### Joseph Byrd, OLF, DMin [Michigan, USA]

Every Saturday, I meet with twenty to thirty inmates at Brooks Correctional in Muskegon, Michigan, USA, for group spiritual direction. Since I am a Third-Order Franciscan, how we work together is informed by that tradition. What follows is a bit of what we've discovered, and what has worked, as these men share their stories with me and with gathered volunteers.

We have three conditions—the three C's—that are essential to the life of the group:

#### Conversation

Everything we do begins with relationship, with conversation, time spent face-to-face. Safe, spacious, honest conversations can be rare anywhere and much more so in a prison. Group spiritual direction offers the opportunity to be transparent, even—and perhaps especially—while behind bars. As Ron\*, one of our inmates says, "Sometimes, there's a sacrifice in just listening, and that can feel a lot like love."

#### Consideration

Consideration comes from the Latin word, *considerere*, which means to "examine the stars." Consideration flows from conversation. How might reflecting upon the stories of the incarcerated help all of us pay closer attention to what goes on within ourselves; the given realities of our bodies, our histories, our places, our circumstances? This "star-gazing" helps lift all of us, both facilitators and inmates, out of ourselves. Mark\*, another inmate, put it best: "Perfection ... is learning to hover outside of yourself."

#### Contemplation

A contemplative is someone who learns to hold loosely the tension of those pieces that arise through this process of conversation and consideration, without rushing too quickly to fit things together. In the prison, we return again and again to the question, "What are you looking for?" Mitch\* offered this last month: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

A fourth C should be mentioned as well, though it hopefully goes without saying: Confidentiality. Confidentiality is the unspoken and overarching

character of all that we offer in group spiritual direction. What is shared is the stuff of holiness. Our guys may speak about their experience in group spiritual direction, but not about what they heard others say.

Group spiritual direction offers prisoners of all backgrounds the opportunity to attend to their inner life. In this place filled with men who have committed crimes of all kinds, group spiritual direction has helped them see that, as Francis of Assisi said, "No one is to be called an enemy: all are your benefactors, and no one does you harm. You have no enemy except yourselves." I like how Nick\* said it, too, when one of the new guys asked him what goes in during group

spiritual direction: "You can't get too far without some guidance."

\*Names changed in order to protect privacy and confidentiality



*Joseph Byrd lives in Holland, Michigan, USA, and is the facilitator of the Prison Practicum for Spiritual Direction at Brooks Correctional. He is the minister of formation for the Order of Lutheran Franciscans, and is co-facilitator of Living Fire Ministries Spiritual Direction Practicum.*



## Do You Want to Know My Name?

**Brenda Buckwell [Ohio, USA]**

He was a big man. We were sitting at table with six other people. The recovery program I was launching in the church was not gaining much momentum. But that day he sat back in his chair, stretched up, and spread himself out, taking as much room as possible and looked me directly in the eye. "Why are you doing this?" he asked. I responded with a well thought out answer. He raised his arms again and leaned way back in his chair with hands clasped behind his head and said, "So what you are saying is you are doing this because you love people, *all* people."

For the marginalized, anonymity and namelessness are facts of life. People walk by the street person without the slightest notice. And if those in poverty and on the margins of society are noticed, the scornful, distasteful, and fear-filled glances they are thrown from a passersby often eclipse any possibility for the sharing of their story. Hunger is a way of life; not only spiritual hunger but also the physical pangs for those who do not know where their next meal will come from. They learn to trust in Divine care for their most basic needs while distrusting human relationships. That day, the big man stepped out on faith. Soon after our conversation it became apparent that word on the street was not to bother the church where "that woman pastor works,

she is one of us." That conversation became a turning point for the recovery programs as we began to gain energy and participation.

In this plight of human dignity, spiritual direction is a vital need. Empowering and healing conversation reveals the presence of Divine in ways many mainstream folks can barely imagine. The marginalized people I serve realize their imperfections; claim their great need for care from Holy power, and desire shelter in the storms of life, both literally and figuratively, yet still they remain steadfast in trust of God's provisional care. I learned several lessons for my work as a spiritual director through my time of serving those who have few resources and live on the fringe of acceptable society.

First and foremost I was humbled by their intuitive "gut-level" unshakable trust in God. I simply listened as their story became reality to my ears. Through open and honest questions, articulation of God's amazing care soon poured forth. We were equals, those with

less and I, both in need of Divine healing, grace, forgiveness, and Holy Spirit empowerment. The shy and tenacious soul in each individual found a safe interior space to be warmly received as stories were shared (mine and theirs) and Divine love claimed. But most importantly, I learned the power of self examen. The question each spiritual director must ask when entering into this sacred ministry on the margins: "Do I really want to know their names, hear the story, receive their blessing, and unite my heart with others who live in the forgotten places in American life?"



**Rev. Dr. Brenda K. Buckwell, Obl. OSB**, is the author of *The Advent of God's Word and founder of Living Streams ~ Flowing Water, LLC*. Through this ministry Buckwell is a spiritual director, coach, retreat leader, church consultant, and instructor in spiritual formation.

