An Interview with Roshi Joan Halifax • The Art of Compassion
Can There Be Spiritual Direction Without God? • Spiritual Direction with Young Adult Males
ARTICLES

Contemplative Perspective and Social Action: An Interview with Roshi Joan Halifax
Sean Murphy

The Art of Compassion
Diane W. Stephens

Listening: A Sacred Art and a Spiritual Practice
Kay Lindahl

Can There Be Spiritual Direction Without God?
Jay E. Valusek

Sacred Circles: Utilizing Mandalas in Spiritual Direction
Starr Regan DiCiurcio

Spiritual Direction with Young Adult Males
Anthony L. Blair

A Revitalizing Journey: Spiritual Direction in Protestant Congregations
Angela Reed

FEATURES

Focus

Readers Respond

About Our Authors

About Our Poets and Artists

Reviews

POETRY

counsel for a directee
Sister Lou Ella Hickman, IWBS

Currents
Wendi Romero

Lull
Sarah Rehfelt

Companion on a Journey
Cullene Bryant

REFLECTION

Courage to Explore Hidden Stories:
Sometimes It Causes Me to Tremble
Marlene Marburg
The last time I saw my spiritual director before losing my faith, I remember telling her that whenever I listened inwardly to the "still, small voice" of God—for guidance, for direction, for anything—the voice I heard always sounded suspiciously like me. Talking to myself. And I had this crazy idea that God’s voice ought to sound, I don’t know, different somehow. Alas, it seemed that either God was speaking with a boring Midwestern accent just like mine, or had fallen silent altogether. Maybe God found it amusing just to listen to me talking to myself, I said. But I found it profoundly disturbing, even after spending twelve years on the apophatic path, the via negativa.

I thought I understood these things. I had, after all, gone through training in contemplative leadership and group spiritual direction with the Shalem Institute. I had led prayer groups and retreats. I had facilitated spiritual direction groups in the Episcopal Church. I had read all the books about the dark night, about the wilderness and the desert, about the cloud of unknowing. I had spent years yearning for union with the Divine Mystery, and listening for an answer to the question of my calling to some kind of ministry. And after all that? Nothing. Nada, as St. John of the Cross would say. Nada, nada, nada. He might even say I was progressing nicely as a mystic. But that’s not how things turned out.

What Happened Next

Some months after that meeting with my spiritual director—on Tuesday, November 18, 2003, to be exact—I woke up to discover that God had died during
the night. It was a weird sensation, a terrifying absence beyond anything I had ever experienced before. God was gone—just like that, overnight. I waited, to see if I was mistaken. Weeks. Months. But no. God was dead. At first I just felt numb. But as the realization finally sank in, I felt utterly lost and alone. I cried at times for whole days. It’s one thing for God to give you the silent treatment. It’s quite another for the object of your deepest longing to die without warning. I needed to talk about this monumental loss, to understand what had happened, to work through it and find my way forward. I needed direction. And that’s when things got interesting.

I tried talking with a few friends and colleagues in the contemplative circles to which I belonged at the time, including at least one spiritual director. No one understood. “What do you mean, God … died?” They looked perplexed, as if I had said the sun was just a big light bulb and, unfortunately, it had burned out. “Okay,” I said, “imagine going into the dark night of the soul, and never coming out. The night persists. No dawn, no ‘bright day of the soul’ follows. Just night.” There wasn’t even, as Rilke so eloquently put it, the sound of God breathing in the dark. They stared. Didn’t get it. They tried, of course, out of compassion, or pity. But they couldn’t wrap their heads around it. Why? Because for them God was still alive and well. They could hear God breathing.

I thought about calling up my spiritual director, a wise old nun who quoted Thomas Merton with wit and grace. Ran through imaginary conversations with her. Frowned and pursed my lips. Didn’t call.

If the reference point for spiritual direction, the still point at the center of the turning world, is God; if the voice to which spiritual director and spiritual directee are listening together is God’s; if the ostensible purpose of spiritual direction is to explore and deepen one’s relationship with the mystery we call God—what on earth would we talk about if God, for me, was dead, not just lurking quietly in the shadows doing something mysterious and wonderful? How could I explain the black hole at the center of my being when, for her, the center was still filled with, if not light, at least the apophatic darkness of God? Besides, I was weary already of trying to explain myself, of feeling defensive and guilty, or worse, crazy. I could tell that the people closest to me—some of whom I had actually led some way down the contemplative path—thought that it was just a phase, a crisis of faith from which I would emerge, given time. Looking into their eyes, I could see that they believed, or at least hoped, that I would come back one day. But that isn’t what I needed.

What I needed most was not someone to call me back, but someone to go with me on the frightening journey that lay ahead. Someone who would not assume that either the path or the destination had anything to do with God, apart from letting go. I didn’t know where to find someone like that, so I went my way alone. Sure, I could have gone to a psychotherapist. But what happened that cold November night in 2003 wasn’t in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It was a spiritual crisis. I could have used a spiritual companion.

