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Almost twenty years ago I crept into a spiritual director’s office, a young leader desperate for help. A grown-up pastor’s kid in my early thirties, on staff at a church I loved, busy with a growing family, and just beginning to embark on a public life of writing and speaking, I was aware of things in my life that needed fixing and of longings that were painfully unmet. A level of selfishness was being exposed in the crucible of marriage and family life that I did not know how to shift or change. I was feeling emotions from past pains and current disappointments that I did not know how to resolve. I did not know how to quiet my performance-oriented drive or my longing for more—but more of what?

I had tried everything that had been offered in my Protestant tradition—more Bible study, praying harder, trying harder, seeking better sermons, reading Christian self-help books—to fix what was broken and to fill what was lacking, but to no avail. In the midst of the outward busyness of my “professional” life, there was an inner chaos far more disconcerting than anything going on externally. But this was not a good time to admit to any kind of spiritual emptiness or acknowledge any kind of serious questions about my faith. As an emerging leader, it was a time for being “good,” for being available when people called, for maintaining outward evidences of spiritual maturity commensurate with the responsibilities I carried and the opportunities that were coming my way. It was a time to do what was needed in order to keep climbing the ladder to professional success, and I knew it; yet my interior groanings were real and needed attention.

Help Is on the Way

For me, help came through a spiritual director, although I didn’t even know what one was at the time. Our paths crossed because she was a psychologist. I sought her out for therapy because I assumed that my problems were psychological in nature and could be fixed at that level. Psychological insight and process were indeed valuable—to a point. Eventually, however, she observed that what I needed was spiritual direction and suggested that we shift the focus of our times together to my relationship with God. She told me that the questions I was raising were actually an invitation to deeper intimacy with God and needed to be dealt with in the context of that relationship. It was a welcome invitation, and so we made the shift.

As I stayed faithful to my own spiritual journey under the tutelage of this wise guide, spiritual direction became one of the disciplines in my life as a leader. I eventually responded to the call to become a spiritual director, completed my training in spiritual direction at the Shalem Institute, and took a position in a large church as director of spiritual formation. Over time I began writing and speaking as a spiritual director on themes related to spirituality, leadership, and the church. Later on I founded an organization focused on caring for the spiritual needs of pastors and Christian leaders. Our mission has been to provide a safe place for pastors and leaders to receive spiritual direction in attending to their own spiritual formation in the midst of the realities of life in leadership. In all of this, my commitment to having a spiritual director myself has remained strong because I am convinced that spiritual direction is an essential practice for all those who are in positions of spiritual leadership.

Welcoming Desperation

I am not the only leader to have come to spiritual direction by way of desperation. Many pastors and leaders come for spiritual direction because they, too, are experiencing inner emptiness in the midst of outward busyness, feeling “stuck” in their spiritual lives, or longing for more in the midst of seeming success. Their question is, where does a leader go to articulate questions that seem so dangerous and doubts that seem so unsettling? Who pastors the pastor? Who provides spiritual leadership for the leader? Often it is a spiritual director. The question for spiritual directors is: how can we increase our sensitivities and our capacities to be helpful to the particular needs of pastors and leaders? Although it may sound strange, a good place to begin is to welcome, or at least normalize, the desperation or desire a leader brings. It can be very hard for a leader...
to seek out spiritual direction because it represents something of a role reversal. Leaders are accustomed to being, well, the leader, and to submit to someone else’s guidance or to admit the need for such guidance can be a humbling experience. Desire and desperation are often the only dynamics powerful enough to cause them to seek guidance, and in that sense, desperation is a good thing. Desperation opens us to possibilities that we might not otherwise be open to—like spiritual direction!

A leader will often come to the first spiritual direction session overwhelmed or embarrassed by the state he or she is in or by the questions he or she is bringing. As these spiritual directees start to feel reassured that their needs or desires or feelings of desperation are a wonderful starting place for new spiritual journeying, they visibly relax. They breathe a deep sigh of relief as they realize that this is a safe place to ask questions and explore issues lurking under the surface of their leadership personae. Leadership, by its very nature, places us in a position where our spirituality and ability to lead are constantly being scrutinized and evaluated. To have a safe place far outside one’s leadership setting in which to attend to one’s own soul’s need is a great gift.

While the “normal” person has many options for seeking spiritual guidance and sustenance (churches, synagogues, a relationship with a pastor, priest, or rabbi, spirituality centers, para-church ministry organizations that cater to specific groups), spiritual leaders are often very isolated. Because everyone is looking to them for spiritual leadership, they cannot share the depth of their own doubts, questions, and growing edges without creating uncertainty among those they are leading. They labor under the burden of knowing that their job is, in very real ways, dependent on their perceived spirituality and doctrinal clarity—however that is evaluated in their particular circles. They know that even if they have questions, they need to continue to teach and preach with confidence; they must be wise about what they reveal in the presence of those who have the power to hire, fire, or significantly influence their career paths.

