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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION • VOL. 21, NO. 2 • JUNE 2015



Thomas Merton: An Interview with James Finley • The Poor and Spiritual Direction
What Is Spiritual Direction? • Spirituality of the Twelve Steps • On Retreat with Martin Laird

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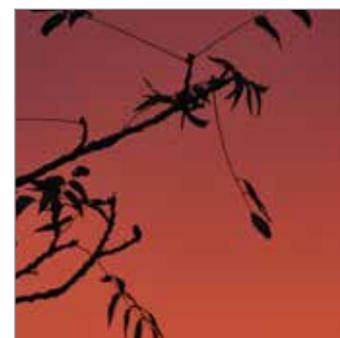
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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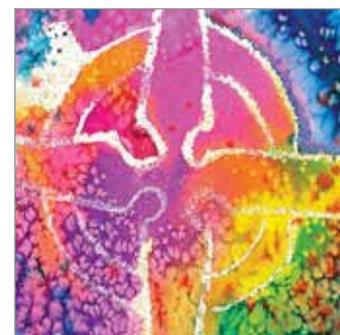
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The Poor and Spiritual Direction

Ellen M. Kogstad

// It doesn't matter. I'm going to hell anyway."

Keisha said this as I was introduced as the new director of spiritual formation to Keisha and her classmates. Her candor was disheartening yet set the course for re-engagement in a ministry I had started thirty years ago. Returning to New Moms, Inc. in this position was going to be a journey of regular encounters like this one. Bridging spiritual formation and spiritual direction to adolescent parents and the staff that serves them would prove eye popping.

Adolescent mothers are a population group that is a heart passion for me. Personally, I had my one and only child later in life. Yet from some deep inner space I have a very natural affinity with these women-girls. In 1983 I started New Moms, eventually entrusting it to other capable women leaders. After training as a spiritual director and serving as one for many years, a gentle nudging sensation started, asking, "What about the poor?" In the hiddenness of my private prayers, I began to sit with this question regularly. For over a year I did not speak publicly about my inner dialogue. I acknowledged the nudges, training my eyes and ears to watchfulness on this specific issue. I listened more deeply to conversations about the poor in relation to spiritual formation. I read articles (few in number) about spiritual direction among the poor. This was followed by direct conversations, including informal job interviews. Finally, the sorting-out phase of discernment led to a decision: I would remain at the seminary where I was teaching spiritual formation and training spiritual directors *and* return to New Moms. Both positions are part-time. This is often how I get answers to prayer: nudging, watchfulness, recognition, engagement, and decision. In some ways it is the strangest of combinations: a seminary where folks are highly educated and generally welcoming to the movement of God contrasted by urban teens focused on daily survival for themselves and a child or two or more. Strangely enough, these disparate worlds genuinely inform one another.

Spirituality in all its forms is expensive. A simple paperback Bible can be \$15, much more for hardcover

editions. A theological education can put students in debt for decades. Seeing a spiritual director may be a luxury even for the middle class. Books in our field are inspiring but inaccessible to those with a fourth or fifth grade reading capacity. Seminars, conferences, retreats? They are cost prohibitive, even if child care and transportation were magically available. One thing I've learned at New Moms is that even going to church can be cost prohibitive. African American churches, I am told, expect attendees to come well dressed. Several of our participants have told me directly that they are unable to go to church because they do not have nice enough clothes for their children to wear. The costs of public transportation plus fees charged for programming are also deterrents to participation. These same concerns can be present for staff working in the social services and ministry fields, where entry-level positions hover around minimum wage.

I keep before me a simple phrase from the biblical book of Galatians that reads, "Remember the poor." In all religious traditions, the care of the poor is a common theme. Politically there may be discussion about who are the "deserving poor," but that we ought to care for them is both pure religion and an ethical and moral mandate. My Random House dictionary defines *poor* as "having little or no money, goods, or other means of support." The U.S. government has tables based on family size that index poverty. What I observe at New Moms is that poverty means you have no options; there is no one who has your back. There is no transfer of wealth, even if it is \$50 from one's grandparents in a birthday card. For the poor, there is no money to transfer as gifts or otherwise.

