CONTENTS

Spiritual Direction
To Bring All Things Together .................................................. 4
James M. Keegan

Training, Mentoring, and Supervision
Encountering Love Mysticism ................................................. 20
Janet Ruffing

Contexts and Cultures
Tending the Holy in the Inner City ........................................... 34
Donald Bisson

Professional Considerations
Professionalism, Legal Responsibilities
and Record Keeping .................................................................. 41
Robert J. Willis

Features
Focus .......................................................................................... 4

Reflection ..................................................................................... 55
Donald Schell

Profiles ......................................................................................... 60
Mary Ann Scofield

Book Reviews ............................................................................. 65

Poetry Selection ......................................................................... 74
To Bring
All Things Together

Spiritual Direction as Action for Justice

James M. Keegan, SJ

Spiritual directors engage in a highly personal art in an intimate setting. "One-on-one" is a standard way of describing the encounter and sometimes even the work itself. The ministry is replete with intuitive feelers like myself, who are often invited into the depths of the stranger in the next seat on the short flight from Boston to New York, but who could not recall whether he was bald or wore glasses or ordered a drink. For many of us, too, gazing out the airplane window can trigger an old, disquieting image of the spiritual director far removed from the mean streets below and enchanted by the beauty of the patterned lights. Hearing again that the promotion of justice is an integral part of the service of faith, first put so strikingly for American Catholics by their bishops in 1971, can make us want to get back on the next flight — wherever it may be heading.

We are religious people who take the gospel seriously and we are usually informed people as well, aware of the violent, unequal society we always land in. Much of our training and work has focused on helping people to deepen their personal journeys. We have written, debated, and harangued for so long about the interface between spiritual direction and the work of justice that some have settled it for themselves by moving their work or residence into the midst of poor and oppressed people. Others have chosen to do well what they already do, maintaining, for instance, that "the poor" can be understood in a wide enough sense to encompass their clients. Still others have decided that they will limit their spiritual direction to men and women actively engaged in justice work or desirous of focusing their conscious energies in that area.

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These are certainly legitimate ways of adapting the work of spiritual direction to the call to "action on behalf of justice." Successful or not, however, each of them results from a separate peace made with that call. What is still missing is a systematic understanding of what "action on behalf of justice" may look like within the ministry of spiritual direction per se. Perhaps the workaholism and fatigue of many spiritual directors are related to the unsettled shadowy figures of "the poor and the oppressed" who approach in the defenseless hours of the night. Seamus Murphy, who helped the Jesuits in Ireland reflect on the relationship or their ministries to the mission of faith and justice, discovered that, while "people in social and youth ministries tended to experience consolation, people in education and spirituality often experienced desolation" (Murphy, "The Many Ways of Justice," p. 1). Our models for this action are social work/social activism, and that is not what spiritual directors do. The desolation may arise because we really cannot say what it is we do when we act for justice as spiritual directors.

When a spiritual director is engaged in action for justice as a spiritual director, what will it look like? I will develop four qualities that seem important in answering the question: it will be integral to the ministry itself; it will be action; it will be founded in a contemplative attitude toward life and reality; it will be recognizably rooted in the gospel. These are not intended as an exhaustive response to the question, but a development of some ground on which to stand in responding to it.

**Action for Justice is Integral to the Ministry of Spiritual Direction**

Seamus Murphy argues that we do not have "an appropriate notion of what it means to do justice" in retreat work and spiritual direction. Instead, we assume "that justice being a dimension of all ministries means that doing justice in any ministry would be similar to doing justice in social ministry. The assumption appears to be false" (Murphy, pp. 5, 6). In other words, we assume that justice is about changing society and any of its structures that are hostile to gospel values. Since this work is so often focused on individuals, we may look for the ripple effect of a directee's spiritual development or expect that fidelity to God's grace will ultimately yield fruit for the poor and oppressed. These may be valid hopes, but they are external to the work of spiritual direction, whose goal is to help people notice the movement of God in their lives and choose to go with it. Directors who hope to see social action resulting from their work could be violating their contemplative stance should they try to steer their clients in the direction of those hopes rather than helping them to engage with the free action of God.

