

# Presence

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**About the cover:** The Lord's Prayer in Arabic.  
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# Tending to Spirituality in the Workplace

BY LIZ BUDD ELLMANN

**W**e yearn for safe places to ask Big Questions and to listen collectively for Big Answers: Why am I here? How am I, and how is my organization, making the world a better place? What is our common mission as workers? Where can security truly be found? How much (money, time with family, time with community, time with work) is enough?

More and more, we look at our work life as we ask these questions and wonder how our activities affect our world and ourselves. We struggle to find meaning in organizations that we depend on for our livelihoods and that change rapidly. We want to share “what’s really going on.” Group spiritual direction in the workplace offers tools and a safe place to look for meaning by tending to the spiritual journey both individually and as a group. Fresh creativity and innovation are often generated in a working community connected at the soul level through group spiritual direction.

## Language

In the workplace, I do not use the words, “group spiritual direction” to recruit participants. Even the word, “spirituality” is one I speak sparingly in a corporate environment. “Spirituality” and “spiritual direction” are specialized terms rooted in historical, spiritual traditions. In order to be communicated clearly, the words, “spirituality” and “spiritual direction” need to be unpacked and explained with many nuances. “Spirituality” means one thing to a Jesuit, another thing to a fundamentalist or New Age practitioner, and yet another thing to a person with no religious affiliation.

A beautiful yet hidden truth lives in the diverse language used to describe the traditional roots and historical interpretations of spirituality. The diversity of language can also lead to ugly confusion and misinterpretation in the workplace. My partner in ministry, Dr. Bruce Davis, and I often need to assure organizations that the goal of our group process is not to convert participants to a particular spiritual tradition, but instead to offer tools and experiences that will aid workers in connecting their values and beliefs—from

whatever tradition or from no tradition at all—with their work. In fact, in many of our programs we do not use the term “spirituality” at all, but instead use “creativity” or “innovation” as vehicles for spirituality.

My favorite definition of “spirituality” comes from Dr. Stephen Sundborg, SJ, President of Seattle University: “Spirituality is one’s lived relationship with mystery.” He introduced this definition of spirituality to a group of corporate executives in Seattle University’s Executive Leadership Program. These executives—from a variety of religious backgrounds and no religious affiliation at all—expressed appreciation for his inclusive definition. Building on Sundborg’s definition, group spiritual direction is created by a group that intentionally listens to and looks for a lived relationship with mystery. I personally choose to name that mystery God, but I am very cautious about using God language in the workplace. Instead, we encourage group participants to name mystery in whatever way they choose. We devote a whole session to exploring ways to name That Which Lives Beyond Names. During subsequent group sessions, we use the language of the participants. Throughout the remainder of this article, “God” is the name I will use for the Mystery. Nonetheless, I invite you to substitute whatever language has meaning for you.

In the workplace, we do not call ourselves spiritual directors. We call ourselves facilitators or co-facilita-

### **LOAVES AND FISHES**

**This is not  
the age of information.  
This is NOT  
the age of information.**

**Forget the news,  
and the radio,  
and the blurred screen.**

**This is the time  
of loaves  
and fishes.**

**People are hungry  
and one good word is bread  
for a thousand.**

*—from The House of Belonging by David Whyte.  
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tors. A group of four people in one organization wanted to continue the groups after the series ended and asked us to train them. We coined the words “deep facilitation” to distinguish their work with creativity, innovation, and tending to the spirit in work from other facilitation they do. Like deep ecology or deep psychology, “deep facilitation” entails nurturing relationships and building community at a deeper, soul level.

