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These are a few modern examples. Christian and Hebrew Scriptures are chock-full of stories that illustrate these “ungracious grace” opportunities, accepted or rejected. Thrown overboard in a storm and swallowed by a large fish, Jonah finds unlikely refuge and is moved to praise and thanksgiving (Jonah 1–2). (Note: I am using the NAB for this and other biblical references.) An unmarried teenage virgin named Mary receives a visit from a fearsome angel and agrees to conceive a child, the Son of God, in a religious and cultural climate decidedly hostile toward unwed mothers (Luke 1:26–38). Certain of his faithfulness to the laws of God, a rich young man is dismayed to find that following Christ demands further and deeper commitment of his life, time, and treasure (Mt 19:16–22).

God’s Opportunity Disguised as “Big Problem”

My “big problem” came in my fifth year as the coordinator of a Certificate Program in Spiritual Companionship. The program, operating in an archdiocesan Catholic university setting, formed in 1987 as the direct result of expressed needs that emerged from a synod where listening sessions were conducted with every parish in the diocese. Among the needs that surfaced were those of people who desired spiritual direction but were unable to find a director, and those of lay and religious ministers expressing a need for training in spiritual direction. Having been a student in the first class of this new certificate program, called the Spiritual Companionship Program, I was well aware of the clear focus on formal spiritual direction ministry in our curriculum. Most of my classmates had worked in ministry for many years. Many had advanced degrees in ministry and were seasoned in the spiritual life. A sizeable number of us continue to offer spiritual direction in our community to this day.

So what was my big problem? The majority of applicants to our program were frequently not educated as professional ministers. Often, they were not even lay ministers. Some were not particularly seasoned in their prayer life. They did not have formal theological background. A few were not even sure what spiritual direction was! Had we failed to define and promote our program properly? Had we been too lax in our interviewing? Should we be weeding out those who, while clearly people of faith and prayer and desirous of helping others grow in the spiritual life, could not clearly articulate where and how they would practice their work as spiritual directors when they exited our program three years hence? Where were the “ideal” applicants? What marketing strategies had we failed to
develop to find them? In short, where had we gone wrong and how were we going to fix it?

Social Analysis as “Tending the Holy”

Encouraged by my colleagues at the St. Thomas University Institute for Pastoral Ministries (IPM), under which our program operates, and guided by our mission statement [see sidebar, p. 29], I determined that a qualitative analysis would be the most helpful first step toward finding answers to this “big problem.” This article describes how the Spiritual Companionship Program was analyzed and what unexpected insights and changes came as a result of careful attention to the community and the contexts out of which it operates. The original Spiritual Companionship Program evolved from an exclusive focus on the training of spiritual directors with a traditional paradigm, to the inclusion of an additional track called Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life to accommodate an emerging paradigm. This study illustrates how attending to an institutional structure, such as a spiritual direction training program, by way of conducting a social analysis, is a strategy for “tending the holy.”

Methodology

This analysis was appropriated from a model and method developed by James and Evelyn Whitehead, where data is collected from three distinct arenas: personal experience, the religious tradition, and the culture. From these three distinct arenas the various data collected will of course set up tensions, contradictions, disagreements, and surprises to be noted and maintained. But in the process of respectfully holding the tension among these different arenas, new perceptions may arise. The aim of the process is that deeper listening and broader focus on the three arenas will produce insights, strategies, and actions that yield a greater and more dynamic reality.

I view this method of analysis as a structural discernment where one chooses to be attentive and present to the “voice” of God in the culture, the religious tradition, and the personal experience of an organizational issue. In a sense, the program became my directee and I its spiritual director. I was responsible for listening deeply to God’s voice articulating through the three arenas.

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To assist in the corporate evaluation of the data I would collect, a committee of interested IPM (Institute for Pastoral Ministries) staff was formed, including the director. They reviewed the data I collected as well as my evaluations and recommendations, so that any indicated changes in structure and curriculum could take effect in the Fall of 2000. What follows is an abbreviated version of a year-long social and qualitative analysis and discernment process of the Certificate Program in Spiritual Companionship.