The conundrum, of course, is that without a safe place to attend to his or her own journey, a leader’s growth will be stunted and the spiritual life will atrophy. As one spiritual directee (a parish priest) shared recently, “My job is to help people attend to their own inner world and to cultivate hope and expectation that God is actively present in their lives, but I have lost that hope and expectation in my own life. I need someone to help me do what I am trying to help others do.”

Create Sacred Space

The word sacred simply means “set apart” or “set apart for a special purpose.” Leaders are deeply in need of finding a place that is set apart for the care of their own souls, a place of privacy that removes them from the public scrutiny of their work environment and the leadership personae that they must maintain.

Privacy is an ethical commitment that spiritual directors make to all their spiritual directees, but privacy is of particular concern to those who are in public positions of leadership, and they may need more reassurance and concrete evidence that their privacy will be protected. When I first began spiritual direction, the questions and issues I brought felt so personal and had such potential to affect how others in my religiously conservative circles might view me that I was extremely skittish; however, I was also acutely aware of my need for a place where I could be completely open. I needed my spiritual director to assure me in the strongest terms that there was no possibility that she would ever betray my confidence. The fact that she was far outside my leadership settings and my social circles was very important.

Where we met was also important. When we began, we met in her office, where she was a part of a busy practice of psychologists. The possibility of seeing people I knew in the waiting room in the midst of something that felt so personal was very unnerving to me. If I saw someone I knew, I felt like I had to explain something I didn’t want to explain and would have preferred to keep private. When she dropped out of the practice and we were able to meet in her home office, there was more privacy and that was helpful.

I am convinced that some spiritual directors need to function outside of existing church systems and corporate structures so that leaders have a safe place to go. I have offered spiritual direction in my home and, more recently, in my office at a nearby retreat center. In both settings I have taken great care to cultivate the physical environment in such a way that the space itself ushers leaders into a sense of being “apart” from the distractions, the
responsibilities, and the frenetic activity that has become the norm for so many. Without fail, leaders express deep gratitude for the quiet, the privacy, and the sacred quality of the space. Sometimes, when they first enter the space and we share initial moments of quiet, they are moved to tears that they hardly know how to explain. The tears seem to be associated with the disillusionment and grief that many leaders experience as they realize that they have lost a sense of God’s presence for themselves personally in the context of their leadership. To have a sacred space that is set aside for them and for the care of their souls rather than being in a religious environment associated with ministry or in a coaching environment associated with getting more work out of them is a tremendous blessing. Even their ability to feel something in response to the space assures them that they are still alive in places where they thought they had become numb or had even died.

The Unique Burdens of Leadership

Those who have been leaders for any length of time have experienced much scrutiny and evaluation of their spiritual lives and their leadership. Many have experienced the heartache of being severely misunderstood, judged, and even betrayed to the point that they have given up on ever being safe. The loneliness that comes from being “the buck stops here” person and the natural process of projection that takes place between leaders and followers is par for the leadership course, and yet it takes its toll. By the time leaders come to spiritual directors, they may have lost any sense of being loved beyond what they can produce; they might harbor deep feelings of disillusionment about themselves, the human condition, and institutions they serve—including (and perhaps especially) the church. Their experiences might have left them questioning their effectiveness as leaders, whatever visions they had, and sometimes even their worth as people.

Many leaders have repressed their grief and anger and soldiered on, leaving much unresolved beneath their professional exteriors. Almost all leaders have something in their lives—some pain, some character issue, some spiritual question, some failure—that they have never talked to anyone about, and they desperately need a safe place to do so. They often walk into our presence carrying heavy burdens of unresolved pain; spiritual direction promises to be a place where they might be able to lay it down—at least for a while.

When I first entered into spiritual direction, I was so beaten down by some of what I had experienced in pastoral ministry that I couldn’t believe that anyone could look into my soul and see something good. Particularly as a woman leading in church environments in which women with leadership gifts and passions were often suspect, I had experienced roadblocks that were deeply disillusioning and caused me to question my faith. When my spiritual director affirmed the brightness of my spirit or the goodness she saw in my heart, I was surprised to find that I had a hard time taking it in. I didn’t realize how far I had gotten from any kind of realistic sense of myself. Even though it took time for me to get used to it and believe it, I needed so desperately the healing of her unconditional “seeing.” Her consistent affirmation of my journey as a person with the call of God in my life and leadership was a significant element of what brought me back to a place of health and strength in my spiritual life. As the poet Hafiz writes, “How did the rose ever open its heart and give to the world all its Beauty? it felt the encouragement of light against its being. otherwise we all remain too frightened” (in Ladinsky, 121).