Murphy's work helps us to think more clearly about various ministries, their goals and means, and the relationship each has to the call to integrate justice with
faith. He argues that, since there are many valid and important ministries that serve the faith without any direct connection to social justice or service to the poor, then there must be various kinds of justice and various ethical theories, none of which are complete in themselves. The "promotion of justice" is integral to every ministry but means something different for different kinds of work. It is important, then, for people in various ministries to identify those particular notions of justice that are appropriate to what they do.

For example, the key question in a ministry such as migration and refugee services or work with homeless families may be, "In what way should human resources be deployed so as to have maximum effectiveness in bringing about a better world?" (Murphy, p. 20). Its goal would be to provide direct human services and to work toward a just social order; action for justice could be providing translation or housing services for refugees or advocating for the voiceless in city government. Only in an applied sense could this notion of justice be integral to numerous other ministries, such as Engaged and Marriage Encounter or Family Enrichment. Their key question may be more, "How ought I behave in my relations to others?" (Murphy, p. 22). Action for justice may mean the respectful treatment of individuals as persons, and their action could be providing alternatives to abortion or encouraging dialogue between spouses or within parish councils. Here, it is human relationships that are to be made just.

So "justice" can show different faces in different ministries. Although the above questions and purposes may not be overlooked in the work of spiritual direction, they do not describe the operative notion of justice which, as Murphy says, is "easily and obviously connectable to the core elements in the work" of spiritual direction. Because spiritual direction is about helping people to recognize, engage with, and freely elect to move with the Spirit of God in their lives, action for justice will be concerned with the process of noticing, discerning, and choosing. The key question here may be, "What must be taken into account before one can accurately discern and choose to follow the Spirit of God?"

**Action for Justice Is Action**

If we make the mistake of applying only one notion of justice to all ministries, we arrive at an old familiar dead-end: since my work does not involve action for the poor or other activity which is more proper to social ministry, there is something deficient in it; something has to be added before spiritual direction can claim its status as a work of justice. So we may move our center into the inner city or invite the poor to our more rural settings. While these are highly laudable activities
which may significantly influence the way we do our work, they are not constitutive of the ministry of spiritual direction itself.

At issue here is our notion of action. If "action" means only the activity appropriate to social ministries, for example, then spiritual directors really are inert! If what we mean by action, on the other hand, is intentional engagement in one or many arenas of human life, then people who bother to record or pray about their dreams, or who open their secrets to a trusted professional are taking action. They are making choices which have consequences for themselves or for the multi-layered systems and structures in which they live. Responsible action means choosing and paying attention to the consequences of one's choices.

Spiritual directors are faced with action choices all the time: whether to continue to listen now or to speak, to focus on this or that aspect of what the directee is saying or omitting, to challenge an assertion or let it pass. They are acting as spiritual directors when they engage, inquire, give feedback or suggestions, and when they spend time afterward prayerfully reflecting and being supervised about their choices. Spiritual directors take action as *spiritual directors* in deciding how to respond to their directees, and such action can be responsible and just or capricious and self-serving, depending on whether or not its origins and consequences are considered. The action appropriate to this ministry does not look like the notion of activity proper to social ministry. It is what spiritual directors do. The next two sections will address the question, "What would make this action more or less just?"

**Action for Justice Is Founded in a Contemplative Attitude**

**Toward All of Life**

As our concept of action can be measured by a host of Lethal Weapon movies, our notion of contemplation may be found in the back pew of a darkened chapel with its eyes cast down. But contemplation is not necessarily quiet, passive, or inward: any more than action is necessarily fast-paced. The first task of a spiritual director is to help a directee develop the non-judgmental presence to his or her own life experience which we call a contemplative attitude. For spiritual directors this essential attitude is a human posture before the experience of living—a habit comprised of acts of listening, attending to, and effectively engaging with the reality of another. In spiritual direction it is the activity of the whole person of the director involved with the whole person of the directee in such a way that the directee's experience of life can reveal intimations of God's activity and the invitations God may be making.
When one human being trusts another with the raw material of living, contemplation is an action science. Its object is the inner and outward events, experiences, and activities that constitute the life of this person. In our ministry of spiritual direction and our practicum programs for spiritual directors, the five of us who work together in the Archdiocese of Louisville have been clarifying and applying an understanding of contemplative action which has broadened our knowledge and practice. We have begun to notice God's activity in four interrelated arenas of human life.

