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The Compassionate Observer

An Experiential Model for Formation

Jane E. Vennard

When students come to learn the art of spiritual direction, most of them come seeking vital skills to help them be successful in their ministries. While skills are important, the true goal in forming spiritual directors is developing an attitude of heart. Guiding students who are becoming spiritual directors toward a compassionate presence which is beyond technique is a challenge in any formation program. The following reflections, experiences, and exercises are suggestions of ways to help students develop the ability to listen to and see themselves and others with a compassionate heart.

Discovering the Compassionate Observer

The students were nervous and excited. We had been talking about spiritual direction for weeks, and now we were pairing up to become spiritual directors for one another. We talked about their apprehension and I suggested they write a list of all the reasons they believed they could not be adequate spiritual directors. They did not particularly like the assignment but they complied.

"I don't know enough."

"I'm not very wise."

"I'm too judgmental."

"I might tell someone the wrong thing and make their situation worse."

"I'm not holy."

"I'm afraid someone will talk about a situation I know nothing about."

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"I'm too young."

"I'm still confused about what spiritual direction is!"

After everyone had written at least four or five reasons, I invited them to make another list of all the reasons they would be good spiritual directors. Liking this assignment more, they wrote without hesitation.

"I'm a good listener."

"I'm compassionate."

"I'm hopeful."

"I believe in God and have faith that the spirit is at work in the world."

"I've had a lot of life experience."

"My heart is open..."

"I want to serve others."

"I am a person of prayer."

When both lists were complete, I invited students into this brief meditation:

Put your pencils and pens down and place your papers in front of you. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths...and then pay attention to your regular breathing.... Now shift your attention from your breath to your heart, feeling its gentle beat.... Imagine your heart filling with compassion.... Allow your compassionate heart to expand.... Now open your eyes and read all the reasons you cannot be a good spiritual director, read them with compassion.... Now read the list of all the reasons you can be a spiritual director, read them with compassion.... As you read, know that everything you wrote on the first list is true...and that everything you wrote on the second list is true.... You *cannot* do spiritual direction and you *can* do spiritual direction.... From this place of compassion gently hold the paradox... you are not ready and you are ready... you do not know enough and you know all you need to know.... Affirm this place of compassion within, this place that sees clearly without judgment, this place that accepts mystery.... Know yourself as a compassionate observer of yourself, of others, and the world.... Then, bringing this energy of compassion with you, open your eyes, and slowly return to this room.

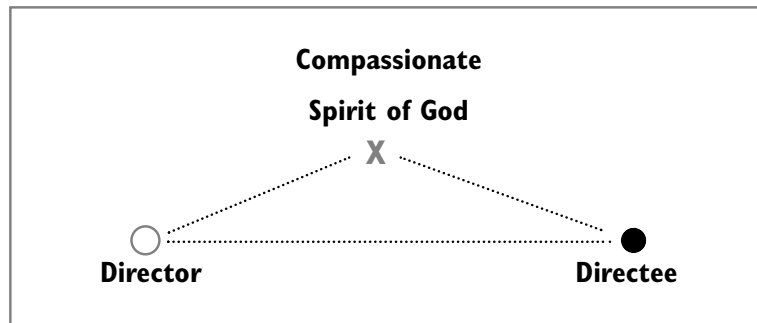
In the writing and sharing that followed this activity, one student spoke of the compassionate observer as a new place to stand in relation to his conflictual inner dialogue. "I always believed that I had to overcome my hesitations and doubts with a strong positive attitude. But the conflict was never completely resolved. Rather I lived with a continual argument of 'You can do it!' 'No you can't!'"

Another student realized the truth in the "I can" and the "I can't" positions and the danger of becoming attached to either. "If I truly believe I *cannot* do spiritual direction I might keep myself from offering what gifts I have to another. If I believe too strongly that I *can* do spiritual direction, I might become arrogant and get in the way of the movement of the spirit." Most of the students shared the relief they felt in

finding a new place from which to view themselves, others, and the world, and shared that the discovery of a “third place” was liberating.

External and Internal Triads

This activity and the experience of the compassionate observer makes real the triangular model I use in explaining the art of spiritual direction. In the external world the triad is made up of two people, the director and the directee. Both of them are connected to the compassionate spirit of God, which affirms the statement that in all spiritual direction the Holy Spirit is the true director.