Recently I have been reinvigorated by the writings of Evelyn Underhill, an early twentieth-century British mystic. She endeavored to teach, preach, and write about the deep connection between the spiritual life and what she calls the "time-world" (96). The line from the Lord's Prayer comes to mind: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Underhill writes:

To "bring Eternity into Time," the "invisible into concrete expression"; to "be to the Eternal Goodness what his own



hand is to a man”—these are the plainly expressed desires of all the great mystics. One and all, they demand earnest and deliberate action, the insertion of the purified and ardent will into the world of things. The mystics are artists; and the stuff in which they work is most often human life. They want to heal the disharmony between the actual and the real: and since, in the white-hot radiance of that faith, hope, and charity which burns in them, they discern such a reconciliation to be possible, they are able to work for it with a singleness of purpose and an invincible optimism denied to other men. This was the instinct which drove St. Francis of Assisi to the practical experience of that poverty which he recognized as the highest wisdom; St. Catherine of Siena from contemplation to politics; Joan of Arc to the salvation of France; St. Teresa to the formation of an ideal religious family; Fox to the proclaiming of a world-religion in which all men should be guided by the Inner Light; Florence Nightingale to battle with officials, vermin, dirt, and disease in the soldiers’ hospitals; Octavia Hill to make in London slums something a little nearer “the shadows of the angels’ houses: than that which the practical landlord usually provides.” (123)

After two years of praying and searching in response to inner urgings, I found myself back at New Moms after a fifteen-year absence. Of course so much was vastly different, even if the soul of the ministry was the same. However, finding my niche with spiritual direction and spiritual formation work has taken several years to blossom. For those searching for a place of ministry and service to share the gifts of spiritual direction with the poor, I would suggest seeking shelters and services directed specifically toward women and children.

Mistreatment of women is a universal practice that circles the globe and transcends country borders, political ideologies, religious beliefs, cultural patterns, and family systems. Whatever race, color, creed, income level, educational level, marital status, Northern Hemisphere, Southern Hemisphere, East, or West, women are considered of less worth than men and treated accordingly. Although women and men are roughly equal in total population numbers worldwide, the inequities for women are stark. The belief in the inherent inferiority of women has resulted in their diminishment, subjugation, and, all too frequently, death. This flawed thinking

has made its way into public policies, social norms, and religious doctrines both subtly and overtly with dire consequences. For instance:

- 80 percent of the world’s millions of refugees and other displaced persons are women and children.
- 1.2 million women and girls under age eighteen are trafficked for prostitution each year around the world.
- Of the world’s 1.3 billion “absolute poor,” almost 70 percent are women.
- Approximately six thousand girls are subjected to female genital mutilation each day, and 30 percent of girls subjected to its most radical form die from the effects.
- Four million women are sold each year as slaves.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 55 percent of HIV-infected adults are women, and teenage girls are five times more likely to be infected than boys.
- In more than forty countries, monetary bribes, job loss, and the threat of incarceration lead many women to abort their children, agree to sterilization, or consent to use birth control devices that often cause infection and permanent reproductive disorders.
- Gender violence (beatings, honor killings, bride burning, and acid attacks) is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer and a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria combined.
- Most of the thirty million poor in America are women and children.
- The World Health Organization reports that 35 percent of women experience physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partners or others.

I ponder regularly the effect spiritual directors and Spiritual Directors International will prove to have on the spiritual formation of the world in the twenty-first century. As our numbers increase, so do the numbers of people who are leaving traditional religion—the “nones”—who claim no religious affiliation. Is it accidental providence that the majority of the earth’s poor are women and girls



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and the majority of spiritual directors are women? How would the life energy of the cosmos shift if each female spiritual director welcomed two or three of the poorest into her ministry and service of spiritual direction? If there is one certainty in this work, it is that the Spirit is always active. Tapping into that activity is transformational both personally and societally. I have hope that our hidden, quiet work is upending the world; I anticipate history will affirm this.

The task of finding the poor will be curiously difficult. Ironically enough, the poor are often hidden, off the path of our daily routines. When compassion compels us to action, it may be harder than you believe to find someone who is ready to receive the gift you bring.