Steve Wirth, the director of the Spirituality Office, has been key not only in moving us to understand and incorporate work done by many others, but in creating his own original synthesis of this material. Many of the ideas and references here are his. We are also indebted to those who developed the "Grid Arenas" and "The Experience Cycle" at the Center for spirituality and Justice in New Rochelle, New York; Elinor Shea, who described their work in writing; Jack Mostyn, CFC, who has dialogued with us extensively on this material; and writers like Peter M. Senge and Chris Argyris, who focus on developing teams and corporate bodies.

Arenas are places where choices are made which lead to the development or deterioration of relationship. In order to help directors engage with the whole reality of an individual, we have found it useful to be conscious of four such arenas which constitute the "frame" of a person's life: the Individual, Interpersonal, Structural, and Environmental. These are interconnected categories with porous lines between them, ways of expanding our noticing and understanding of human experience. It is my thesis that this "Lifeframe" makes it possible to understand how, in practice, one may "do justice" in spiritual direction by expanding our contemplative skills to encompass more of a directee's reality. It has also helped us to recognize that we have habitually acted unjustly toward our directees when our contemplative gaze has omitted significant areas of their life and experience.

The Individual Arena

Each of us has a relationship with ourselves, and this Individual Arena is where events in that relationship happen. Our therapeutic culture makes it relatively easy to notice happenings and influences here. I play "old tapes" to myself, messages from others that I have ingested and made my own: "Who do you think you are?" "You'd better not say anything about your feelings!" "You can do anything you want." I relate to myself in patterns of healthy and unhealthy ways. I may discover my "inner child" as dissociated from me, or as increasingly one with me. I experience myself bodily: my foot hurts or I feel elated and tired after a run. When I pray I may become aware of my breathing, of my heart's rhythm, and of the inner noise around my quiet center. I act justly
here when I can listen to and love myself, coming to know and include more and more of myself while maintaining secure and flexible boundaries.

Spiritual directors are often very helpful in this arena of a person's life. Sometimes, however, we narrowly interpret "holistic" spirituality as implying a oneness within the person, a coming-together of head, heart, gut, mind, spirit, and body, and may fail to notice that all of this activity occurs in only one arena of life. Body-awareness, quiet prayer, and inner healing are important and even essential elements of spiritual life. But "holistic" spiritual direction will recognize that these activities which occur in the Individual Arena are intimately connected with other arenas of spiritual development and activity.

The Interpersonal Arena

My individual makeup is partly a result of the interpersonal relationships that have most affected me, and it affects those relationships in turn. As we have said, the lines between these arenas are porous. In friendships, at home, in places where we sometimes least expect it, we find ourselves mutually aware of one another. We act interpersonally when we are more focused on "being with" one another and less focused on the roles or tasks which necessarily engage us much of the time. One evening, my friend, Steve, helped me put up a wallpaper border around a couple of rooms. While we wanted to get the job done well, the evening wasn't as memorable for the work as for the spontaneous, interesting fun and conversation we had doing it. The next day, when he chaired our staff meeting, our relationship had shifted from an interpersonal to a structural way of being together, as we shall see below.

Justice demands that I recognize this interpersonal dimension in each human being, but not always that I act interpersonally with others. In fact, there are times when such action is inappropriate, even offensive. The passenger in the next bus seat, who wants to know more about me than I want to reveal, may call for a gentle signal that we're fellow travelers but not friends, as does the anonymous salesperson who phones during dinner and calls me by my first name. Further, as we shall see below, there are situations when an interpersonal interpretation of reality can omit the possibility of justice. I do justice interpersonally when I treat other people as ends rather than means—for instance, when I reveal myself to and become interested in another who wants to be my friend.

