

Presence

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ARTICLES

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The Spirituality of the Spiritual Director 7
by Gerald M. Fagin, SJ

Brief Encounters: What Spiritual Directors
Can Learn from the Short-Term Therapy Model 20
Duane R. Bidwell

TRAINING, MENTORING & SUPERVISION

Friends of God and Prophets: 2002 SDI Symposium Address 33
by Mary Ann Scofield, RSM

TRADITIONS & LEGACIES

The Spiritual Elder: The Early Desert Tradition
and the Eastern Orthodox Way 40
by John Chryssaugis

CONTEXTS & CULTURES

Spiritual Direction for Youthful Seekers 51
by Pat Hendricks

FEATURES

Focus 3

About the Cover 4

Readers Respond 5

About Our Poets & Artists 6

Poetry: "Oasis" 19
by Sam Davis

Listening to Scripture: The Long Road Home 60
by Terri Mifek

Reviews 65

About the cover: "In the Beginning was the Tao."
For information on the artwork, see page 4.

Friends of God and Prophets

The 2002 SDI Symposium Address

by Mary Ann Scofield, RSM

God has been really concerned about the way the world is heading. . . . There seems to be so much greed and strife and wars and troubles, people not taking care of one another. So God resolved to send one of the angels down to earth to check it out. After a few days the angel came back and reported, "It's even worse than you thought, God. About 95% of the people are on the wrong path; but the other 5% are really wonderful."

Hmmm, thought God. That sounds really bad. Maybe that angel was exaggerating. I'd better get a second opinion.

So God summoned a second angel and sent her off to see what was going on around the world. A while later she returned, shaking her head. "I regret to inform you, God, but the situation is exactly as the first angel reported: 95% of the people are not following Your ways; they are lost souls. The other 5%, however, are truly wonderful."

God listened and pondered: What should I do?

Finally, God decided that the first step should be to send an email to the 5% to encourage them to keep up the good work.

So, do you know what was in that email?

No? I guess you didn't get one either!

Actually, for the past few months, I've been waiting for a direct line from God myself to help me with this presentation! That help came in the form of two dear friends in our Mercy Community: a biblical theologian, Mary Criscione, RSM, PhD whose insights into the scriptural understanding of prophecy form the foundation for what follows here tonight; and Marilyn Lacey, RSM, MSW whose contemplative listening and questioning distilled what I hope will be a coherent presentation from my many years and experiences as a trainer of spiritual directors. I come as a peer among peers, wanting to begin a conversation among us on this topic: where do we see the prophetic edge?

I have entitled my presentation, "Friends of God and Prophets." You may recognize the phrase as the title of Elizabeth A. Johnson's 1998 book on the communion of saints. However, Elizabeth herself lifted it

directly from scripture, from the Book of Wisdom, 7:27, “. . . in every generation, she [wisdom] passes into holy souls, and makes of them friends of God, and prophets.”

In tonight’s presentation I 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 three-fold transformation. My personal hunch is that we are far better at training folks to be friends of God than we are at preparing them for the continuing conversion which puts us at odds with a world generally hostile to prophets. I look forward to our dialogue together on that point!

Let’s consider these three phases in our wonder-full, perilous journey into God:

1. First, becoming friends of God
2. Second, being transformed such that we see things, people, events, indeed, all of creation, from God’s perspective
3. Third, staying with this ongoing conversion, this prophetic stance, as it turns life upside down. Or, more precisely, as all hell breaks loose!

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The First Phase: Becoming Friends of God:

Who wouldn’t want to be a friend of God? It is the deepest desire of our hearts: to be fully known and accepted, loved as we are, without reservation; wholly held by God’s compassion, healed of our brokenness, set free to be our best selves. For some few persons I have known, this awareness of being utterly embraced by a loving God has been a priceless gift from their earliest years. For most of us, however, it takes a very long time to absorb the reality of God’s love, no longer just in our heads but right down to our fingertips and our toe-tips! The good news is, after all, beyond all that we could ask or imagine. But when it does take hold, and a human person experiences the radical unconditionality of God’s love, then miracles do occur: joy surges up, affection and freedom

emerge, whole new worlds open up.

In our spiritual direction training programs, I believe we have focused long and well on helping persons to become “friends of God.” We explore the scriptures to discover who this amazing God is, the One who delights in showing mercy, who desires that we have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). With our interns, we study psychology, human growth and development, to understand, yes, that we are wonderfully made (Ps 139) but also that we are fragile and easily hurt, slow to forgive and to heal or be healed. We examine our theologies, our approaches to making sense of our lives, the elements that shape our

spirituality. We teach others how to listen contemplatively, how to identify movements of God, resistance to grace, the tending of the Holy. We need to do all this: as St. Teresa of Avila famously groaned, “God save me from ignorant directors!” As trainers, I believe we have done our homework in this area, and learned a lot together.