The twentieth century saw human degradation and destabilization on an unprecedented scale, yet the torrid pace is being maintained in the twenty-first. Refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced people are among the most visible; but the growing numbers of urban poor have been perhaps the least visible. If the plight of the visible (in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan or Palestine/Israel) provokes a humanitarian response, the plight of many on our own doorstep has simply not been noticed.

A profile of the homeless poor provides a context for thoughts about popular religiosity and pastoral responses. Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked. As Jesus ruefully said, “You always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11). Indeed, those whom Jesus encountered in first-century Palestine are with us in the twenty-first-century United States, especially in the faces of homeless people: mostly nocturnal, largely invisible, easily avoidable and virtually uncountable, because they are an unstable and shifting population. It is easier to identify trends than to produce incontestable statistics: mere facts do not convince everyone. “The homeless poor” is more than a category; it is a fragile culture of flesh and blood people. And Jesus gave them preferential treatment. (Gittins, 119)

Spiritual direction at a homeless shelter or human services agency may not look like the sessions spiritual directors were taught to model or the ones enjoyed personally. There may be no quiet space, much less a set-aside prayer room with two comfortable chairs and



a nicely scented candle. Most definitely there will not have been an appointment made and kept; the session will often be spontaneous. Nevertheless, true, orthodox spiritual direction occurs. We bring listening presence, the core of our discipline. We do not offer suggestions or create lists—those are for social workers to handle. In the midst of a crisis or crucial time, participants are searching for someone who will hear their inner story; human services workers know the outer, obvious one. Participants are eager to use the G-word, hoping someone will take their God story seriously. In the midst of poverty, homelessness, abuse, and much more, I am continually surprised by the strong belief in God and the sure hope experienced by New Moms participants.

At New Moms I teach a four-session Women and Character class. I have a three-question handout on spirituality: (1) What kind of church/religious experiences



“Expansive Sky with Walnut Tree” — by Susan O’Connell

have you had? (2) If you could have a conversation with God, what would you like to say? (3) What do you believe God thinks about you? We have the most discussion on the middle question, which is another way of discussing prayer, the heart of spiritual direction. Below are several responses copied exactly as they were written:

- “I talk to God almost every day even tho we don’t have words. About everything that goes on in my life. I love the fact I can talk to him and he sends signs to let me know I guess how he felt.” — Age twenty-three; twin boys, twenty-three months old.
- “I would like to ask God why was my mother and father taking away. Why don’t my kids father love my kids. Am I doing a good job by
- them. Will I have money to do what I need to do from my kids, me, and my family.” — Age twenty-four; one- and two-year-old children.
- “Dear God, My Aunt had passed away, I just wanna know why exactly did you take her and I need her.” — Age twenty-two; three-year-old child.
- “I would say God thank you for giving me a great life and family to live with. Thank you for giving me choices/options. Thank you for letting me know I mean something to you. And when you come to meet us save a special seat for me.” — Age eighteen; eleven-and-a-half-month-old child.
- “I would just like to thank him for many things that I been to, really my bad things in life because it helps me appreciate things a lot more. I will also have an intimacy relationship conversation about God and I, because I really enjoy church, and the bible, and also the words that I hear but I will like to have the personal relationship with God to lead my path, clear my mind, block negative things approaching my way. Thank him for the things that I already have, and for my Daughter!” — Age twenty-two; one-year-old child.
- “I would have a lot to say but its nothing that I want to write down or share.” — Age nineteen; two-month-old child.
- “If I were to have a conversation with God I would ask him why is life so hard and unfair. Why is the world so full of hate & negativity and only gets worst every day. Is this how it was meant to be in your plan? & If not why can’t you do anything to make the world a better place.” — Age eighteen; six-month-old child.
- “I would thank him for everything he has blessed me with and all he has done for me and for him to continue to love me and never give



up on me.” — Age twenty-two; three-year-old child.

- “I would like to say to God Just help get through this tough life with me, to be successful get my family together, be prepared to get my life situation right, make sure I always have a place to stay.” — Age twenty; three-year-old child.