The words “creativity” and “innovation” identify some of the outcomes, or fruit, of meaningful group spiritual direction. Many corporate leaders want to know how their organizations and people can be

more innovative. Reconnecting with and nurturing our relationship with our loving Creator God is one key way to foster innovation. Hence, an entrée for workplace spirituality programs has been to point to the resultant creativity and innovation that emerges when our relationship with our whole selves, including our spirituality, is nurtured and brought to work. In our “Riding the Dragon: Creativity and Spirituality in Work” series, each session includes a creative expression exercise to practice connecting and reconnecting with our Creator, real-time, with group support and witness. One headstrong hi-tech executive explained, “I hate the creative exercises, especially in a group, because it looks as if everyone knows what they are doing, and I’m the only one lost. Yet there is nothing better for me. The process forces me

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FOR WORKERS TO RECONNECT WITH ASPIRATIONS AND  
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to move out of my head and access juice that is indescribable. It's a spiritual experience. The group helps me get there."

My experience in the corporate world and my partner's work as a family physician and leader in a large healthcare organization also help us translate spiritual language in the workplace. Our familiarity with the stress and challenge of corporate life as well as the wonderfully creative spirit that lives in the workplace lend us credibility as we assist workers in making meaning of their often hectic work experience.

Because healthcare language and the understanding of the need for bottom-line focus come easily to us, we can credibly show the "opportunity cost" for ignoring workers' spiritual well-being, as well as the "real cost" of burn-out, absenteeism, and high turnover. While group spiritual direction offers no panacea for employee retention, healthcare cost reduction, or insuring peace and justice in the workplace, group spiritual direction can provide support for workers to reconnect with aspirations and focus on healthy ways of working.

Some skeptics criticize workplace spirituality programs as a corporate tool to placate workers. My belief and experience indicate a different trend: spirituality in the workplace awakens workers' deep desires and reorients work around core values that enliven the workplace. For example, a manager recently came to the group saying, "We are the ones we have been waiting for" and proceeded, with great excitement, to espouse his desire to take responsibility for improving his workplace. He was sick of waiting for someone else to make things better. He decided to use his revitalized

managerial role to care for colleagues in new ways.

Karl Marx was wrong: religion—and by extension, spirituality—is not the opiate of the people. In fact, tending to the spirituality of workers combats complacency. Novelist Annie Dillard agrees when she writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?" Spirituality has the explosive potential to awaken us to unique and deeply creative work, affirming purpose and meaning beyond the paycheck. Building community at the soul level encourages personal growth and helps transform rigid hierarchical work structures. I believe that tending to the spirit of work offers our world the possibility of creating sustainable ways to work and live together with justice and peace. This may sound like idealistic hype, but through our various programs, we have witnessed transformation not only in individuals, but also in organizations that participate in group spiritual direction.

A word of caution for the faint-hearted: spiritual direction, whether one-on-one or in a group, always requires the wisdom to pay attention to language, to what resides beneath, around, and beyond the words, and to challenge where appropriate. Spiritual direction implies inviting God to lead while paying keen attention and utilizing tools of discernment to sift through the words, culling wheat from chaff: what is a core learning from the experience and what is distraction? Or to use Thomas Merton's terminology, who is True Self speaking and who is False Self? Sometimes a False Self dominates the working person's world, taking on many guises. Seeing itself in a mirror may require reflecting back the garb of the False Self in the lan-

guage of the speaker. Hence, learning the language of the organization and listening closely to God's guidance will assist a spiritual director in choosing words that may potentially create a turning point in an individual's and an organization's life. Group spiritual direction provides the benefit of offering reflective images from other people's perspective and improves the likelihood of an individual hearing words spoken in ways that provide new insight.

### **Ways to Prepare for Group Spiritual Direction in the Workplace**

While it may sound glamorous and lucrative to be doing spiritual direction with executives, the fact is that criticism and skepticism abound and funding is scarce. Many traditional religious institutions frown on group spiritual direction in the workplace as a "fringe ministry" while traditional organizational development firms and corporate human relations departments often dismiss spirituality in the workplace as counter to secular policy or superfluous fluff. Discerning one's call to this ministry requires prayerful reflection and community support, and the sustaining community will likely be provided from outside mainstream religious or corporate structures.