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## Double Marginalization

**Don Bisson [New York, USA]**

There are consequences to our choices. I have chosen during several periods in my life to live and work in American inner cities: from Chicago after the race riots, to Oakland during the crack epidemic, and now in the Bronx in the forty-seventh precinct with the highest murder rate in New York City. These pilgrimages to the margins have profoundly affected my life, values, and understanding of God. By deep listening to spiritual directees in these contexts, I am also drawn into the experience of being doubly marginalized.

When living and working in these neighborhoods, the comfort of ignorance is stripped from me. I see, feel, and know real people within our social realities that are debated theoretically by our politicians, who have no direct knowledge. Ten learnings from the margins jump out to my consciousness, but also lead me to feel alienated from my roots and the people I serve.

First, I have to be real here. No B.S. is acceptable. My shadow is forced forward to confront realities. Second, I touch into the evil structures that keep the poor even poorer with lack of adequate housing, education, and opportunities. Wages are not adequate to support a family. Working people have more needs and fewer resources. Third, my old images of God have died and my spiritual comfort zones have been eradicated. Life and God are rawer. Fourth, I have grown more comfortable with powerful emotions of grief, anger, and joyous laughter, which are so prevalent in the

inner city. Fifth, I am challenged by the excesses of our culture from waste of food, to the general gap between the top wage earners to the lowest. In New York, it is so visible in the contrast between Manhattan and the Bronx. Sixth, I continue to see the significance

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You feel, see, and respond to all that is good and beautiful in the beloved. You offer your heartfelt joy and respect in response to who they are. And you desire them.

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Love reaches to understand the heart and soul, the hopes, desires, and fears of the beloved. You want to know, hear, and understand your loved ones *entirely*.

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Love is unselfish devotion, commitment to the true well-being and happiness of the beloved. In love, you give yourself for the joy, benefit, and fulfillment of the beloved.

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### LOVE WANTS TO LIBERATE

Love wants to help the beloved find relief from their suffering—including the pain that results from thoughts and behaviors that make them feel unhappy, limited, less-than-Godly, less like themselves.

### LOVE IS LOYAL

Love commits to doing right by the beloved, providing steady, ongoing support, standing up for them when they need it, defending their goodness against any untrue thought that we or anyone else might have about them. Love means being true to the beloved.

### LOVE IS DIVINE

God is love. When love moves, God moves. When you move with love, God moves with you. To love is to respond to all that lives as a healing flow of energy and compassion.

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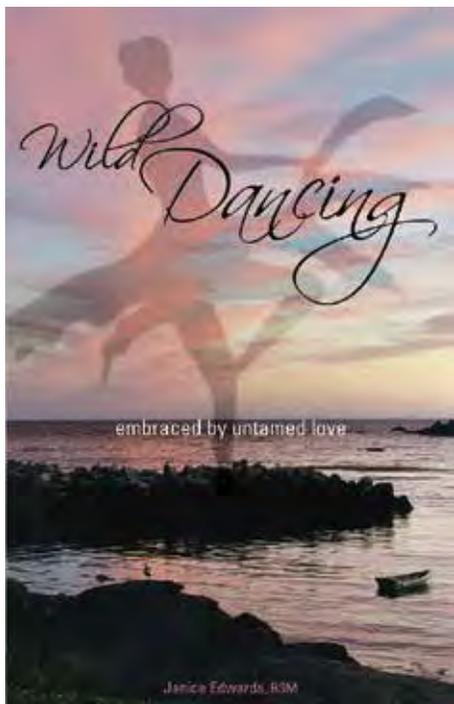
of churches and community organizing where there is less split between religion and spirituality. People need each other and the common good is still prized. God is not only a personal experience but also one in community celebration of family, culture, and arts. Seventh, I have a growing concern that poor people have few opportunities for retreat, spiritual direction, inner work, or any atmosphere for silence and reflection. These are becoming the experiences of the upper middle class. Eighth, I am touched by the enormous love of the human experience, where an aunt or a great grandmother raises young children at the cost of great sacrifice of time, energy, and resources. Ninth, witnessing the deep faith in Jesus among the poor, I am seduced into a prayer of trust and surrender. Tenth, I am filled with gratitude for the confidence people have placed in me at their most vulnerable moments.

The greatest challenge resulting from all these experiences is the feeling of not belonging anywhere. I call this double marginalization. As an educated white male in a religious community, I have the option to leave the margins. Most of the people I have served do not

have that opportunity. Each time I left for good reasons, there was survivor's guilt even in the face of burnout. Yet when I return to family, friends, even religious confreres, they cannot know what I have witnessed and experienced. They usually don't even want to know, for it might disturb them. One day, years ago, while I was in Oakland, I visited my mother in Maine. She was watching the show *Top Cop* on television. The scene of the arrest was literally down the street from where I was residing. This tragic set of circumstances was entertainment for my family in Maine! I lived the scourge of drugs, violence, and family dissolution in the neighborhood. I was frustrated, angry, filled with conflicting emotions. But most of all, I felt alone. Yet, I had for a brief moment a vision of how God sees us with deep compassion, and I was consoled beyond words.



