WHAT’S IN A NAME?

“That which we call spiritual direction by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Or would it?

Shakespeare’s famous phrase, slightly adapted here, pointed adroitly to the limits of language. The “finger pointing to the moon” is not the same as the moon itself after all.

So, what of “spiritual direction?” Is it the same by any other name?

The term “spiritual director” has many associations and a long history in the Abrahamic faiths traditions, where it has been closely associated with certain strands of Judaism, with spiritual directors referred to as “Hashpa’ah” or “Mashpai’h,” depending on the strand; Christian and, much later, in particular Ignatian spirituality; and in the Islamic Sufi path, where the spiritual director is known as a “Murshid.” But even within these traditions there is great (and increasing) variability in how the terms are used, defined, and contextualized. The common approach that they share is that in all of them, the spiritual director looks to engage with seekers in an open and non-judgmental way, steeped in contemplative practice and deep listening, to provide guidance and enable seekers to get closer to God.

In Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Vajrayana Buddhism, spiritual teachers or guides are referred to as “gurus,” or their equivalent. In Sanskrit, “Guru” means “weighty or grave,” with the connotation of “elder teacher,” or “esteemed teacher.” But the long story of that term contains overtones of someone who removes spaces and obstacles that may lie between us and our spiritual evolution. Gurus can develop highly personalized relationships with seekers, with a dynamic that is distinct to each teacher but that is deep and all pervasive.

In most strands of Buddhism, it is more common to refer to spiritual “friends,” rather than to “directors,” “guides,” or even “teachers.” These friends encourage and allow us to evolve, such that the Buddha was reported to have said that spiritual friendship is the sum total of the spiritual life (in the Meghiya Sutta of the Pali Canon). Spiritual friends help seekers by allowing intimacy; virtuous conduct; dialogue which facilitates and encourages practice; determination, dedication, and enthusiasm for the good; and awareness of impermanence. Spiritual friends, therefore, are the most important key in the spiritual path.

Other examples include followers of Indigenous religions, who usually work with Shamans, or Taoists and Confucians, who learn how to connect with their true natures through wise and learned teachers.

Finally, a significant portion of the over 1.1 billion people worldwide that the Pew Research Center refers to as
“unaffiliated,” many of whom describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” seek connection with a higher power and a larger meaning in variety of ways: for example, by working with philosophy teachers as their guides, or through their work with psychologists, and other types of counselors.

Given all of this, how are we to approach the issue of who qualifies as a “spiritual director/guide/teacher/friend/counselor/advisor?”

Here are some ideas.

First, spiritual direction should be an inclusive, rather than an exclusive concept. It should always strive to welcome and invite, rather than to separate and divide, which it does on occasion, often unwittingly.

Second, at their roots, spiritual directors are individuals committed to helping others seek and find connection with a higher power, however that power might be defined. This characteristic always holds true, regardless of the particular spiritual configuration or orientation of the directors and seekers.

At a recent retreat I had with the SDI Coordinating Council, we identified some other key factors to look for in authentic spiritual directors, namely that they be:

- rooted in personal experience, and display “depth.”
- willing to follow universal ethical guidelines, summarized as “Do no harm.”
- accountable in a community setting.
- committed to contemplative, compassionate listening, with respect for the agency of directees.
- supervised by other spiritual directors and accountable through that direct supervision.
- committed to ongoing education and learning.

What do you think? What characteristics do you see as essential in a spiritual guide? As SDI strives to broaden its spiritual director public square, your thoughts are most encouraged and welcome.

Please send them to us at listen@sdiworld.org and we will publish a sample in our next edition.

—Anil Singh-Molares
In response to the following question:

“When you have experienced deeply meaningful community with other spiritual directors, what characteristics of the community made it valuable?”

“Characteristics of the deeply meaningful community with other spiritual directors include the following: the authenticity of the participants, trust, honesty, vulnerability, rapport, respect, acceptance, and a non-judgmental deep listening. All of these characteristics allowed members of the group to feel free to be real, and share what has been on our minds and hearts even when we didn’t have the words yet. Often the group helped individuals articulate the niggles that obsess us and needed to be released.”

—Marjorie English, OSF

Let us know your thoughts about spiritual director community at listen@sdiworld.org.
BIRTHED

Glory be for lambs that leap
and mincing calves that bolt and bleat
for runnels parched then deeply sodden
rivers bogged and swift gills streaming
for thin leaved tendrils prodding curling
horschair patching thinning winging
all birds that shriek and squawk and plunge
into the heights and depths as one
below the wave beyond the cloud
for April’s steely measured coming
May’s most ardent roving raving
Hue and dab so mildly hurled
and hearts
that flutter
birthed
for earth

after Gerard Manley Hopkins

—Barbara Hudspith, Ontario, Canada
All aggregated things
Are like a dream, a fantasy,
a bubble and a shadow,
Are like dewdrops and
a flash of lightning.
They should be regarded as such.
—and so you should
Consider in this way
all this transient world:
As a star at dawn,
a bubble floating in a stream,
A dewdrop, a flash of lightning
in a summer cloud,
the flickers of a lamp,
a phantom, and a dream."

—excerpted from the Diamond Sutra,
trans. by Anil Singh-Molares

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