The Voice of Religious Tradition

Because our program, though open to people of other faiths, is offered in a Roman Catholic setting, I first turned to the US Catholic bishops. A document written at the same time our program was formed not only described but encouraged the movement of all lay faithful into more systematic education in theology, scripture, spiritual life, religious studies, and spiritual direction. The bishops characterized this lay education as critical in helping the people of God to understand and communicate the truths of faith in new ways, as something that should be extended to more laypeople, and as necessary if evangelization were to achieve full potential. (See “Committee on the Laity” reference in
Already I was hearing a fresh but unsettling new “voice” from the American bishops. What if God wanted even more from our training program than to supply spiritual directors to serve in parishes and retreat centers in South Florida? I argued with this new “voice.” At the time our program was formed, there was an expressed need in our diocese for spiritual directors—because few directors were available to meet the growing need, and because people were offering direction without the benefit of training. If we admitted those who were not explicitly interested in the ministry of spiritual direction, even if those applicants desired personal spiritual growth and wanted to help others, would we weaken our ability to provide high-quality formation to those who did want to become practicing directors?

A review of the current practice of the ministry of spiritual direction raised even more questions. There was, and is, confusion about the naming and definitions of various “listening” ministries. Gerald May has identified a spectrum of language for these, including such terms as “formal spiritual direction,” “mentoring, discipling, and eldering,” and “informal companionship.” In the history of Christian spiritual direction there is the practice of free and voluntary choice of the director by the directee, as offered by desert fathers and mothers of the early church, the medieval mystics, and most of today’s spiritual directors. Another form that could be termed interventional is the spiritual direction that happens in a directed retreat setting such as with the Ignatian Exercises. This is interventional only in the sense that it occurs in a setting chosen by the directee, where a prescribed format facilitates the spiritual direction experience. Institutional forms of spiritual direction can be found even today. An abbot may be chosen to provide spiritual direction to a religious community, or a list of approved spiritual directors and confessors may be provided for seminarians in a diocese. (See Davies.)

As I moved through the historical literature on the Christian practice of spiritual direction, my sense was that these different categories developed as a response to the spiritual needs of people in particular times and circumstances. Rather than helping to clarify the “proper” practice of spiritual direction, they simply confirmed the myriad ways that direction has been and can be practiced. I was ready to open my awareness and even my curiosity. What were the needs and circumstances of the people in our community who were seeking spiritual guidance? What motivated people to apply to our program? If forms and ways of practicing spiritual direction changed over the times as a result of people’s needs, might this be one of those times?

God’s Voice in Today’s Culture

My search for God in the “voice” of culture began in the Religion section of a mega-bookstore complete with the requisite coffee bar. From Tom Beaudoin’s illuminating portrayal of the cultural religiosity of Generation X, with its virtual reality, virtual religion, and its distrust of religious institutions, to books describing hundreds of reported apparitions of the Virgin Mary, I had little doubt that contemporary American culture is engaged in a search for God and Spirit. Mainstream media such as USA Today regularly offer articles on America’s search for meaning. A survey of their articles for the previous twelve months revealed titles such as, “Businesses Seek Religion to Improve Bottom Line,” “Employers Hope Spirituality Lifts Workers’ Morale,” “Financial Advice with a Dash of Spirituality,” and “Spirituality Becomes a Hot Commodity.” Cathy Lynn Grossman wrote about peo-
ple signing up at spiritual centers, consulting guides on the Internet, buying large quantities of spiritual books, and described the recent phenomenon of mainstream magazines creating regular columns on spiritual topics.

The “voice” returned to me as I began to appreciate that characterizing the spiritual searching of the growing numbers of bookstore and Internet seekers as shallow may be missing the point. This widespread search for ultimate meaning in daily life and the spiritual hunger for a road map into the realm of the holy helps explain the proliferation of more than 200 spiritual direction training programs throughout the United States and the world in the last fifteen years. (See http://www.sdiworld.org/html/train.html for a comprehensive list of these programs.)

Trainers Voice Their Experience

My next step was to conduct in-depth interviews with coordinators of four spiritual direction training programs around the country—one on the East Coast, two in the Midwest, and one on the West Coast. I also looked at a program in New Zealand. I asked questions about the programs’ duration, cost, application requirements, curriculum and program structure, and the type of certificate or diploma awarded upon completion. I found more similarities than differences between their programs and ours. The biggest difference among programs was tuition cost, but since our tuition is relatively low due to the university’s commitment, this did not seem to be a significant issue in terms of attracting prospective students.

The Unspecified Ministry Appears

I inquired about the name used to describe the ministry students were being trained for. Two said spiritual direction, two said spiritual companionship, and one said faith companioning. In all but one case, coordinators spoke of their programs’ purpose as the training of spiritual directors (regular one-on-one contemplative listening and discernment). Interestingly, the “faith companioning” program coordinator described his curriculum as focused on spiritual direction but added that “those who did not finish with affirmed gifts and skills as spiritual directors would be able to ‘faith-companion’ others in an informal way.”