The Power of Confession

The safety of the spiritual direction relationship makes it the ideal place (and for some, the only place) where leaders can experience deeper levels of self-awareness, examine the hidden dynamics and relational patterns that are hindering them, and at times make confession. The idea of receiving someone’s confession may be uncomfortable for some spiritual directors because we do not think of ourselves as priests and we feel quite unprepared for such a thing. In some traditions the spiritual director and the confessor are seen as two distinct roles and two distinct people. However, most pastors and spiritual leaders (at least in the Protestant tradition) do not have anywhere else to make their confessions, and there are times when this is what the soul needs most. Confession is good for the soul—especially confession in the presence of someone who knows how to mediate God’s grace in the moment. Because of the safety, the privacy, and the longevity of the relationship with a spiritual director, this may be the only place a leader has to engage this powerful discipline. If the Spirit is moving spiritual directees to make a confession, we need to be ready to receive it. There are many ways to receive someone’s confession; the important thing is to be
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availability to the Spirit for what the moment requires.

The first time I made a confession to my spiritual director, I had not planned to do it. Confession to any kind of confessor was not a part of my tradition, but it had been on my mind as something that could be beneficial to my spiritual journey, and on this particular day, it just kind of came out. Confession was so difficult for me that I slid out of my chair and onto the floor in a wave of tears that took me by surprise. My spiritual director just quietly got down on the floor with me and put her arms around me in a gesture of love, comfort, and unconditional presence that was tremendously healing in its impact. There was no need for words.

The first time I received someone’s confession, the person let me know ahead of time that this was something she wanted to do. Because the person was from a liturgical background, I brought my Book of Common Prayer so that I could read the prayer of absolution. She made her confession. The tears flowed. I put my arms around her and read the prayer of absolution along with a verse from scripture that assured her of God’s forgiveness.

Readers of Presence will have many views on sin and forgiveness. My point here is not about the specifics of what we believe or what we do in such moments. Each of us will have to discover the ways of being with our spiritual directees in such moments that are true to who we are and responsive to what the spiritual directee most needs. The point is that receiving someone’s confession is a sacred trust, and it is good for us to have given some thought to how we might respond. If we are in spiritual direction with leaders, there is a good possibility that spiritual direction is the only place where they can make confessions, and they will at some point be moved to do so. We need to accept this as a part of the gift that we bring and be prepared to respond in ways that fit the situation. It is one of the ways we can serve them.

**Fresh Disciplines for Worn-Out Leaders**

When I entered into spiritual direction, I had been working very hard at practicing the spiritual disciplines that I had been taught in my Protestant upbringing. I was sure I could make it all work if I just tried harder. But part of my desperation was the fact that the practices and habits that people had told me were supposed to work in bringing about my transformation were no longer working, no matter how faithful I was to the program. I was embarrassed and felt very defeated. Surprisingly, my spiritual director encouraged me to stop doing what wasn’t working (!) and to pay attention to what I was longing for. It was the strangest and most wonderful feeling to be freed from the Bible study and prayer methods that I had practiced for so long in the hopes that there might be something new for me. While I continued to lead in the arenas where I had responsibility, I had a private place for letting go of what wasn’t working and trying some new things. This was all very hopeful.

Eventually my spiritual director helped me to understand that I was in a transitional place in the life of prayer and began to guide me into new disciplines that corresponded to my need and fostered the fresh experiences with God that I was so thirsty for. Her concrete guidance along with the confidence she conveyed marked out a new path for me.

One of the natural pitfalls of pastoral leadership is that the boundary between one’s personal spiritual life and the demands of one’s profession can become very blurry. Pastoral leaders may come with a great sense of guilt that “I just don’t feel like praying” or “I study scripture so
much for my sermons that I am no longer able to engage scripture without thinking about my next sermon!” A corporate leader might have created a false dichotomy between the spiritual life and leadership, having no idea how to engage spiritual disciplines that will help them forge the connection between the soul and leadership.

One of the most significant contributions a spiritual director can make in the life of a leader is to create space for reflecting on spiritual practices. In this space, we help to quiet feelings of “ought” and “should” so that they can pay attention to those practices that are no longer fruitful for them or may have become layered with all sorts of professional expectations. This can open the way for letting go of what isn’t working and claiming fresh disciplines for themselves. Our role as spiritual directors is to provide guidance for entering into spiritual disciplines that will forge a stronger connection between their souls and their leadership. The practice of mindfulness, paying attention to one’s breathing, building time into each workday for silence and prayer, staying attuned to inner dynamics of consolation and desolation, and allowing such awareness to shape decision making are all practices that strengthen the soul of one’s leadership (see Barton).