In the internal world the triad is made up of the directee, who is the part of oneself that is in need of guidance and direction; the director who is the part of oneself that can listen, offer insights, reframe questions, encourage, and lovingly confront; and the compassionate observer who is the part of oneself that sees both the other parts with compassion and holds out to both the hope and promise of God’s abiding love. To experience the internal triad I guide the students in the following activity:

Sit in a chair and place an empty chair in front of you. Take a few deep breaths and then let your breathing return to normal.... Pay attention to your body, its ease and dis-ease, and move in any way you need to become more comfortable.... Pay attention to your feelings...feelings you find difficult...feelings you enjoy.... Pay attention to your thoughts...watching them go by like clouds in the sky...aware of them but not engaging them.... Now imagine that you have come to a spiritual direction session. In your imagination, who is your director? Let your director appear in the chair opposite you.... It may be a real person, an imaginary person, a person of history, literature, or your religious tradition.... See if you are willing to simply accept whoever comes to be with you for this brief time.

Take a few moments to be with your director...observing his or her body position and facial expression...looking carefully at his or her eyes. Ask yourself if you believe this person to be trustworthy and whether you are willing to tell your director a little bit of what is on your mind and in your heart.... When you feel ready, begin to share your story.... Watch how your director listens and responds.... Pay attention to nonverbal clues as well as what is said to you.... I will be quiet for a minute while you carry on this dialogue.

Bring your storytelling to a close, even if you are not finished.... Sit for a moment, and then slowly stand up, gently shake the experience from your body and mind and heart. Then carefully sit down in the opposite chair.... Embody your inner spiritual director...and look at the part of you telling the story.... See the body position and the facial expression.... Hear the words and listen for the feelings underneath the words.... How are you called to respond? What are your thoughts and feelings? What do you wish to say? I will be quiet for a minute while you continue this session from your new position.

Now it is time to draw this session to a close.... Do that in any way that seems appropriate.... Then slowly and carefully stand up and find a place where you can see both chairs.... Take a few deep breaths, allowing your breathing to fill your heart with compassion....

Then turn your attention to the chair in which you were sitting when you were the directee.... With eyes of compassion notice your body position...remember what you said...be aware of the feelings that were expressed and unexpressed...and how you related to your director....

Now turn your attention to the chair of your inner director and with eyes of compassion notice how the director listened and responded.... Pay attention to the nature of the relationship, opening your heart in compassion to whatever occurred.

When you have seen all that you can see, take a few deep breaths...feel your feet on the floor...shake your hands...and open your eyes. Now sit down in your chair and write about the experience and anything that you discovered.

The responses to this activity are as numerous and unique as the people participating, but most report experiencing the three positions very distinctly:

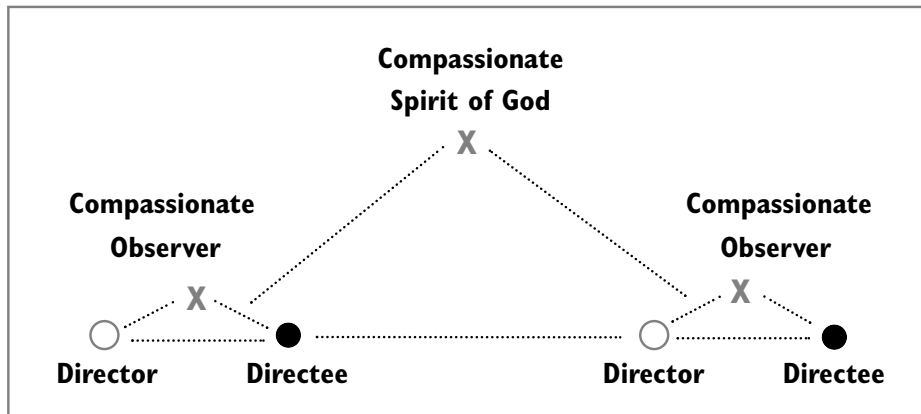
“When I was the directee, I was so relieved to have someone to listen to me that I was pleased my director did not speak, but just looked at me with love. When I was the director, I was worried I had nothing to say that would help. As the compassionate observer I saw that what was happening was just right.”