Since spiritual direction is always a process of interpreting and reinterpreting words and experiences in an effort to discover how inner and outer realms relate, a spiritual director intending to facilitate workplace groups would be wise to nurture corporate and organizational curiosity, and set aside preconceived biases concerning "the evil corporate empire." Cultivating reverent curiosity may include questions that help keep personal agendas in check: "What is God creating through this group of people?" "How is this organization already a manifestation of God's love?" "What blindness in me prevents me from witnessing God in this organization, in this worker, in this executive?" As facilitators of workplace spirituality, we need to be respectful of how God is operating

in the inner and outer realms and honest about our motives for facilitating God's work. There may be opportunities to challenge unjust corporate systems, but if that is the personal agenda of the spiritual director-facilitator, I suggest some other venue.

### **Getting Started: Experimenting with Workplace Group Spiritual Direction**

I am experimenting with several different venues for group spiritual direction in the workplace. Some programs use a background text. In my opinion, a textbook helps in marketing and identifying a group that is ready to do inner work and provides one vehicle among many for gathering a group that yearns to learn and connect at a deeper level.

*Models.* Models I have used with success include:

1. **"Riding the Dragon: Creativity and Spirituality in Work"** or (if the client has difficulty with the word "spirituality") "Riding the Dragon: Creativity and Innovation in Work." A twelve-week series meeting for one hour (or an hour-and-a-half if the group size is greater than ten people) during the workday in a downtown conference room. The group commits to the twelve-week series, and the group size has ranged from six to eighteen people. I have facilitated groups alone and with teams of two or three. Two facilitators are ideal. Our twelve-week series uses the book, *The Artist's Way at Work* by Mark Bryan and Julia Cameron, as background text. Some groups consisted of people working in different industries (hi-tech, biotech, legal, real estate development, entrepreneur, government, education), and other groups consisted of participants from the same organization. The groups are multi-faith, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural. Attendance has been evenly balanced between men and women.
2. **Two three-hour sessions to train "deep facilitators"** who are creating ongoing "Creativity@Work" circles in their organization.

3. **“Pursuing a Soul Journey: How to Pray in Daily Life Following a Jesuit Tradition.”** An eight-week series, meeting for one hour a week during the workday in a central university setting. This is a co-facilitated group of eight people who came from mixed industries (e.g., education, finance, retired). The format of the series involved a pattern of teaching Ignatian prayer one week followed by one week of group spiritual direction. Since this series was explicitly about prayer, we used the words “group spiritual direction” for marketing and in practice. (Other series along a similar vein may be developed: How to Pray in Daily Life Following a Benedictine Tradition, a Trappist Tradition (contemplative centering prayer), or Buddhist Tradition. This model was developed in conjunction with Diane McQuiston and Celia Chappell, SP, from the Ignatian Resource Center.)

4. **“Beatitude Check: Feeling a Little Poor in Spirit?”**

A four-week series based on St. Matthew’s Beatitudes, meeting from noon to 1 p.m. in a downtown, centrally located church classroom. Attendance is from mixed industries, and is co-facilitated with Dr. Bruce Davis.

*Marketing.* Marketing consists of circulating emails, blanketing downtown bulletin boards with flyers, and pleading for space in church bulletins. Being featured in *Vanity Fair* magazine, *The Seattle Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* newspapers has helped. The SoulTenders website, [www.soultenders.org](http://www.soultenders.org), also announces upcoming series and events. It’s no surprise that word-of-mouth creates the majority of participants. Even if flyers and brochures do not produce many group participants, the announcements act as a downtown form of ministry by begging the question of tending to the spirit in work.

*Funding.* Funding for the groups is provided by fee-for-service. Participants pay for the programs up front with many participants expensing their workshop fee as professional development. One organization underwrote two twelve-week series and paid for us to train in-house facilitators so they could continue cre-

ating circles to foster creativity and spirituality in work. Recently, a quickly growing hi-tech organization enrolled eight people in a twelve-week series. The handpicked participants constitute a pilot group that will assess whether their organization would benefit from in-house groups.