One at a time the participants read from their papers their thoughts and questions, which sound like heartfelt prayers. To speak out loud is always voluntary and mostly appreciated. Having a safe place to speak one’s doubts and questions while affirming faith in God (or not) incorporates the mystical, hidden life of spirit into the concrete stuff of life. The rest of us listen in silence, nod in sympathy, keep our heads down in familiar recognition, or laugh when a statement makes a connection. The classroom feels at these times like a prayer room, our interaction like a group spiritual direction session. God fills the space between us, and for thirty minutes we reflect on the heart’s hidden ponderings.

Themes of sadness, death, future, where is God?, hope, disappointments, gratefulness, and cries for help are regular and familiar to spiritual directors. The poor—in my context, adolescent mothers—echo universal wonderings and longings emanating from their urban context. Poverty seems to color life in neon: what is already hard is made more challenging without a backup support system. Single parent households are common throughout North American culture so it is not that singular fact that makes our work challenging.

For our participants and their families it all too often becomes that one-too-many mouth to feed in a household already stretched. One participant told me her father and his family would take her in but they have rats. She didn’t want to take the chance of her newborn being nibbled in the night. Another came to talk to me about

her friend’s suicide just two days earlier. As if that grief weren’t big enough, out of her flowed the tears from her aunt’s death two months earlier. This teen mother in my office also just learned of her mother’s diagnosis, identical to the illness that claimed her aunt. All of this combined (there’s more about the father of her child) led to her homelessness. How can a nineteen-year-old have so much tragedy? How can crying with me and spilling the details of each dramatic story point do her any good at all? I don’t know, but I keep listening, as we all do as spiritual directors. I can’t mend, but I can tend. And somehow that seems to matter.

It has been helpful for me to be aware of those who come to me for spiritual direction as either process spiritual directees or practice spiritual directees. Process spiritual directees are those who seek spiritual direction on a time-limited, even theme-specific basis. My students at the seminary fulfill the course requirements of the Direction and Solitude class by seeing me for four spiritual direction sessions during the semester. Sometimes people in transition see me while working through a discernment question. And certainly participants at New Moms

are process spiritual directees. Practice spiritual directees are those who see me monthly over a period of years; they have made spiritual direction one of their spiritual practices. I treat both classes of spiritual directees identically. Whether someone comes one time, four times, short-term, or decades long, the holy work of listening for God’s movement in the story of their lives is always a deep privilege.

Susan Crawford Sullivan led a research project interviewing forty-five very poor mothers in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Her excellent book is titled *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*. Her focus from the spirituality perspective is that most mothers in poverty had a “lived religion” or “everyday religion” that sustained them. While most did not formally belong to any religious institution, the mothers had a very deep

*Poverty seems to color
life in neon:
what is already hard
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without a backup
support system.*



connection to God through regular prayer. Sullivan writes:

Prayer can lead to transformation. Poor mothers find in prayer new identities as strong people who persevere, who face their problems not alone but working in partnership with a God they view as loving and involved. Most of my respondents, and likely many poor urban mothers overall, frequently pray for strength. In believing that God answers these prayers, women actually feel stronger, more capable, and more able to act in the world. Women transformed by prayer may view themselves not as stigmatized and scorned welfare mothers but as children of God, a God they believe strengthens them and works with them to help bring about their goals. (43)

Recently a fourth “E” was added to the New Moms’ logo and key drivers. The first three are “Enable healthy families,” “Empower economic independence,” and “Equip for independent living.” Now there is “Encourage spiritual growth.” While we are a (Christian) faith-based organization, there has never been a key driver or tool used to intentionally support and track spiritual growth. A consultant in the management and leadership field worked pro bono to develop a tool that we call the Spiritual Hope, Healing and Well-Being Inventory. The Spiritual Wellness Inventory by Elliott Ingersoll will also be used.

The Spiritual Hope, Healing and Well-Being Inventory has a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The intent is to have participants fill it out with a family services specialist every six months to mark change. Perhaps more important is the opportunity for on-the-spot discussion about participants’ answers to any one of the twenty-five statements. A sampling includes:

On most days I feel discouraged.
I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
I am a daughter of God, I know God loves me.