I asked the coordinators to estimate how many of their graduates actually practiced spiritual direction. I received the following answers:

- “Maybe two-thirds graduate . . . that may be high. . . . Out of ten graduates, six or seven will do spiritual direction and three or four will go on to other things.”
- “We start out with between 75 and 100. By the time we reach Phase III we are down to 25. These 25 would serve as spiritual directors.”
- “I would guess five out of ten.”
- “Our Internship people do spiritual direction. The faith companioning people do other things.”

Another insight had dropped into my sphere of awareness. What if people with training in spiritual direction did other kinds of holy listening that may not yet have a name? What if people with spiritual gifts for this unspecified ministry were applying to spiritual direction programs like ours in response to a call by God? Scripture was helpful in beginning this discernment: “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit” (1 Cor 12:4–7).

My final question to coordinators was, “Do you know what your graduates do when they exit your program if they do not become spiritual directors?” I learned that the majority of graduates used their newly acquired skills to do things such as retreat leadership, hospice service, pastoral ministry, group spiritual direction, social justice work with small groups, prison ministry, and taking communion to shut-ins.

As I continued to collect data on the forms of spiritual direction, I attended the 1999 Symposium and Conference of Spiritual Directors International. In a personal conversation with Jack Mostyn, then on the SDI Coordinating Council, I described my research. Jack had completed a more extensive study on spiritual direction training programs around the country that revealed how many graduates never actually practiced spiritual direction—about 70%. I later learned that this phenomenon was well known in SDI as “the 70% factor.”

I was stunned! What was the wisdom of tailoring our
program for an extraordinarily specific form of ministry that, presumably, would be practiced by less than one-third of our graduates? I was troubled by a nagging “voice” that the actual ministerial training needs of a large majority of our students could be eclipsed or marginalized by a curriculum neither conscious of nor attentive to the way they wished to “be present.” What about those who wished to “listen into presence” the love of Christ in contexts other than the spiritual director’s office? I thought of our applicants: the clinical dermatologist who volunteers at a local hospital teaching residents and indigent patients; the director of a preschool who is sought after by young mothers for holy guidance in raising and educating their children; the AA sponsors; and counselors for homeless, elderly, and mentally ill people. Every one of them applied with the desire to learn how to bring God’s presence to these activities, because they recognized the hunger for it in the people with whom they volunteered, worked, and ministered. What if our marketing strategies were exactly right?! Might God be inviting us to pay attention to another, as yet unidentified and unnamed inner movement in people when they hear about and are drawn to our program?

At the 1999 Symposium the story of SDI’s development as an organization was told. Through this retelling a number of issues emerged. Particularly significant to my “listening” was a statement by Jeff Gaines, then Executive Director, regarding the definition of spiritual direction. “The Council will not define spiritual direction,” he said. “It shall be left to the context.” I heard this statement as clear encouragement to pay attention to my context in South Florida.

The Voice of Personal Experience: Program Graduates

In order to listen to the personal experiences of our program graduates, I conducted a qualitative study through depth interviews with a sample of eighteen graduates. (To make the sample, the random number 6 was chosen, and I started with #6 on an alphabetized list of graduates. I then interviewed every tenth graduate with the same set of questions.) My first questions were designed to elicit responses about our curriculum, program structure, effectiveness of faculty, cost, and location. Those responses were helpful in uncovering student needs that may not have surfaced any other way. Even though we have student evaluations at the conclusion of each class year, these graduates had had time to practice their skills and test the effectiveness of their training. Their input was helpful in crafting our program to be more responsive to the practical needs of our graduates who became spiritual directors.

Graduates were also asked whether our program helped them to “companion” or offer “spiritual direction.” Their responses indicated contradictory, inconsistent, and sometimes interchangeable use of these two terms. To some students “companioning” meant meeting with someone on a regular basis for the expressed purpose of offering spiritual direction. Other students named this work as spiritual direction. Some used the two terms interchangeably to refer to the formal, contractual, regular, ongoing attention to another’s spiritual life.

Others spoke of “companioning” occurring while doing other activities or ministries, almost as a byproduct of another type of relationship. One graduate said, “I helped a Jewish woman in Al-Anon find the God of her understanding. I helped her explore where God had been in her life although she did not put a label on it. She did not call it ‘God.’”

I asked, “Where does spiritual direction or spiritual companionship happen?” While those graduates who were offering formal spiritual direction gave answers such as “my office” or “a counseling room at my church,” others reported that the ministry was happening in a variety of other settings, including at home, in an airplane, at the hospital, in a nursing home, at 12-step program meetings, in a parking lot, at school, on the telephone, in a restaurant, and “under a tree.”