*Locale.* Downtown space for these experiments has been God-sent. A prominent lawyer hosted the first and second series in his law firm. The president of a portfolio management company hosted the third and fourth series in his firm’s boardroom. A different lawyer hosted another series in his law firm. One participant in the “Creativity and Spirituality in Work” series found it so helpful that he brought it in-house, and in that case we used the organization’s conference room. I suggest prayerfully listening to where God is leading to space availability. Law firms, brokerage houses, banks, and universities often have conference rooms in convenient downtown locations. The importance of a convenient location cannot be overstated.

*Duration.* Working professionals live in a time-bound world. The one-hour format during the workday fits into their timeframe. Likewise, the twelve-week series corresponds to the conventional quarter of the business cycle. To respect participants’ schedules, we start and end on time. We offer mid-week email support and assignment information on-line at SoulTenders’ website for those who miss a session or want extra support. The short one-hour timeframe may seem unusual to traditional group spiritual direction, but my experience shows that participants will go deeper, faster when given a limited amount of time. Over time, there is less and less wading and more and more deep diving where only the essential is shared and silence is welcomed instead of fought. The one-hour format works best for groups of six to eight people. More than ten people require an hour and a half. (Eighteen is the largest group we have facilitated.)

*Time.* The times of day that have been most successful for groups include right after lunch (1:30 to 2:30 p.m.) and at the end of the workday (4:00 to 5:00

p.m.). It's generally easier to book consecutive conference room space at the end of the day. Returning to the same room each week helps eliminate confusion and may facilitate a deepened experience of timelessness in a time-bound group of people. Our intention is to eliminate as many distractions as possible.

*Environment.* Participants arrive to find hospitality in the form of refreshments, name tags, and warm greetings. By using centerpieces on the conference table and wall adornments (e.g., posters, charts) we create intrigue, curiosity, and a visual or sensual aid to experiencing Blake's "eternity in an hour." We do our creative best to transform the predictable, gray conference room with seats around a central table into an unpredictable, inviting, gathering space. One participant remarked, "No wonder we never have any creative ideas—we're not being fed by these boring, square boxes that we regularly meet in."

Each week the centerpiece relates to a new theme. We rarely talk explicitly about the centerpieces or wall hangings—we let them speak at the implicit level (as in good liturgy where the symbols do not need to be explained because they are speaking beyond the cognitive level). Big rocks, rock-climbing rope, and a harness may be the centerpiece for a session on "Finding one's foundation of safety from which emergence is possible." Audubon field guidebooks, binoculars, and toy animals from a child's farmyard play set may be the centerpiece for a session on "Deeply learning by listening to our environment and the life of our organization." By exhibiting simple examples of how to enliven a conference room, we model ways that participants may transform meetings—again this is

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implicit in practice, yet intentional modeling by design. Participants express appreciation for the care to the environment, and several people have reported successful experimentation with hospitality and creative centerpieces for meetings in their workplaces.

### One Model in More Depth

During the course of our twelve-week "Riding the Dragon: Creativity and Spirituality in Work" series, we increase the amount of silence each session. The fidgety reaction to our first invitation to shared silence eventually evolves to a quieter group experience. Silence grounds the experience and cannot be over-emphasized. Deep facilitation requires comfort with silence and compassionate presence to the False Self's restlessness in silence. We open and close each session with a prayerful, poetic reading followed by shared silence and the ringing of a bell to end the shared silence.

This represents a rough outline of each session:

- 5 minutes — Opening reading followed by silence
- 10 minutes — Check-in usually initiated with a question
- 20 minutes — Creative Expression Exercise in silence (instrumental music usually provides background)
- 15 minutes — Verbal Reflection on the Creative Expression process with silent pauses between reflections
- 5 minutes — Invitation to a Reflective Technology / Spiritual Practice for the week



5 minutes — Closing reading followed by silence

Sometimes we vary the outline by diving into the creative expression exercise first—experience first, then verbally reflect. Those who enter the spiritual realm primarily through their intuitive function generally benefit from having the experience first followed by discourse. Having the discussion first, followed by experience and more verbal reflection tends to work best for those who enter spirituality primarily through their cognitive function.

