

Connections

The Newsletter of Spiritual Directors International

From the Executive Director:

Mother Teresa once said that, "The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved."

As I read through the articles you will find in this issue of *Connections*, I was struck by how relevant Mother Teresa's words are to our work as spiritual directors. We help the lonely, and we ourselves can be very lonely. It's the nature of our work, and the price we sometimes pay for our calling.

Spiritual Directors International's theme for the next three years is "Seeking Connection," which is another way of seeking community, often the antidote to loneliness.

New Contemplative Sarah Cledwyn identified with loneliness and despair in her article where she exclaims that in "the face of darkness and pain, spiritual direction felt like a luxury—an irrelevant and privileged retreat," before concluding that in spite of that feeling, spiritual direction is ultimately the tool that helps ground us in connection; seekers and spiritual directors alike.

Leslie Aguillard reflects on a similar paradox when she notes the increasing emptiness and alienation of our lives in front of computer monitors and screens, while celebrating the role of those very screens in allowing her to intimately connect with her own spiritual director.

Brigitta Sassin, Karen Erlichman, Cynthia Bailey Manns, and Ravi Verma explore the breakdown of connection and community experienced by refugees and others beset

by the rising tides of violence, hatred, and inequality in the world. Their articles raise the question, how might spiritual direction contribute to more peace and justice for all?

All of our contributors reach similar conclusions about the need to listen, contemplate, and discern, in order to help others—and ourselves—struggle through feelings of abandonment and disconnection.

The answers all appear to ultimately lie in rebuilding connections and being in community.

And what of us, occasionally lonely spiritual directors?

Perhaps it is the awareness that we must live and struggle with paradoxes, and learn to be lonely and connected at once, and in solitude and in community simultaneously.

As I begin this exciting adventure as the executive director of SDI, I too long for connection with each of you. If you have a question, comment, or need for dialogue around a certain topic, I welcome your messages. We have set up a [web form](#) as a way for me to connect with the over 7,000 member of SDI. ✨

Anil Singh-Molares

Executive Director



Love Neutralizes Hate

Sarah Cledwyn [Minnesota, USA]

Help us to understand and embrace the fears that bind us, that we may grow in courage, and challenge injustice wherever it prevails. For as we withdraw our projections upon others, balance and harmony adorn us; our peaceful presence becomes a blessing to the world; we become at one with all of Creation. Yes, as our hearts are awakened to your Presence within us, we are led back to the Source of all life.

—Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, "Psalm 109"

This summer was a difficult one in the Twin Cities in Minnesota, USA, where I live. Police killed another black man. Philando Castile was pulled over for a broken tail light and killed in front of his girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter while reaching for his identification. Philando worked in the public schools and knew the names of all the kids. He had no criminal record. Witnesses at the scene after the incident reported that there were no broken lights on his vehicle.

There are no words to describe the heartbreak, sorrow, and rage that filled me upon hearing this news. The

immensity of racism seemed to make anything I could do feel feeble and too small. Is there anything at all that I could contribute that would feel in any way like "enough?"

I found myself joining my community to march, protest, and occupy. I had a difficult time leaving the protests to put my children to bed, rest myself, and to show up to offer and receive spiritual direction. Nothing seemed like enough. In the face of the darkness and pain, spiritual direction felt like a luxury—an irrelevant and privileged retreat.

As I sat at home journaling my confusion and prayer, I recognized the voice of "not enough" and the emotions that come with it. It was the voice of "I am not enough," the voice of fear and separation saying that nothing I could do would solve this primal woundedness. And this is true. There is nothing I can do alone. And it is true that coming from a place of I, separated from the "we," there isn't enough. The only abundant "enough" comes from the source of all. Separation is a costly illusion. God is the absolute center and truth; no one is excluded. There is no poverty in God, no other. The energy and power that come from connection with love deep in us, between us, and beyond us is the force large enough to heal this dire wound in us.