As I listened to the many ways that people in the community were being touched, I realized that not one of the graduates said they were not using their training. On the contrary, all graduate interviewees had a story to tell of how they had been able to minister God’s love and grace to another as a direct result of their training, even if they never once practiced “formal” spiritual direction!
A New Vision

I was impressed by the stories of our graduates. I envisioned grieving families in the intensive care unit of our local hospital, an accident victim on the street, dispirited housewives at the perfume counter of a major department store, a drug addict, the neighbor whose daughter had run away—all of them hungry for God and attended to by our graduates. I recalled the shelves of spiritual books being snapped up by our eager community in the mega-bookstore. Wasn’t this evidence of Christ present in the thirsty, hungry, and sick of Matthew 25? How could the Spiritual Companionship Program turn its institutional back on this startling presence of Christ among us? Further, that same chapter of Matthew is clear enough about the consequences of ignoring those in need when we have ways and means to be of assistance (Mt 25:45–46).

My questions had shifted. I was no longer so concerned about more precise marketing of spiritual direction training because I knew serious spiritual direction students in the community could find us. Instead I wondered how we could be more intentional in our planning to consciously accommodate “the 70%.” How could we take this more informal listening ministry seriously while maintaining the integrity of our spiritual direction training?

Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life Is Born

My colleagues at the Institute for Pastoral Ministries were interested in the results of my research and supportive of accommodating “the 70%.” I wanted to avoid creating a hierarchy between spiritual direction as a ministry for the elite, and these more informal ways of offering a listening presence as a less significant ministry. Jesus discouraged rivalry among his disciples and was emphatic that one disciple would not be greater than another in the Kingdom. On the contrary, the least among us are the greatest (Lk 9:46–48). If we were being called to address the needs of informal listening ministries, how would we keep unity in our program while honoring the diversity?

In our program the point where students began to discern in earnest whether their natural and spiritual gifts support the possibility of a ministry in spiritual
direction occurred in the second year during the Spiritual Exercises. Those who wished to pursue spiritual direction ministry continued a third year for a certificate from our Practicum in Spiritual Direction. Those who did not discern and receive affirmation of a possible ministry in spiritual direction, or who simply did not wish to continue, exited after the second year with a Certificate in Spiritual Companionship. After concluding my program analysis I understood that this arrangement did not do justice to the listening ministries of those students who had exited after Year Two. We agreed that they needed and deserved greater affirmation and also the encouragement and support that a Practicum could offer. We believed that they and their ministry merited institutional support and the dignity of a name.

In September 1999 we enrolled our next class of students into a full, three-year Spiritual Companionship Program with two options. At the beginning of Year Three (Practicum), students declared their desired ministry as either Spiritual Direction or Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life. Only those who completed the full three-year course would be awarded certificates. Students in the Spiritual Direction track proceeded as usual. Students in the Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life track proceeded similarly, except they received their individual and peer supervision using conversations that had occurred in work, home, or community settings where they had helped others attend to the presence of God. Over the Practicum year, they were expected to prepare five verbatims for individual supervision using the same format as those who were in the Spiritual Direction track.

Out of this first Practicum class of twelve students, three discerned that they would pursue the Certificate in Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life. We decided to honor and clarify the goodness of both types of ministry by putting Daily Life students and Spiritual Direction students together in the peer supervision work they both received. The Daily Life students and their work were regarded as seriously as those students offering spiritual direction. Interactions with Spiritual Direction students encouraged Daily Life students to stay focused on God’s presence in their less formal contexts, honing their holy listening skills for everyday situations. They were enabled to avoid the temptation to problem-solve or give advice in more casual encounters. They began to appreciate the goodness of holding sacred space for their “companionee” to explore the guidance God might be offering.

“Chuck” describes a daily life companionship encounter in this way: “I recently ran into someone who was dealing with a failed relationship. The person told me the details of the breakup. In the past, I would have asked questions about what happened to cause the breakup and, in the process, assign blame. In this case, after I listened for a while, I asked the person how she was at the moment with God. She seemed relieved to get off the subject of the breakup and discuss feelings about her God relationship. From this point of view the person discovered that she had actually moved on and did not need to marinate in old pain. The insight I gained in the Spiritual Companion Program allowed me to not focus so much on stories, but on individuals and where they were with God. She welcomed the insight and the opportunity to talk.”