We begin the series by instructing participants about listening, not giving advice or judging. They practice using “reflective technologies” (spiritual practices) such as stream-of-consciousness writing first thing in the morning (Julia Cameron’s “morning pages”) and taking time out during the workweek to refill their creative well-spring. The series is divided roughly in thirds with the first third devoted to the personal journey, the second third to the journey of the group or organization, and the final third to the journey of the community and world. In the second third of the series, we introduce experiences of listening and responding at a deeper level, but initially we encourage sharing with no responses. During the last third of the series, we borrow a prayer I learned at a group spiritual direction workshop led by Rose Mary Daugherty, SSND: “on whose behalf are you doing your work today?” This opening prayer helps to orient the person toward

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work as a spiritual practice that can be intentionally devoted to the service of others.

Why do we do a creative expression exercise? Inviting people to create something in the moment offers them the experience of entering mystery. It’s not about making museum art, it’s about creatively expressing what’s really going on. The creative expression exercises encourage participants to practice—real-time—making friends with the nay-saying inner critic, the inner doubter, the fearful quitter, the inner voice that is secure enough to risk making mistakes, and all the other voices that speak up when we are stretched beyond our comfort zone. One marketing VP found this process so helpful that she regularly does creative exercises with her staff. Once she

brought her seven-year-old son into her workplace to teach her team the art of origami paper folding. “We are bonding at a different level when we get out of our spreadsheets and create together for the sake of creation.” She is building community at a soul level.

Some examples of creative expression exercises include decorating a box to contain fears (from the 12-step Tradition: writing fears on scraps of paper and putting them in a can because “I can’t, but God can”); creating with clay an image of one’s sacred self; writing a haiku poem after a guided imagery exercise; making a collage about what one is passionate about in our world. These exercises also help people talk at a deeper level; they cut to the core of what’s really

happening and facilitate deep sharing. Since the process is real-time, a person's struggle with a creative invitation to mystery can be described, processed, and learned from. Moreover, inspirational breakthroughs and reconnecting with our loving Creator can be proclaimed and celebrated. After members of the group were asked to sculpt in ten minutes what their inner landscapes look like, an attorney said to the group, "I am amazed at what I just experienced. I don't know you people at all, and look at what we just created. We all started with the same materials, yet each piece is so unique. And what you've shared about your inner sanctuary is profound. Thank you."

### Conclusion

Some members of my parish of St. Thérèse in Seattle call my workplace group spiritual direction "missionary work." In fact, St. Thérèse of Lisieux is the patron saint of missionary work and has certainly guided me through a labyrinth of skeptics and critics. But workplace spirituality is not about traditional proselytizing or evangelizing. Particularly in the unchurched Northwest, there is a need for teaching spiritual language and practice by awakening individuals and the community to the spiritual journey while trusting that God will ultimately lead each person to a faith community that will help them continue the journey. In the language of the Roman Catholic tradition, this is pre-RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) work for the many who have no connections to any faith tradition. It is also pre-Judaism work, pre-Buddhism work, pre-Muslim work, pre-Protestant work, pre-Hindu work. Only God knows where each person's spirit will be best nourished. Deep facilitation of group spiritual direction in the workplace involves gently following the lead of our Creator God who longs for all people to be whole, to work and live out of our holiness, and to be secure enough to take risks for justice and peace not only in our workplaces but also in our world. z

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### Resources

SoulTenders maintains a website, [www.soul-tenders.org](http://www.soul-tenders.org), that provides information on workplace spirituality, a book list, and links to other websites.

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*Fast Company* ([www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)) is a business magazine founded on a single premise: a global revolution was changing business. Fast Company set to chronicle how changing companies create and compete, and to showcase the teams and individuals who are inventing the future and reinventing business.