“When I stood up I realized how I was trying to get the approval of the director and had not been completely honest. I felt compassion for myself and for my inner director who was being manipulated.”

“I was surprised to find that as the director I was listening attentively but inside I was very judgmental. I wanted to tell the part of myself speaking to stop whining. When I stood up I was filled with compassion for myself and this constant critical voice I live with.”

Double Triads

With this understanding and experience of the inner triad, we must expand the external triad. No longer do we simply have a director and a directee, we have all three parts in each person. Therefore, in any spiritual direction session we have double triads in action.



The DIRECTOR is present to the person who has come for guidance, listening, encouraging, reminding, speaking, and responding nonverbally in a number of ways. While directing, the director is also aware of her inner directee who may be vulnerable, confused, or afraid and who is in need of direction. The director is also connected to her compassionate observer who witnesses the session with the compassionate spirit of God.

The following account by a director demonstrates how this internal triad becomes active in a session of spiritual direction.

"I had been seeing this directee regularly for four years. Our lived experiences were very different, and I found him a challenge to listen to and to understand. Many times as we sat together I realized I did not have a clue what he was talking about, where he was going, or what his true issues were. In these moments I began to feel inadequate. When I got afraid I began to analyze, or try to logically figure out what was going on. Sometimes I would search desperately for a verse from the Bible to let him know how religious I was. And then I would see what I was doing. I could feel compassion both for my dilemma and for his journey. I could relax with the understanding that it probably did not matter if I understood his words as long as I was present to his heart. I could feel the energy change between us when I was given a way to let him know I was truly with him on his journey. In spite of my lack of comprehension, I saw him grow in the spirit and open his heart to God over the years we journeyed together. And I grew enormously in my trust of the guidance of the compassionate spirit of God."

The internal triad is also present in the DIRECTEE. Many people are led to spiritual direction because they are not aware of the deep connections they have to their own wisdom and their own compassion. They are looking for the connection outside themselves. Part of the art of spiritual direction is guiding directees to trust their own inner triads and their connections to the holy. A directee spoke of this experience in her direction relationship:

"When I sit with my director and we pray together and he listens to me, I hear what I am saying. He needs to say very little these days. Somehow, as I express my

complex feelings and confused thoughts, they untangle in front of me and then open inside of me. I understand my issues and know for myself what to do. I am filled with compassion for myself and gratitude for the work of the spirit through this relationship.”

The Compassionate Observer in the Formation Experience

When we understand the spiritual direction relationship as the interaction of two internal triads, the complexity of the art of direction can seem formidable when one is preparing to be a spiritual director. How does one pay attention to the directee and at the same time attend to inner dynamics? How does the directee listen to the director and at the same time attend to inner voices of compassion and wisdom? To ease into the complexity, I return the students to the first external triad and invite those in formation to take one role at a time. As the students have the opportunity to practice each role in the triad separately, they experience each place and learn to follow the dynamic transitions between the places. Therefore, all spiritual direction practica are done in triads.

To form the triads, I invite those who feel ready to serve as spiritual directors to raise their hands. I then ask those who are looking for someone to listen to them to go to one of the directors. When people are paired, I ask the remaining students to go to a pair and ask if they can serve as the compassionate observer. The triad then finds a place to sit and be together for 15-20 minutes.

The use of triads and observers in a training program is not new. Anyone who has been through a counseling program can speak of supervisors watching sessions through one-way mirrors, classmates observing from a distance and making notes about what is occurring, verbatims during which the director is told about all the issues, feelings, and nuances of the session that were missed in addition to what was done well. Because of these experiences, the triangular model often elicits fear in people for they assume that when they are being observed they are being judged.

The essence of the compassionate observer is being — not doing.

In this formation model, the compassionate observer is not there to judge, or to respond verbally or nonverbally to what occurs. The compassionate observer is simply to witness with compassion the interaction between director and directee, and to remind both of them of the presence of the Spirit in the session.

“But what does the compassionate observer do?” the students ask. This question uncovers the heart of the compassionate observer and the difficulty of finding and living more and more from this place. The essence of the compassionate observer is *being* — not *doing*. The compassionate observer is not passive any more than the Holy Spirit is passive. The observer is fully present to all that is going on and may be constantly in prayer for what she or he observes, but does not speak or engage in the

session in any active way. However, the simple and profound presence of compassion and prayer will effect the relationship being observed.