*Don Bisson is a Marist Brother living in New York City, New York, USA. He has a doctor of ministry from the Pacific School of Religion in the area of spiritual direction and Jungian psychology.*



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## Acompañantes Espirituales

Barbara Winston [Nevada, USA]

*Acompañantes Espirituales* (spiritual companionship) is a model of spiritual director training with a focus on currently unserved members of the community. It has been developed in response to the shifting demographics of Hispanic immigrant communities and the need for resources and support to integrate their multi-cultural life with their faith and be better prepared to minister to each other.

*Acompañantes Espirituales* grew out of formal research and development efforts as documented in *A Vision for Spiritual Direction in the Diocese of Monterey, California*. The bi-lingual and bi-cultural program generates a process of growth, listening, and ministry whereby participants become more spiritually and communally self-reliant. In year one, we support growth in awareness of individual spirituality. In years two and three, participants continue to grow in consciousness of how God is moving in their life with a new awareness of the movement of God in other's lives as well.

We recently asked participants of our program some specific questions and received meaningful responses.

### What did you enjoy most about this experience?

Participants expressed their greatest enjoyment came as they gained more experience in trusting God, themselves, and others.

**If you were starting all over, would you still participate in this program?** Participants were one

hundred percent affirmative in their response to this question. Most expressed a sense of the sacred in journeying with others as God's love and presence became more fully alive.

### What have you learned from this experience?

One person shared, "God works and loves through me often. I am blessed by others." Another said, "... [I am] beginning to recognize anger I've held since childhood—didn't realize how this long held anger can influence my thoughts and behaviors even today."

### What has been the greatest benefit to you in this program?

Participants shared their sense of joy at having a safe place to tell their stories; helping to heal relationships among family and community members; learning better life balance in work, prayer, and ministry; and reconnecting with faith community in a new way with an increased sense of a call to serve others.

Participants continue to express the significant impact spiritual direction and spiritual director formation and training have had on their lives. People from both the Hispanic and non-Hispanic cultures, even those with extensive spiritual formation and leadership experience, benefit from one-on-one spiritual direction. As was envisioned at the onset, not every intern will end up becoming a spiritual director. Team members, together with a total of twenty-six participants, observe and sift through the individual's spiritual and human gifts noticing if this ministry is in sync with their perceived call to serve.

Special attention needs to be paid to the experiences of those often isolated and somehow overlooked, "on

the margins." By God's grace, the inclusive formation opportunity that began in this community will continue to be encouraged and supported for all those who are open and would benefit within the diocese and beyond.



*Barbara Winston is a spiritual director and peer group supervisor in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.*

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## Beauty on the Margins

**Tessi Rickabaugh [Missouri, USA]**

I am a woman between worlds. I am white, and I am native. I am a Christian, and I am a healer. I am a mother, and I have born no children. I belong many places, and am fully at home nowhere. Perhaps this is why I have always drawn people who feel they don't belong.

At first, it was "misfit teens." Goth kids with black lipstick and multi-colored hair; deaf teenagers whose emotional struggles kept them from academic success; young adults whose conservative church didn't provide a safe space to discuss their questions around sexual orientation and identity. I wanted to offer them solutions, but didn't have any to give. I quickly learned that they didn't want solutions anyway. They just wanted to tell their story, and maybe hear a little of mine.

Maya Angelou once said, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." I have seen this truth confirmed time and again as I gently receive a story of deep pain, of marginalization, of having one's instinct or identity devalued or condemned, of being misunderstood or unheard. There is something about telling one's own story and being deeply heard that is healing at a level I cannot deny. I received story after story, and watched the agony melt away as my presence brought God into the story beside me, even though I had no idea what I was doing, or why. That's when I discovered spiritual direction.

The funny thing about untold stories is that they don't have to be bad to cause agony. Receiving the stories of teens I worked with made me desperately want to share my own story. I tried to tell bits of it: my struggle to reconcile all the conflicting pieces of myself, my battle identifying as a woman without having married or born children, my questions about the God I know versus the God I thought the Bible revealed, the



difficult beauty of receiving the stories of others, the spiritual awakening I was experiencing. People tried to listen, tried to relate, but most of my story was so far outside their experience that they just didn't know what to do with me. Sometimes their attempt to help or counsel did more damage than good. I didn't need help, I just needed my story to be heard by someone who could say, "Right there. Do you see the beautiful presence of God *right there*, in your own story?"

Spiritual direction has been life altering for me. In my spiritual directors I have found women who listen deeply to what I don't even realize I'm saying and their caring attention blesses my journey as I continue to grow into the beautiful, unique woman I was created to be. This is what I, in turn, offer to my spiritual directees; a welcoming space to share their story, a loving

presence to companion their journey, and a story of my own to remind them there is beauty out here in the margins.



**Tessi Muskrat Rickabaugh** is a graduate of Shalem Institute's spiritual guidance program. Between home educating her daughter and writing, she provides spiritual direction in English and American Sign Language and manages The Barefoot Journey, an online community of people seeking to recognize God in the raw beauty of their story.

Connections

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