Spiritual direction reminds us that the Holy is present everywhere. There are abundant ways to engage in the work of justice. All of them matter. Returning to the source of all life, and acting from that centered place of love, brings us into balance and invites others to join us there. In that space, I have compassion for myself, Philando, Philando's family, the police officer, and for our country as we are invited to do our shadow work of withdrawing projections of separation and fear that are forced on black and brown people. From this place of connection, spiritual direction and contemplative practice seem like essential tools to sustain our work of challenging injustice. Gandhi says, "If a single person achieves the highest kind of love, it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions." And what is spiritual direction except coming together in the presence of love, again and again, until we are harmonized with

it? Until there is no question that we ourselves are not separate, but invited to bring the depth of Love to the world together. That knowing gives me the courage to face my own shadow and let go of my calculations of enough. That love reminds me of what I know. We are one. The action that flows from oneness blesses and moves the world. When we realize this truth together, there will be enough for us all.



Sarah Cledwyn, MA, is a Unitarian Universalist spiritual director in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. A 2014 New Contemplative, Sarah works with individuals, couples, groups, and institutions to open awareness in service of growing towards more life and love.



Finding Unexpected Connection

Leslie Aguillard [Colorado, USA]

I grew up in the era of letter writing, a quaint and patient art form I still enjoy. When the convenient speed of e-mail dawned on me, I took to it readily and

was able to keep in touch with far-flung old friends I could have lost track of otherwise. Even with e-mail's drawbacks, like easily misinterpreted terseness, distant friendships were maintained when travelling to visit became, at least for me, too expensive.

Sadly, most of my old friends have passed on. I've tried

to replenish people contacts through the Internet, but have found too many platforms of unilateral opinionating growing more and more divisive. Anonymous "venting" is certainly a form of release, but I rarely found it productive on the Internet. Why do we even bother responding to that sort of stuff? Because the Internet is *there*, and *there* is where the people are.

We need people—not Pokémon Go, politically inflamed posts, or pseudo-intellectual memes. While I have posted my share of cliché pop psychology and spiritual aphorisms, these do not fulfill my need for deep or real connections with other human beings.

As we age and isolate more in front of small digital screens and desktop monitors, I've sensed a great emptiness spreading throughout The Force. Despite rush of tragic global events unfolding in real time, and hot societal trends that have both amused and caused me to weep—I still need real personal time with real people. I needed to take a serious look at those convenient and instant communication forms and rethink what I was doing with my limited time. Thank God for my spiritual director Jay, though he lives several states and a time zone away! This is where the Internet, phone, and e-mail worked to fulfill its promise!

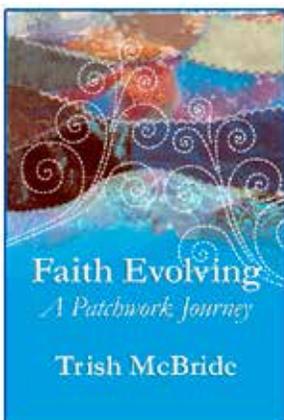
Jay and I are the same age, and had known each other for over twenty years prior to him becoming my spiritual director. When we first met, via e-mail, we argued so intensely that we had to stop talking and e-mailing altogether! Yet, years later, somehow, we found ourselves again part of another spiritual

organization. At that time, I was being ordained a priest. Jay, my soon-to-be spiritual director, was already ordained, and I was informed he was willing to fulfill the role of spiritual director for me.

Both intrigued and surprised, I was relieved that here was someone who had not written me off entirely! If he could move past those old e-mail arguments, so could I. We had evolved, and come to understand the role of non-local communication much better. I took the chance and challenge offered by Jay and it has been wonderful—healing, collegial, warm, and trusting—and instead of debating over philosophical minutia, we grew to know one another, and, as it turned out, we are so similar it is nearly comical. This marvelous long-distance friendship would not have been possible without that danged digital Internet connection.