For many years as a spiritual director, I panned for interpersonal experience of God as the real gold of spiritual direction, and I have developed fine tools to help a directee mine the lode. While such experience remains a touchstone for discernment, I have to admit some failure with people who did not unearth their riches here. I excused it by saying that spiritual direction is not for everyone, but I have discovered that, by keeping my focus on the Individual or Interpersonal
Arenas, I may not have been helping some people to look in the place where God’s activity was most accessible to them. I was not doing justice as fully as I could as a spiritual director.

The Structural Arena

We exist together in structures: families, jobs, parish communities, clubs, professional organizations. Because we tend to think of relationships as individual or interpersonal, we can miss the fact that much—even most—of our lives occur in structures.

I spend at least eight hours a day at work. While I consider some of the people there to be my friends, I am only asking for trouble if I do not act consistently, while at work, within the structures provided for the accomplishment of our goals. Those roles and boundaries may be quite flexible, but they must underlay my activity at work. When I associate with the superior of my local religious community, we are often in structural positions: I am a member of the group for which he has some responsibility. Mothers and fathers have structural roles in relation to their family, and grandparents have different ones. A husband or wife who is awakened by the baby, who gets the other children ready for school and then goes off to work, who returns home in time to have supper, brings the children to Little League, and makes it to the Parish Council meeting may have almost no daily interpersonal or individual time beyond sleeping! The Structural Arena is where we actually live much of our lives.

Doing justice in this Structural Arena means paying attention to and caring for the roles, structures, and systems that comprise it.

Let us look at a hypothetical situation. Alan, a young associate pastor in a large metropolitan parish, repeatedly complains to John, his spiritual director, that he is sick of the crises from all sides that get dumped on him in his work. The pastor is fond of his image as a humane and equitable administrator. Alan thinks otherwise. He sees the pastor as either withdrawing from conflict or entering it with authoritarian power. The pastor, of course, doesn’t see that at all.

Alan is angry about being in the middle between him and members of the parish staff. When he finds a quiet space to pray, the anger pounces like a cat. For Alan,
God is often imaged as an old man who walks and talks with him, and he often feels that God hears and understands his anger and the fantasies it produces. As John explores this with him, his sense of God’s presence deepens and solidifies, and he leaves with a stronger conviction that, whatever happens, God will be with him in it.

John has explored with Alan the interpersonal dimension of his experience and has probably helped him to deepen his friendship with God. They have explored his personal prayer. But the original experience occurred in the structure of his work, and that dimension has not been investigated. If God is nudging Alan to be just, it will most likely be in the arenas of his life where he is most engaged and committed. If direction stops here, John (and probably Alan) will miss the possibility that God may want to be noticed in Alan’s structure as well as in their interpersonal relationship. In fact, in a gentle way, John may have “wrestled him back” from the Structural Arena to the Interpersonal, where both of them may be more comfortable.

What could happen here if John’s contemplative attitude were wide enough to encompass the Structural Arena of Alan’s life? John is quite clear that, if Alan becomes aware of and at home with his real feelings about the situation, he will be more personally integrated. John also acts on the premise that, as Alan reveals these reactions to God, their relationship becomes more mutual and whole. (He may be wrong about this, as we shall see in the next section.) What if John were not to stop here, but to imagine that God also cares deeply about the transformation of social structures, concretely manifest here and now in the parish which employs this man at least five days a week? If John were to operate on the belief that God acts and invites us in our lives as we are, his desire to do justice would not lead his directee to some experience in the future or outside his present concerns. He would be interested in the liberating and oppressive realities already operating in the structures of his life. John’s work with Alan could be doing justice not only personally and interpersonally, but possibly on a structural level as well.

We are not saying here that John’s aim is for Alan to transform the structures of his life, but rather to help him explore more contemplatively what God may be doing there. The exploration might yield the following:

Alan has been aware of unspoken resentment brewing between the paid and volunteer parish staff. Volunteers feel they have no say over what goes on; the paid staff feels at the mercy of the volunteers. Volunteers feel they’re asked to do too much and find it hard to say no; the others feel the same way but add that they’re not paid adequately for all they do. Both groups find solace in criticizing the pastor. “The boss will find some way to say no to this!” Meanwhile, the pastor...
complains to Alan that we want to be a “Vatican-Two-People-of-God” pastor, but feels forced to make decisions because the buck stops at his desk. Everyone is stuck and no one can do anything about it.