We are privileged witnesses to the inner journeys, the struggles, the insights, the pain, the growth, the conversion of persons who confide in us, who come to us for guidance and companionship along the way. We see people literally becoming “friends of God.” This is no small treasure shared with us! If you are like me, you have many moments during or after a spiritual direction session where you are in awe, and deeply humbled, by the action of God in the lives of your interns or directees. How often I have almost been jealous of their intimate experiences of God!

So, I do think that our training programs, our collaborations and regional support structures, our Spiritual Directors International symposia and conferences and the *Presence* journal have done tremendous good. We are engaged together, more and more, in learning how to help persons realize that when God looks at them, God sees their goodness, God stands at the door of their hearts knocking (Rev. 3:20), wanting only to be allowed in, to sit them down and serve them, to share God’s own self with them, to speak with them intimately, as a dear friend, or even passionately, as a lover whose desire will not be held back.

I invite us to examine whether our training programs stop at this level; namely, helping individuals to feel good about themselves—a sort of therapy with spiritual trappings—that does not go any further.

Phase Two: Being Transformed

The next phase, which follows upon this growing friendship with God, is what I call being transformed,

or “beginning to see life from God’s perspective.” Friendships change us; intimate relationships all the more so. It should not surprise us, then—though it almost always does—that becoming a friend of God has consequences. Surely it has consequences on the personal level: as God’s forgiving, life-giving mercy flows into me, it is meant to flow through me into all of my other relationships. As God’s joy fills my heart, I naturally share that “enthusiasm” (*en-theo*) with the people around me. As Dorothee Soelle writes in her new book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: Fortress Press, 2001), “mystical experience is bliss and simultaneously it makes us homeless.” We can no longer stay as we were, in our own comfort zones, cherishing the graces received. As God makes it clear that God wants to be the center of our lives, then we have to toss out the old idols that have until now held that space captive, and re-evaluate everything in the light of this one absorbing priority. Though it often will be terribly difficult, this is never a grim task, since it is prompted by a love that surges with joy.

This transformation can be quite sudden and radical—the response to an inbreaking of grace as seen, for example, in Mother Teresa or St. Francis. More likely, it will be a slower dawning of what it means to be a friend of God: over time, values change; relationships are affected; lifestyles shift to align us more with our experience of God.

Whether sudden or gradual, the mark of authenticity for a developing friendship with God and its consequences in our lives will always be that the experience is not clung to as a private grace. Again I quote from Dorothee Soelle: “There is no experience of God that can be so privatized that it becomes and remains the property of one owner, the privilege of a person of leisure, the esoteric domain of the initiated.” For those of us born and raised in the United States, the tendency toward rugged individualism remains deep and stubborn. We like our God one-on-one, in the privacy of our own hearts. This “Me-and-God” spiri-

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tuality (or, in our better moments, God-and-Me), while quite strong and pervasive in the Western world, does not describe the God of the Scriptures or the God of Jesus or the God of the early Church or the God of the saints or of other religious traditions. There we always see that God is forming a people, not a collection of individuals. God is bringing about community, not saving souls. God's justice is about right relationships with all creation, not just setting me right with God.

Thus, when a person becomes a true friend of God, there will be external changes in that person's life. What really happens when we experience God is that we glimpse what Quakers call the "unity in the midst of commotion," the deep, authentic oneness of all beings despite the dissonance and separateness that appear on the surface. By God's own action in our lives, we begin to see with God's eyes, hear with God's ears, speak what we hear from God, do what God does, more and more desiring only what God desires. This is precisely what the prophets experienced: feeling what God feels, speaking and acting out of that experience.

So, in our training centers, where we are learning together how to discern God's action in our human experience, we need to ask: What God are we looking for? What God are we training others to pay attention to? Is it the God of the politically powerful, dividing the world neatly into good and evil and wreaking vengeance on one's enemies? Is it the God of the televangelists, preaching an ethic of success and wealth as proofs of God's approval? Is it the currently best-selling, flag-waving, bumper-sticker God of Jabez,

whose prayer is that God will "enlarge my territory so that I never come to any harm"?

Or is it the God of the prophets, where we see Hosea describing a God as helpless as a spurned Lover, who must go to extraordinary lengths to woo us back into the divine embrace? The God of Jeremiah, whose passion for us wraps itself around us like a loincloth around a man? The God of Zephaniah, who brings about reconciliation and then dances joyfully in our midst? The God of Isaiah, who demands justice for the oppressed, and fair wages for the laborer? The God of Jesus, who warns us not to pattern our lives on the religious professionals who pay tithes and accept places of honor in society, all the while trampling the rights of the poor?