Leslie Aguillard was ordained to the priesthood in Fairfield, Iowa, USA, in May 2012 after a very long road through seminary that began in the former Church of Antioch, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA. Currently she posts the weekly prayer list to the e-mail server for the Ascension Alliance community. Her virtual church is on Facebook, The Independent Catholic Church of Christ the Healer, and she is an interfaith supporter and endeavors to facilitate peace among people whenever possible.



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Listening to the Unspeakable

Brigitta Sassin [Hesse, Germany]

Known for its big airport, Frankfurt has also become an international city with people from more than 180 nations. For the past thirty years, Eritreans have settled in greater Frankfurt and with the increase of new refugees during the past two years, we estimate them now to number around 20,000 people—our city has become one of their centers in Germany. Eritrean Catholics are a small and very vibrant part of it. My interactions with these refugees have been powerful.

Two elderly men, one of them in suit and tie, want to talk with me. They're angry because of what they say is injustice and exclusion they experience in their parish. I should help them win their rights and justice. It takes me several months until I start to understand them. Maybe the injustice they have to tolerate is much bigger: Their hopes for a free Eritrea haven't come true. They feel betrayed. As they grow old, the situation in Eritrea is only worsening.

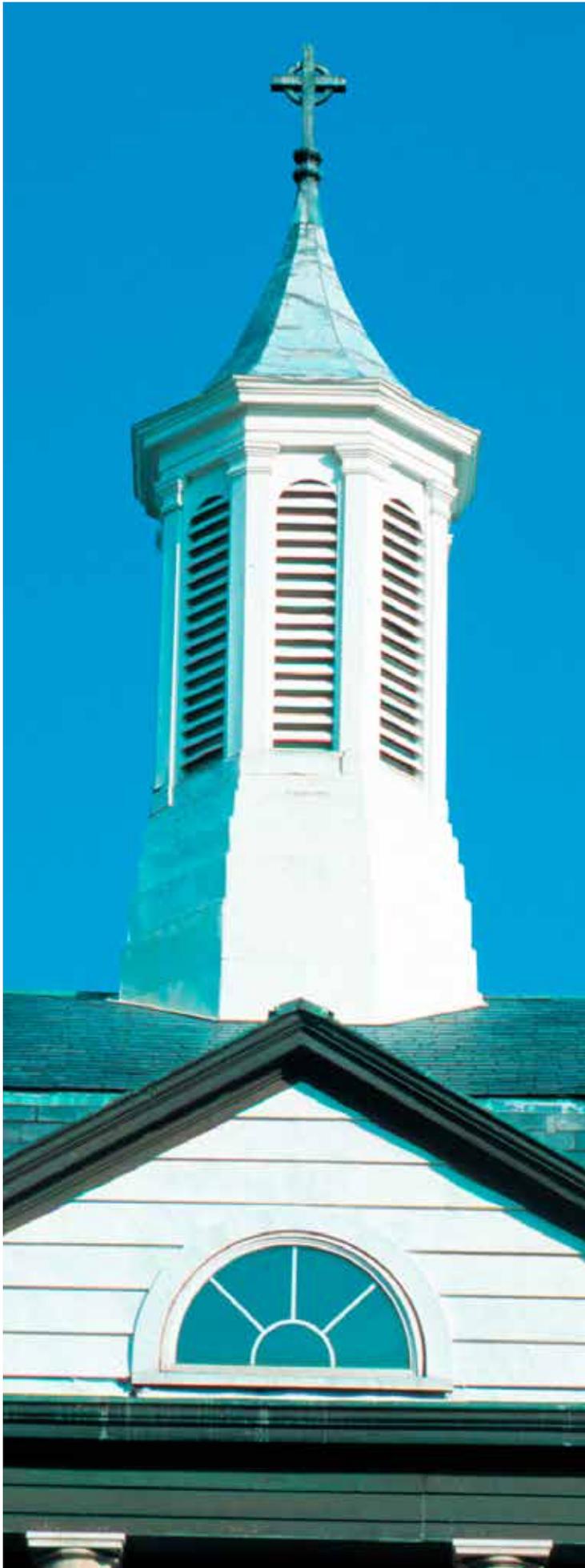
To the question of how she has come to Germany, a twenty-four year old woman answers simply: "by foot." With fifty other young people, she's part of the Eritrean Youth Choir. Most of its members have come to Germany within the past one or two years. Singing helps them to find strength.