In the formation of spiritual directors, the understanding, practice, and ongoing development of the compassionate observer is the key to the development of "holy listening" as Margaret Guenther defines it. Many students come to spiritual direction with skills of reflective listening, reframing questions, hearing the question beneath the question, connecting the directee's story to biblical stories, offering suggestions for deepening prayer, and gently probing to open up spots of denial. And where these skills are lacking, they can be taught. But most directors-in-training have little or no experience of engaging without speaking or doing, being fully present with compassion, and looking at themselves and others through the loving eyes of God.

*The compassionate is always present
within yourself, within the directee, and
in the presence of the spirit who
"intercedes with sighs too deep for words."*

When students are given the opportunity to practice being compassionate observers, some of them report it is like "coming home." "This place is a truly natural way of my being in the world," one

student reported, "but I have always devalued it, trying to become more involved, more outgoing. How wonderful to have an affirming name for a way of being in the world that is so intrinsic to who I am."

But most students become anxious and confused in the compassionate observer's place.

"I don't know what to do!"

"Should I close my eyes?"

"What if others think I have gone to sleep?"

"If my eyes are open, will I be intruding?"

"Why am I here if I am not doing anything?"

"What should I pray?"

"How should I pray?"

"What do I do when I begin to judge what is going on before me, or become bored by the dialogue?"

The answers to these questions can come only from the experience of practicing the position of the compassionate observer, each person finding his or her own way into the experience. However, talking about the difficulties of this new experience helps students know they are not alone in their discomfort. Moments of insight and clarity about being the compassionate observer will also help.

"It took me a while, but I finally realized that I was present in a way I cannot be if I know I have to speak."

"I had a moment of wondering and then knowing that this is the way God looks at us."

"I found myself praying the Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us."

"I sat with the image of the directee and the director held in the loving hands of God."

As important as the experience of the compassionate observer is the experience of the director and the directee to the presence of the compassionate observer. Usually there is some discomfort at having a conversation with a third person present whom they do not include. There is a pull to make the dialogue a "trialogue." But with practice, both the director and directee come to rely on the loving third presence in their midst.

"When I became confused as to how I should respond to the directee's issue I was strengthened by the compassion I felt from you."

"I started to weep as I told my story and was at first embarrassed, but then reassured by your lack of judgment."

"Through your presence I felt we were bathed in warm light."

"Your quiet loving presence underscored the glorious mystery of God's presence in our lives."

At the end of three weeks of practica in this form, students often exclaim, "How can I ever do spiritual direction *without* the compassionate observer?" And the answer is, "You don't!" For the compassionate is always present within yourself, within the directee, and in the presence of the spirit who "intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). The challenge now in the formation of spiritual directors is to help them stay awake to all three positions within themselves. This is best done through storytelling and examples of that inner movement.

For example, I often tell of my experience of journeying with a directee through the death of her mother just months after my own mother died. Her stories, struggles and grief pulled me into my own pain. I recognized I was in danger of becoming the directee in the session, in need of comfort and permission for free expression of all my feelings. I could not move from directee back to director without experiencing the compassionate observer. Moving there I could feel the light of love and understanding, the affirmation that my grief was real and necessary, and the assurance that I too would be guided and held. With this awareness, I could become the director, empathetic and present, weeping tears with her but not being overcome by my own grief.

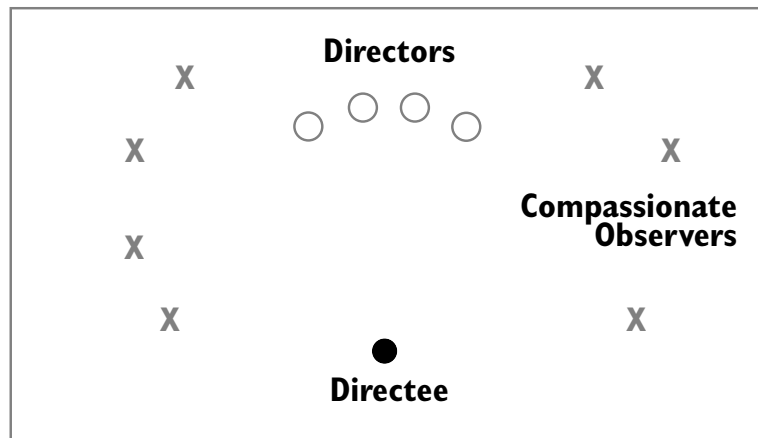
Another person who was a therapist for many years before he became a spiritual director reports that the compassionate observer within himself is the only thing that keeps him from sliding unconsciously from direction to therapy. "As I listen and companion a directee, my mind often begins to slide into its analytic, diagnostic mode. But before I go too far I hear the voice of compassion within saying, 'These are wonderful tools and you have used them well in the past for healing. But that is not