I have goals for my future and my child’s future.
I believe that God’s love is for everyone, not just certain kinds of people.
I have a spiritual friend that I can talk to about God.
I believe there is some real purpose for my life.

It is significant that a not-for-profit organization is taking spiritual health seriously enough to develop an inventory and make it a part of the data collected for management and reporting purposes.

After serving at New Moms for a couple of years, I began to wonder if there were others like me with a background in human services, a focus on the poor, education in spiritual formation, and training as a spiritual director. I was blessed with the use of one of New Moms’ graduate school interns who did much of the research work. She contacted dozens of not-for-profit organizations mostly in the metropolitan area of Chicago, Illinois, USA. She also checked online resources. Interestingly, the for-profit world seems to be further along when it comes to emotional and spiritual concerns for its employees. Leaders are seeing that it makes good business sense

to have employees pursue spirituality on company time to enhance their productivity. While they may not have spiritual directors (yet!), they do have meditation rooms, values training, yoga, and more.

Finally, I found two other trained spiritual directors bringing these specific gifts to the poor in a social service context. We began meeting, found another who wanted to join us, then another, and a few more. Not all have been trained as spiritual directors, but all are committed to integrating the spiritual dimension of life into client conversation. Our rather informal Chicago Formation Network gathers quarterly, rotating our meetings at each other’s agencies. We share program ideas, materials, prayers, successes, and discouragements. Sometimes spiritual direction is offered as a formal staff benefit; in other agencies the staff interactions are more informal.

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One in our group suggested that as a network, perhaps we can serve the larger community with our presence. One tangible expression was attending together the Twenty-Eighth Annual Interfaith Memorial Observance for Indigent Persons. I had no idea such an event existed, nor that there was a need for it. Since 1985, on the Wednesday before Memorial Day, a service has been held commemorating the lives of indigent babies, children, and adults buried by the Office of the Cook County Medical Examiner in mass graves. W. Earl Lewis, the founder of the Memorial Ministry for Indigent Persons and the initiator of these services, said, "To live and die alone is a human tragedy, but not to be remembered and mourned after earthly life is an ugly blemish on human dignity." The names of 389 indigent persons were read one by one, and our little group was there as witness to the lives lived, often hidden in the world and anonymous in death.

Another not-for-profit in our Network is Harmony, Hope and Healing (HHH). This organization provides creative, therapeutic, and educational music programs that offer emotional and spiritual support to homeless and underserved women, children, and men in Chicago's most disadvantaged and violence-ridden communities. Using the restorative power of music, HHH programs offer participants struggling to overcome the detrimental effects of homelessness, substance abuse, violence, and isolation a means to develop the inner resources necessary to break the cycle of poverty and abuse. HHH programs bring an element of joy and creativity into the difficult and painful process of turning one's life around. One past participant described HHH as "medicine for the heart, for my spirit."

Plenty of the poor are also men and boys; their numbers may not be as striking as those for women, but the plight of males in poverty is also dire. Prisons, halfway houses, and cardboard-box homes exist in all-too-large numbers, too. At the 2013 SDI events in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, I hosted a lunch table discussion for spiritual directors interested in serving the poor. A few of the participants took their training as spiritual directors to men in prisons and to the Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP). The vision and mission statement of ISP reads: "We began by offering weekend retreats away, and have recently developed days of reflection, one-on-one

spiritual companionship to continue the community and spirit of transformation forged on retreats. These programs invite both a deepening connection to one's true self and a greater sense of intimacy with God and with the larger community."

The worldwide community of spiritual directors, specifically represented by SDI, has pockets of people serving the hidden in society: the poor. It is a specific niche of our specialized ministry and service. I do not use the word *marginalized* in referring to the poor. The poor are always marginalized, but the marginalized are not always poor. Within our community of learning I hope there will be further research, an increase in the collection of resources, and more conference table discussions and workshop presenters focused on spiritual direction with the poor. We will all be richer for hearing the stories of deep spiritual hunger, seeking, and finding among those who God loves. ■

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Online resources

- Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org>.
- Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org>.
- Gendercide Watch, <http://www.gendercide.org>.
- Opportunity International, <http://www.opportunity.org>.
- UNICEF, <http://www.unicefusa.org/endtrafficking>.