Conversely, Spiritual Direction students were inspired by the work of Daily Life students. The nature of spiritual direction became clearer when it could be compared and contrasted with the ministry of “spiritual companionship in daily life.” They began to see and understand the advantages and dynamics of meeting someone on a regular basis rather than having sometimes only one encounter. They realized that there was a relationship between the ability to stay focused on the movement of God in the life of another and their directees’ clear and stated desire for that focus. A number of Spiritual Direction students looked for opportunities to use some of their contemplative listening skills in relationships with family and friends outside of spiritual direction. They were encouraged to use their gifts in wider arenas than just direction sessions. Several stated that they were more conscious of the opportunities every day to make the choice to be available as a spiritual companion as they went about their lives.

Continuing to Listen

Follow-up interviews with students who completed their Practicum in May of 2002 have yielded heartening stories of how the gift and skill of “presence” has
helped them in their informal practice of holy listening with people who may never have sought or even heard of spiritual direction or companionship.

“Cindy,” a student our Practicum supervisors identified as having demonstrable gifts as a spiritual director, discerned and chose instead to complete her program in Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life. Her rationale was that her work at her church offered numerous opportunities for informal spiritual companioning, and she believed God was calling her to open herself to God’s presence in her home, workplace, and everyday conversations. She related an encounter with a woman she interviewed to serve as a greeter at the church. During the course of the interview, Cindy described a shift in the conversation. The woman volunteered that she was feeling hypocritical and ashamed of her difficulty in breaking a smoking habit since she was sponsoring 12-step women addressing their addictions to alcohol and drugs. Cindy described how, as a direct result of her Practicum work, she discerned an invitation from the Holy Spirit in the rather abrupt shift in the conversation. She asked the woman if she had any sense of what might lie underneath her feelings in the situation. For several minutes the woman pondered the possibility that, indeed, God’s voice and desire to help her might be heard in her feelings of shame. When the woman seemed okay with the unexpected turn of the conversation, Cindy gently returned to the interview.

“Steve,” another graduate who completed his practicum in Spiritual Companionship in Daily Life, described an incident demonstrating levels of awareness he developed that have served him in daily encounters. He spoke of an acquaintance calling him “out of the blue” to declare resentment over an incident that had occurred more than a decade before. The caller described how Steve’s daughter had teased and taunted his son in school and was “scandalized” over the years that Steve was considered a “pillar of the church.” Steve said, “I could feel myself getting angry. I wanted to blast this guy. He could only see his side. But my training kicked in. I just noticed my feelings and kept listening. The more I listened, the more I heard the hurt this guy was feeling behind his words. Even though I was angry, I saw that I was hurting, too.
I knew God was present at that moment. I just told him I was really sorry, and I really was! It must have taken him by surprise, because he began to weep. We had the greatest reconciliation. He even listened to my side of the story! As angry as I was feeling, I don’t think I would have waited on God’s guidance if I hadn’t had the chance to practice doing it and watch my classmates do it for a year. I would have just blasted back.”

Making Room for More

From the time of Mary who, heavy with child, could find no room in the inn (Lk 2:7), to the Canaanite woman who had to argue and beg for her ailing daughter to receive the healing touch of the Lord (Mt 15:12-28), to the little children rebuked by the disciples (Mt 19:13-14), there appears to be a tendency in the human family to differentiate, discriminate, and ultimately, to restrict or prevent the outpouring of God’s grace. The disciples loved the Lord and did not intend to stifle God’s Spirit when they rebuked the little children, but their vision of the Reign of God was not yet big enough to make room for them.

Spiritual directors are needed and treasured by hundreds of people of faith in our community. Tens of thousands of others, some members of faith communities, some belonging to none, yearn for the sacred and seek deeper meaning in the ordinary events that fill their daily lives. They long for fulfilling relationships and work that has meaning, experience broken families and shattered dreams, look for love and wish for peace. Each has within them a longing for the More that my faith tradition tells me was planted in them at the time of their creation, made in God’s own image and likeness. Who will care for these children of God to whom the Kingdom belongs? Who will help them find their way?

Spiritual Companions in Daily Life are equipped to respond to these needs. They are trained to recognize and respond to the nascent desire and sometimes veiled cry for God by people they encounter at home, at work, at church, in other ministries, or in the wider community. Because they learn to attend to the movement of the Spirit, they know how to companion in an attentive and respectful way. As one recent graduate put it, “I know like I never did before that God really does show up, even when people do not call God by name! I just help them talk deeply enough until they find the Holy questions and the path they are looking for.”

To admit and train Spiritual Companions in Daily Life requires a vision of the possibilities and goodness of a less formal listening ministry. The presence of Daily Life students in Spiritual Direction training enhances the education of Spiritual Direction trainees. Spiritual Direction students encourage Daily Life students to be courageous and contemplative in their daily practice. All of this can be done with minimal adjustment to an existing Spiritual Direction training program. Why would we not make room at our inn for such as these?

Bibliography