what you are about now. Turn your attention to the movement of the spirit in the life of the beloved of God before you.”

Compassionate Observers in Group Spiritual Direction

In Rose Mary Dougherty’s contemplative model of group spiritual direction, three or four directors respond to a directee after periods of silence and prayer. In the language of our triangular model of spiritual direction, each person in the group process — directors and directees — are invited to spend time in the place of the compassionate observer before they speak. This quiet time of prayer helps the words of the directors come from the depths of their souls and helps the directee hear the words and the spirit speaking through them with open hearts.

In introducing the process of group spiritual direction to students, I have found it helpful to break out the position of compassionate observer and invite a few members of the group to simply be with the process in prayer. As in the triangular model of individual spiritual direction, the compassionate observers do not speak or respond, but are actively present through prayer. The model looks like this:



Many people confuse this model with the fishbowl model of discussion. In that model the people surrounding those in the discussion take notes on the process and later share what they saw: who listened and didn’t listen, what comments seemed appropriate or inappropriate, and so on. Being *watched* is very different from being *witnessed*. Being witnessed compassionately brings depth to the process of group spiritual direction. In this model the compassionate observers surround the process in prayer and witness the exchanges and offerings with compassionate minds and hearts. They are fully engaged, yet say or do nothing.

The presence of a compassionate observer is so powerful I have continued to use them in group spiritual direction beyond the formation stage. Compassionate observers serve the process through prayer and witness and also receive many gifts

in return. Often compassionate observers speak about the direction they receive for their own lives as they sit silently and compassionately, open to the movement of the spirit. They tell of receiving insights into the process of spiritual direction as well as becoming aware of the mystery inherent in all direction.

I have used this model of group spiritual direction on retreats to introduce retreatants to a contemplative model of speaking and listening to one another. During a spiritual renewal retreat for clergy, I taught the model and asked if they would be willing to participate. One man spoke up quickly, saying that he had an issue he would like to bring to his colleagues, but feared if he did the issue would be "talked to death." He moved his chair to the center of the circle. Five others slowly joined him to be his directors, and the remaining twenty became compassionate observers.

In the half hour that followed difficult issues were raised, many feelings were expressed, words were spoken and heard, prayers gave comfort and courage, the spirit was active, and God was surely in that place. "I feel as if I should take off my shoes," one of the retreatants said when we were done, "for surely we stand on holy ground."

A Life of Compassion

The practice of being a compassionate observer in class and on retreat can deepen one's ministry. Students and retreatants have shared the power of active compassionate observation in their own lives:

"I have been a pastor for 30 years, and I always believed I had to do something when an issue or idea or problem was presented. And if I had nothing to offer, or felt it was not mine to 'take care of' I would withdraw. With a new place to stand I believe I can be more pastoral in either situation."

"When I hear my wife and daughter arguing in the next room, I do not run to get involved, neither do I withdraw. I stop what I am doing and offer a prayer that they may see their way through this disagreement and find reconciliation in their relationship."

"Last week in the hospital a large family gathered at the bedside of a dying parent. They surrounded their father's bed as he quietly slipped away. After the death they joined in pairs and small groups crying, talking, and comforting each other. At first I felt I should do something. Then I thought I should leave. And then I knew that I could simply be there in that room, present to them in prayer."

Students in formation to become spiritual directors would benefit from discovering the compassionate observer in themselves. Then they may experience the guidance of the spirit spiritual direction sessions. They may more readily enter into the mystery of what is happening between themselves and another individual or a group. They may learn to rely less on their own skills and abilities, and turn more to the power of prayer. Spiritual directors who know the compassionate observer within can help others find their own connection to wisdom, compassion, and the promise of God. ❖