Parents come to ask me for advice. Their daughter, aged fifteen (born and brought up in Germany), has run away for the second time to find refuge with the Children's Welfare Office. As parents they should be strict and keep certain rules, they say. Looking at them, I'm reminded of the woman's story. She was a freedom fighter during the independence war against Ethiopia. Now her daughter seems to fight for freedom and independence.

A woman in her fifties shares about her mother who brought her up according to the Orthodox tradition. As she shares memories of her childhood, she quietly tells me that she was circumcised—according to her mother, an honor. I am horrified and remain quiet. We share a moment of silence.

A man takes out his mobile phone and shows me twelve photos of relatives and friends—people he knew and loved. During summer 2015, they all drowned in the Mediterranean Sea; there's not even a grave, a place to mourn. I'm at a loss of words.

I don't claim that my ministry increases peace and justice; this seems far too grand. None of these people asked for spiritual guidance; none of them come with a contract on a monthly basis. But I know that listening makes a difference—to them and to me. Even when I sometimes still complain about "these crazy Eritreans," I know their life stories are upside down. I remember



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moments in my life when family and friends told me that I am crazy. Then are we alike? They transform me. I am able to give them respect and honor. Maybe that is already a step towards peace and justice.



Brigitta Sassin is a Catholic theologian with pastoral experience in Mauritius, India, and Germany. Since 2005, she has been a pastoral worker and spiritual director in Frankfurt, Germany, where she accompanies parishes of Catholic immigrants and initiates projects of better understanding between Muslims and Christians.

A New Chapter Begins

John Pollard, MA, RP [Ontario, Canada]

I am very excited with the prospect of joining the SDI staff. I look forward to working with the SDI staff, coordinating council, and on behalf of SDI's seven thousand spiritual directors and the people they serve, to continue building on the very strong foundation that has been laid and developed over the last twenty-five years.

—Anil Singh-Molares

These few words from our new executive director signal an exciting new chapter in the life of Spiritual Directors International. The previous chapter came to a close late last year when the former executive director, Liz Budd Ellmann, resigned from SDI at the conclusion of the very successful twenty-fifth anniversary year.

We were fortunate to have Larry Pennings take over as interim executive director for the ensuing months. Larry is a long-time SDI member and has facilitated a number of meetings and events for us; he was well positioned to take over the reins of SDI until a new executive director could be appointed. The coordinating council and SDI staff have all been very impressed with Larry's dedication to his role and are very grateful for his collaborative approach during this time.

Not long into the New Year, we sought assistance from Raffa, an executive search firm with a speciality in serving non-profits. Catrese Brown, our main contact there, accompanied us each step of the way during the recruitment process. We were delighted to receive many strong applications for this position, and with each series of meetings and interviews, the process narrowed in on a small number of candidates. Our final discernment in July led all seven members of the

coordinating council to unanimously support Anil's appointment as SDI's next executive director. We are very excited to have Anil on board and look forward to introducing him to the membership at the [Seeking Connection educational events](#) in Toronto.

This "changing of the guard" was also mirrored in the coordinating council. July brought an end to Sophia Park's three-year term as a council member, and we offer deep gratitude to Sophia for her years of service. Two new members joined the coordinating council in July: Cynthia Bailey Manns from Minnesota, USA, and Nita Ng from Penang, Malaysia. Welcome, Cynthia and Nita!

During this year of change and renewal for SDI, we are grateful for one thing that did not change: our core staff. Katherine Hampton, John Seymour, and Brittany Waldean have beautifully maintained the functioning of the office and all of our activities during this time. Over the course of the last twelve months, they have worked with three different executive directors, and have done so with great energy, commitment, and grace. Thank you, staff!