Spiritual Direction, Round Two

Fast forward seven years. I had just published a small book about my long, painful process of grieving the loss of God. I had also spent years studying Buddhist psychology; learning, practicing, and teaching mindfulness meditation—a contemplative practice without God. But I could not be a Buddhist. I was still too Western, at heart. Recently, while on retreat with clergy and lay leaders, I had met a very open-minded spiritual director to whom I confided that I no longer believed in God yet found myself wanting to revisit and explore my spirituality again, whatever that might mean. I asked if he would be willing to try offering spiritual direction with a guy like me. He said yes. So we gave it a go. Once a month, roughly, for maybe six months. We really tried. But in the end, I weaseled out. I made excuses for not going on, some quite legitimate (like the long drive in horrendous rush hour traffic). But the truth was, it wasn’t working, and I was too skittish to say so in so many words.

What went wrong, you ask? Simple. I could feel his belief in God like a nail in my shoe. Every step along the way, however familiar and nostalgic, was painful for me. It wasn’t his fault, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that God was still the focal point, the center of the circle, for him. He certainly couldn’t abandon that part of his being. I knew that going in, but I had hoped for, well, for something else to happen. I guess I had wanted us to listen
together, not to God, but to my deeper self—my “true self,” God’s analog, if you will. In fact, he was trying to do that. But God was the elephant in the room. I found myself having to lean sideways just to maintain eye contact. Our worldviews never quite joined hands and, alas, I never felt quite as free, safe, and open as I needed to be.

It was, however, a valuable experiment. I began wondering if others had gone through something like I had, had found no one who truly understood, or could benefit from spiritual direction without God. I began to consider doing it myself—offering spiritual direction to people who have lost their faith, yet feel the need to discern and deepen their relationship with ... with, what, if not God?

Well, with their own hearts, with the meaning of their lives, with nature or something larger than themselves, whatever that might be—family, the local community, humanity, or the whole evolutionary web of life of which we are a part. We are, after all, children of the stars—not in some dreamy, metaphysical sense, but literally. Our atoms were forged in the nuclear furnaces of supernovas. Scientifically speaking, the sky is our father, the earth our mother, and all living things our brothers, sisters, and long-distant cousins. Perhaps something in us still yearns for communion beyond the little boundaries of self, tribe, or even species.

This is why I raise the question: Can there be spiritual direction without God? I like to think so. It would, of course, look a bit different.

Am I Nuts or What?

Before I consider what that might entail, there are a couple other questions worth asking. First, are there sufficient numbers to justify spiritual direction without God? I mean, really, am I nuts? Who on earth—besides a few very odd ducks like me—would even want a spiritual director, if they did not believe in God? One might just as well ask why an atheist would want to go to church. But some do. Some call themselves Unitarian Universalists.

What kind of numbers would you need? Only about three million Americans belong to the Episcopal Church. Yet apparently there are enough to justify a bunch of spiritual directors, training programs, peer groups, and such. According to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, some fifteen million Americans say they do not believe in God. Does this mean they’re not “spiritual,” that they’re not on a spiritual path of some kind? I don’t think that’s a safe assumption. Why not? Because elsewhere we learn that about one-fifth of American scientists who do not believe in God nevertheless consider themselves “spiritual” (Ecklund). That’s right: spiritual atheists. Now, I realize that scientists may not be representative of the general population, but the numbers are intriguing. What if a fifth of those Americans who say they do not believe in God considered themselves spiritual as well? That would be roughly three million people—same as the Episcopal Church. Could any of these folks benefit from spiritual direction? Seems quite possible to me. After all, I’m one of them.

Would it violate the whole intent of spiritual direction to leave God out? Another good question. I don’t think so.

Spiritual direction is, in essence, a contemplative process of discernment, much like a Quaker clearness committee. In both cases, the original process is intended to assist an individual in listening to the Voice or attending to the Light within. If we can agree that every human being, including a non-theist, has a voice or light or something wise and “sacred” within, whatever you might call it, then couldn’t these practices help anyone? The Quaker author Parker Palmer thought so. That’s why he took the clearness committee out of the Quaker meeting house and into educational institutions and professional development programs for public school teachers. Given the constitutional separation of church and state, he couldn’t make any assumptions about religious belief in those contexts. So he simply referred to the “inner teacher” as the subject of the communal conversation. Everyone gets the idea of an inner teacher, whether he or she believes in God or not. Palmer successfully “translated” a Quaker spiritual practice for secular individuals. The beauty is that, if a person engaged in that process does believe in God, then God is quite welcome to attend. If a person does not believe in God, no one drags God into the room. The focal point is the deeper self, the inner teacher.

By analogy, I can imagine a spiritual direction process in which at least one focal point is the inner spiritual director, or whatever you want to call it.

I’ve already taken the contemplative practice of lectio
divina out of the church, substituted poetry for the sacred text, and offered it without any reference to God. I call it *lectio poetica*. I have hosted retreats and small groups using poems to open our hearts and minds to the “still, small voice” of the soul, our source of inner wisdom, listening for a word of guidance, comfort, challenge, or direction. I explain honestly where it comes from—the Western monastic tradition—but I have opened it up to anyone, of any worldview. If Palmer can share the clearness committee and I can share *lectio divina* with the world at large, why not spiritual direction?