As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote 40 years ago in his superb book, *The Prophets*:

The Prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security: to [the prophet] it is a challenge, an incessant demand. . . . The prophet's word is a scream in the night (p. 16). . . . God is never neutral, never beyond good and evil . . . [God] is always partial to justice. . . . The characteristic of the prophets is not foreknowledge of the future, but insight into the present pathos of God (New York, NY, USA: HarperPerennial, 2001; p. 231).

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophecy is distinctive but complex. Prophets were both women and men, both cultic priests and their opponents, in both professional religious roles and in secular occupations, both within the king's circle and critical of it. Some, like

Elijah and Elisha, healed. Some, like Miriam, led communal celebrations. Some, like Jeremiah, performed symbolic acts of judgment. Some, like Isaiah and Hosea, wrote. Always, whatever their status, the genuine prophets saw the reality of their day from God's perspective and communicated that perspective to the people, whether it was a message of judgment or of consolation.

In the New Testament, Jesus is depicted as referring to himself as a prophet (Mk. 6:4) and as being so understood by others (Mk. 8:28, Lk. 24:19, Acts 7:37). Like Elijah, Jesus heals and provides food miraculously. Like Amos and Jeremiah, he performs symbolic acts of judgment (Mk. 11:15ff) and castigates the religious establishment of his day (Mk. 12, Mt. 23). The communities established in his name include prophets as communal authorities (I Cor. 12:28, Acts 13:1), as leaders of prayer (I Cor. 14:39), and as linked with the presence of the Spirit and the need for discernment (I Thess. 5:19–22).

Throughout all of Scripture, the true prophet sides with the poor. The false prophet, on the other hand, bolsters the comfort and security of the powerful. The true prophet points out the divine presence and power, always in the context of community, and with a view toward judgment that moves the people toward justice. The false prophet engenders an insular sense of security and inner peace in individuals that does not lead to action.

The links with spiritual direction are clear. Both prophet and spiritual director stand in a position of recognizing and mediating God's perspective, proclaiming God's ways. Both prophet and director stand in (sometimes critical) service of the larger community even while addressing individuals; social responsibility is the prerequisite stance. Both prophet and spiritual director attend to the divine valuation of actions and attitudes, and their consequences for choosing life or death in the eyes of God.

Phase Three:

The Social Consequences of Conversion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this the "Cost of Discipleship." Authentic grace never comes cheap. Emmanuel Levinas, a 20th century Jewish philosopher, puts it simply: "To know God means to know what has to be done." And knowing what has to be done, alas, generally means that one's life will be turned upside down. "Success is not a name of God," says Martin Buber. But don't we love being successful? Wouldn't we all want, at least on a subconscious level, to be known as the best trainer of spiritual directors? To develop the training curriculum recognized worldwide? To have our particular center touted as the model for all others? But success is not a name of God. Conversion, that movement beyond being a friend of God to becoming a prophet of God, inevitably sets us apart from and even up against the way most people see and live and think and feel. It made St. Francis a laughingstock in his town. It landed John of the Cross in prison in his own community. It cost Gandhi his life. It pushed Dorothy Day to actions on behalf of justice that were incomprehensible to most of her contemporaries. But still, most of us miss the radical consequences of God's presence in our lives. Take the title of Dorothee Soelle's book, to which I've referred already: *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Be honest, when you hear "resistance" in the context of mysticism, don't you think of a directee evading, stonewalling, or resisting God? But Soelle's title actually refers to communal resistance to unjust social structures—the inevitable consequence of mysticism!

David Lonsdale, SJ has an excellent chapter in the recent book, *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, entitled "Spiritual Direction as Prophetic Ministry," in which he quotes from Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) on the insidious possibility that involvement in spirituality which seeks private inner peace actually deflects us away from substantive issues of peace and justice in the real

world. The net result, she writes,

. . . is the reinforcement of the societal status quo, as intellectual and religious energy is poured into an exploration of private religiosity rather than into social and political action for change. And this in turn has the effect not only of turning the attention of those seeking deepened spirituality away from issues of justice, but also of leaving the efforts for justice to those who have abandoned concern with spirituality, seeing it as having nothing to offer in the work for structural change (p. 329).

True conversion, on the other hand, always thrusts us into community. And conversion requires contemplation. Without community, the prophet slips into arrogance. Without contemplation, the prophet cannot move beyond his/her anger at the world's injustices. If my words must speak for the powerless, then only God can energize me with both passion and compassion for the long haul.