The coordinating council is very excited as this new chapter begins, we are happy to be sharing this journey with you, and hope to see you in Toronto in April!



John Pollard, MA, is a spiritual director, registered psychotherapist, and teaches at the Transformational Arts College of Spiritual and Holistic Training in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. John has served on the SDI Coordinating Council since 2014.



Called to Prophetic Action

Karen Erlichman, Cynthia Bailey Manns, and Ravi Verma

In her article, "Friends of God and Prophets: Transformation for Justice," Sister Mary Ann Scofield, RSM (of blessed memory) proposes a triune paradigm for spiritual direction formation that leads us to the prophetic edges of our calling.

I want to explore how God's action in our lives first creates friendship, then transforms us to the point where we see the world as God sees it, and how this necessarily moves us, willingly or not, into a prophetic stance with the poor and against the unjust structures of our world. In that context, we can look together at how our training programs encourage or impede this threefold transformation. (Scofield, RSM, Sister Mary Ann. 2005. "Friends of God And Prophets: Transformation For Justice". In Sacred Is The Call: Formation & Transformation In Spiritual Direction Programs, 1st ed., p. 200. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company.)

Over the past year we have witnessed a series of violent assaults on communities around the world. Increased terrorism, racial profiling, hatred, and xenophobia have awakened us anew to our responsibility as spiritual directors to inhabit the prophetic edges in which we find ourselves, and perhaps more importantly, where God has placed us.

As soul friends, teachers, and mentors in the spiritual direction community, we have turned to each other for compassionate listening, soul sanctuary, and encouragement on the front lines of spiritual activism. We have had frequent early morning phone calls during which we have shared our grief, fear, tears, and wonder. We know we are not alone in struggling to find safe places to share our souls. We have sat with our spiritual directees as they ask similar questions.

We have been wondering together about which prophetic edges God is calling us to at this moment in our collective lives. In our conversations, we prayed and dreamed together about how we are being called to prophetic action in the service of democracy. We

specifically discussed issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, age, disability, nationality and geography, religion, and faith tradition; in other words, nearly every unique manifestation of the Divine image.

Spiritual Directors International is our shared spiritual home (virtually). We are connected as a global community by our service, ministry, and calling. When the world cries out in pain, we not only hear the cries; we cry with the world. We respond not only with our hearts; we “pray with our feet” like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

SDI members are scattered across the globe, but we have several print and online formats through which we connect. There are also informal networks among us—soul friends and affinity groups. We know how to create a safe container for wisdom to emerge, and we are wondering how we, as a global community of spiritual directors, might connect and collaborate, such as:

- Discern our call, in community, to prophetic ministry
- Encourage sacred conversations locally and globally
- Participate in the best use of social media, the SDI Facebook page, and blog to share our stories of sacred activism
- Provide leadership and ideas for SDI conferences, Leadership Institutes, publications, and other formats to foster dialogue. Can we create an *SDI Learns from ...* video about the connection between spiritual direction and social justice?
- Foster conversations, leadership, and sacred activism that build bridges across lines of

age, race, religion, gender, economic class, geographic boundaries, and affiliation

- Share resources on best practices in our formation and training programs around this topic

In these troubled times, we need each other perhaps more than ever. Together, and with God’s grace, we can transform our world. To further engage on this topic, listen to a [recorded dialogue](#) and complete this [short form](#) to be contacted to continue the conversation.



Karen Lee Erlichman, DMin, LCSW, provides psychotherapy, spiritual direction, supervision, and mentoring in San Francisco, California, USA.

Cynthia Bailey Manns is an experienced spiritual director with a background in social work, human development, spirituality, and spiritual development.



Ravi Verma has experience with a variety of cultures, religious traditions, boards, and a combination of a contemplative stance with organizational development and management experience.





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