**From Circle to Ellipse**

Okay, so how would it work, spiritual direction without God? I have already hinted at how I would approach it—largely by substitution.

Let’s think for a moment about what one might substitute for God. Can we agree that, theologically speaking, God is considered personal, wise, and loving? That God is both immanent (deep within the self) and transcendent (beyond or outside of the self)? That God is, in theory, the source of everything in the universe, from the tiniest quark to the mightiest galaxy? Spiritual direction is about attending, together, to the God within and the God without. To capture this idea, draw a circle with a single focal point at the center. Label the center “God,” and the circumference “God.” In this scenario, God is ultimate.

Now, imagine for a moment that God goes on break, steps outside the universe for a vacation, but you continue meeting with your spiritual director. No doubt you would notice a sort of absence but it would not, in fact, feel like a complete void. Why? Because instead of God’s presence, you would begin to notice your own presence, your deeper self, your soul, if you will. If you continued to pay close attention, your presence would feel both personal and, at times, wise and loving, just like God. At the same time, you might begin to notice a subtle web of connections reaching out from the center of your being to others, to friends and family, to the larger society and world, to all living things, even to the vast and mysterious universe beyond the earth, our island home. Spiritual direction, then, would be about attending, together, to the soul within and to that web of outward relationships, surrounded, ultimately, by nature, of which we are but a tiny part. To capture this idea, draw an ellipse with two foci. Label one focus “soul,” the other “spirit,” and the boundary of the ellipse “nature.”

To highlight the difference between spiritual direction with God and without God, it helps, I think, to “split” the apparent unity of God into two foci, corresponding with the dual nature of being human on a spiritual path. “Soul” represents our longing to reconnect with our own deep selves, from which we are so often alienated by the demands of work and life and our automatic reactions. “Spirit” represents our longing to connect with something larger than ourselves, to understand where we fit in the greater scheme of things, to feel embedded in a matrix of meaning beyond our little egos. And, without God, nature is simply the largest and most encompassing reality there is. In this scenario, nature is ultimate.

As a contemplative naturalist, if I were doing spiritual direction without God, I would want to explore and deepen the spiritual directee’s relationship with that which is immanent and that which is transcendent, however he or she might understand those two foci. Can we
agree that these constitute a real spiritual path, and that companionship along the way could be vital and valuable, at least to a few otherwise lonely individuals who might otherwise lose hope?

But What Should We Call It?

Can I honestly call myself a spiritual director if I don’t believe in God? I’m aware that a few Buddhists here and there call themselves spiritual directors, and perhaps a few Unitarians, but the term belongs mostly to the monotheistic spiritualities. Perhaps, without God, spiritual direction ought to be called something else, since most of us associate it with God. Why not the time-honored “soul friend”? That might be a good substitute, given the emphasis on one’s own soul in spiritual direction without God. However, it is also a traditional term from the Western religious tradition.

Okay, how about “existential companion”? That’s getting closer, I think. The spiritual path is about questions of meaning, practices that make sense of our existence, relationships that play out here in this life, in this world, and, of course, learning how to face our own mortality. Love, pain, sickness, aging, dying, and even paying the bills are, or can be, existential issues. Spiritual direction, with or without God, encompasses all of these by bringing our solitude into community—at least a community of two. We are, in essence, existential companions to one another on the sacred journey of life. In the vast expanse of the universe, so far as we know, life itself is exceedingly rare, hence it is sacred. And each of our individual lives is utterly unique. We come equipped with particular capabilities, genetic dispositions, life experiences, limitations, interests, dreams, and, yes, callings. We are “called,” by nature and nurture, to become who we are, to offer our gifts to the world, and ultimately to find our place in what poet Mary Oliver calls “the family of things.” It’s hard to do that alone. We could all use a soul friend or existential companion to help us stay on, or return to, the path—our path—wherever it might lead.

It’s just that it helps if such a companion has been down a similar path, and understands at a gut level what it feels like to walk this way—a way that begins in darkness, off the beaten path, and passes through existential dangers that our friends, back on the highway, may never know or see. This also explains why people like me can’t quite sync up with spiritual directors for whom God is still the center and circumference.

If, therefore, as a spiritual director or existential companion, you encounter someone who, like me, simply can no longer believe, for whatever reason, would you kindly refer them to someone like me? And if, by chance, someone comes to me while God is on vacation, I’ll be sure to send them back to someone like you if, or when, God returns.

References

Currents
Every now and then, take your soul to the river.
Notice the things the river brings—ducks, seaweed, canoes, broken branches, you.
Notice too what it takes away … live things and dead things too, all afloat in a passing water parade.
Wind inseparable from water, feel it penetrate your skin.
Heed the pull of every current curling a finger, calling your name, taking you with it wherever it will.

Wendi Romero