So, in our training centers, how do we train for social consciousness? Are we teaching people to tend individual broken hearts without also teaching them to listen to the cries of humanity? Are we teaching compassion for those who need healing, without watching for the divine passion that yearns to change the unjust structures that oppress the poor? I would suggest that we examine our training programs in this light.

1. Are we ensuring that the theologies undergirding our training include this whole notion of prophetic justice? Do our theologies embrace the prophetic edge, or shy away from what may be uncomfortable or challenging?

2. Are we globally aware? Are we acting from the conviction that all of life is interconnected? Are we being prompted by God's spirit to participate—or even lead—the vast shifts of consciousness that are shaping our world today: the human rights movement, the environmental movement, etc? What would this mean on a practical level for our programs?

3. Who is it that we train? In general, our starting

point has been mostly first world, mostly white, mostly middle- or upper-middle class. Don Bisson, a trainer whom many of you know, wonders whether we are guilty of creating “spiritual apartheid” by working with elites who have time, money, and leisure for our training programs. How can we ensure that the circle widens?

4. Are we desirous of being counter-cultural in order to be more attuned to the values and demands of the Gospel? Are we even aware of the worldview we inherited?

5. Are we connecting our interns to voices that are not mainstream? How culturally diverse are we? How eager to embrace other cultures? How urgently do we seek out the marginalized to learn from them? Surely the Lord hears the cry of the poor. Do we?

Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, tells the story of a wealthy king, a raj, who desired to see God. He assembled a tremendous retinue of elephants and carriages and royal attendants, forming a magnificent procession slowly making its way across India, toward their holiest temple. As they passed through village after village, they invited onlookers to join the pilgrimage, and thousands joined the throng. But one old man, desperately poor, stood quietly in front of his hut without moving. “Come on,” his neighbors urged, “This is our chance. Let's go visit God.” “No,” he whispered, “I shall wait for God to visit me.” Then they hurled abuse at him: “You? A peasant! Don't be a fool; even the mighty raj must travel to see God! What makes you think God would come to visit you?” The man stood his ground and answered, “Who but God would ever visit the poor?”

The best name for God is “*Surprise*,” says Benedictine Brother David Stendl-Rast, because God is always doing something new (Is. 43:19), always moving beyond what we have already known. If this is true, then we are seriously at risk of missing the living God when we set up guidelines and curricula and teach from our carefully crafted notes. God resists packaging; the real God cannot be domesticated.

The disturbing truth here is that what may well have been prophetic thirty years ago could easily be getting in God's way today. Thirty years ago, spiritual direction was primarily the domain of ordained clergy; it was largely a Catholic phenomenon, and it occurred normally within the sacrament of confession, or some other private setting with a priest. Thirty years ago, it was quite bold to imagine spiritual direction being done by the non-ordained—and downright brazen to suggest it could be done by women! Yet that is precisely what God's spirit seemed to have in mind, and so it came to be: a worldwide reality that is now marvelously ecumenical and inclusive of people from all religious traditions. It happened first at the margins, and gradually became accepted, and then in a sense, "popular." Gradually centers were established to teach others how to become directors; curricula were designed; now we have ethical guidelines and national convenings and even business cards that say "spiritual director." But over time, unless we continue to listen for the prophetic edge, these very structures and programs and codified ways of training spiritual directors might themselves obstruct the living God whose ways can never be structured or codified. The only way to avoid this is to stay engaged daily with the living God whose word, Jeremiah says, "is like fire, like a hammer shattering rock"(23:29).

The only way we can remain faithful to the God who is always surprising us, always moving us toward the poor, always stretching our boundaries, is to become deeply contemplative ourselves, to take, in the words of Walter Burghardt, "a long loving look at the real."

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do will stop this divine energy. Our task is to pay attention and to nurture the in-breaking of the prophetic among us. This we do by sustained contemplative prayer and by refusing to isolate ourselves from the poor. If we daily risk this contemplative engagement with God, and we regularly choose to leave our comfort zones and move outward toward the marginalized, then in our training programs we will not be seduced by certificates and honors, or even by being invited

to speak at a Spiritual Directors International conference. Rather, we will remain attentive to the subversive values of God who identifies with the "least in our midst," the strangers, the outcasts; the God who pulls down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. We will be watching for the movement from consolation-that-leaves-us-comfortable, to consolation-that-sets-us-afire-for-justice. We will be training directors to seek out the marginalized and listen for God's prophetic word there. We will be bringing spiritual direction to settings where it has not yet been. We will be moving beyond individualized spirituality toward the deeply spiritual work of community and structural change. We will, in short, become not only friends of God but also prophets. ■

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