It takes humility and courage for spiritual leaders to admit that while they are guiding others in spiritual matters, they are coming up empty themselves. The more experience and practice we as spiritual directors have with a wide variety of spiritual disciplines, the more we are able to open up a treasure trove of spiritual possibilities for leaders who have done all they know to do and are desperate for fresh ways of connecting with God. This offers a world of hope to leaders who have lost faith in their ability to connect with God in the context of their leadership.

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**Reclaiming Identity and Calling**

A leader’s calling is rooted in his or her identity. Whenever a leader is out of touch with his or her identity or calling, he or she is vulnerable to living a life at the mercy of other people’s expectations and his or her own inner compulsions. When a leader has lived this way for too long, it is hard to tell the difference between being called and being driven. A key role of the spiritual director is to help leaders stay in touch with their identity as given to them by God and their calling as spoken to them by God. The experience of a call is an opportunity for great intimacy with God if we know how to cultivate it; it can also be a time when leaders feel a heartbreaking sense of being cut off from God and from their true selves if they let the demands of leadership consume them for too long.

I know one spiritual director who is always asking his spiritual directees if they are staying true to their calling, and the question immediately brings clarity or, if not clarity, the need to find clarity. Before calling has anything to do with doing, it has everything to do with being that essence of ourselves that God called into being and that God alone truly knows. It is the call to be who we are and at the same time to become more than we can yet envision. Our calling is woven into the very fabric of our beings as we have been created by God, and it encompasses everything that makes us who we are—even those things that have caused pain and confusion. This includes our genetics, our innate orientations and capacities, our personalities, heredities, life-shaping experiences, and the time and place into which each of us was born. As Parker Palmer points out, “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was...
born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God” (25).

The spiritual director has the extraordinary privilege of helping people—in this case, leaders—listen to the voice “in here” so they don’t spend their whole lives being driven by other people’s expectations and their own inner compulsions. One of the ways we can help leaders return to a true sense of calling or recognize a new calling is to notice that spiritual callings often take us out to the edge of our capacities and sometimes to places of great risk. With courage and restraint, a spiritual director can help leaders continue to listen to the voice deep within and answer with a courageous yes when that voice speaks.

When I first began to sense God’s call to spiritual direction, I was in seminary preparing for a traditional pastorate while serving on staff at a local church. I thought that was my calling. But at the same time, several people were asking me to serve as a spiritual director for them, and I began to discover that something about that fit better than a lot of what I had been doing. However, my own experience in spiritual direction had been so profoundly shaping that I could not imagine really playing that role in someone else’s life. The thought scared me to death. When I finally got up enough nerve to say something about it to my spiritual director, she quietly said, “I’ve seen that in you for years.” It was a moment that was electric with truth, and I’m glad she hadn’t said anything about it any sooner because I wouldn’t have been ready. I wept and trembled with fear and with hope—fear about what this change might require of me and whether or not I could really do it, hope that God knew me well enough to call me to something that fit so well.

What was most helpful to me was that my spiritual director had waited until God said it to my heart and then affirmed it in a way that helped me to believe in what I was hearing. Our interactions changed the course of my life vocationally and took me in all sorts of risky directions that have brought me to where I am today. This is indeed holy ground, and that is where we as spiritual directors often find ourselves standing with the leaders we are companioning.

The Soul of Leadership

Jesus indicates that it is possible to gain the whole world but lose your soul. If he were speaking to us as spiritual leaders today, he might point out that it is possible to gain the whole world of success in leadership and lose your soul. When leaders lose their souls, so do the churches and organizations they lead.

Spiritual directors are in a unique position to help leaders stay in touch with their spiritual longings and support them in crafting a way of life that opens them to what their souls most want. While the people around them are often more concerned about what they can get out of them in terms of productivity and success, the spiritual director is in a unique position to ask the question “How is it with your soul?” and to keep asking it whenever it seems like spiritual directees are losing themselves amid the demands of life in leadership.

Because their relationship with spiritual directees is “pure”—meaning that there is a singular focus on the well-being of the spiritual directee rather than competing agendas—spiritual directors are free to encourage and challenge leaders to be rigorously honest about how they are living their lives and whether their way of life is sustainable over the long haul. Many congregations and organizations actually encourage and applaud—albeit in very subtle ways—destructive behaviors in the leader such as compulsive overworking, performance-oriented drivenness, and lack of boundaries. The spiritual director has no such hidden agenda. He or she is free to be completely focused on the well-being of the leader-directee.

Few relationships in a leader’s life are unencumbered with multiple agendas. This makes the spiritual direction relationship uniquely valuable to leaders as we are vigilant with them about finding a way of life that honors the whole reality of who they are—body, mind, and spirit. The best thing any of us brings to leadership is our own transforming self, and the spiritual director is uniquely prepared and positioned to provide guidance in this process.

References