As John helps him to investigate his feeling of powerlessness, Alan discovers that no one is comfortable with the situation as it is. He had not noticed before that they all appeared, from different angles, to be victims of some unseen force or value that kept them from saying the truth to one another. He also notices that the helpless victim-feelings tend to feed on themselves, getting more overpowering as they get more air-time. Alan recalls feeling depressed by thinking, in the midst of an informal staff gripe session, “They all love how they feel! If I had a solution to this mess, nobody would want to hear it right now.” He asked himself why he was there to begin with; he had to admit that he too wanted to take sides against the pastor; he doesn’t like that awareness. He wants to think and pray about what he has noticed.

Because John expects God’s action can be noticed in this Structural Arena, he is aware that Alan’s description of the group’s powerlessness and his own complicity in it has the hallmarks of spiritual desolation or countermovement. He also suspects that Alan’s realization that staff and pastor are in the same boat and his awareness of his own darker motives may harbor the seeds of consolation and the movement of God. It may be the crack through which God’s Spirit is bringing light and transformation to the injustice in this system, which seems to have ensnared everyone in it and is felt personally and interpersonally. If Alan’s personal prayer radiates energy and mutuality with God, John will keep in mind that the same God will probably be evident in the play of consolation and desolation at work as well.

If spiritual direction makes Alan aware of the presence of God in his work, the opportunities for justice there are as numerous as imagination can make them.

Alan may resist hearing it, resting satisfied that he’s handling his anger and that his prayer is rewarding. But John knows that if he sets the structural aside, he will be estranged from an important dimension of his life and will eventually feel it in his body and his interpersonal relationships. He will ask Alan about the parish if he doesn’t bring it up.

If spiritual direction makes Alan aware of the presence of God in his work, the opportunities for justice there are as numerous as imagination can make them. He may simply be aware of the creative strength of his anger and no longer allow himself to be made a victim or to get triangulated, or he may confront the gripe sessions in ways appropriate to his position. He may help to unmask and devise a creative solution to the hidden agenda that seems undiscussible. Whatever the action, he can be helped by his spiritual director to recognize that its origins are in the same relationship with God that gives him personal comfort and that its implications are, however small, real steps for justice that shapes the lives of many people.

There may even be more to the way God is acting here.
The Environmental Arena

One of the reasons that the just transformation of social structures seems so remote is that we easily confuse the Structural and the Environmental Arenas. Because racism, widespread violence or the cycle of poverty seem invulnerable, we lose patience with the structures good people have created to diminish these cycles, and despair of our personal power to address them in any constructive way. We may lose so much faith in them that all structures seem sinful or greedy. What we are really being moved by here, however, is not an unjust structure of a community but a wider cultural reality, a shared attitude in which the spirits of life and death can work as concretely as in one’s personal prayer. What we feel helpless about much of the time is not the injustice of structures, but the cultural assumptions that actually work in our daily lives. This may precipitate a real cultural or environmental desolation which, like the individual variety of the same, can easily convince us that action is useless—unless we become discerning persons.

The Environmental Arena is probably the most powerful and yet the most invisible of the four arenas. Recently I was in line at a busy supermarket when I discovered that I didn’t have enough cash to cover what I had in my basket. The clerk said I could use a credit card in this new scanner—just do this. Well, it didn’t work. She tried it and it didn’t work. We tried another card with the same results. She got on the phone to the management. Meanwhile, I was very aware of the growing line and of the young African American couple right behind me, and began to make “Sorry—what can I do?” gestures. A few people changed lines before the manager arrived to straighten out the procedure. As I picked up my bag, I thanked the young couple for their patience. They both smiled easily and he said, “That’s OK! We don’t like to hurry. It’s not bad to enjoy some time in line.”

I had run right into an environmental event. I have lived in Kentucky for four years after spending most of my life in Northeastern cities, where there are certain expectations about the ways Americans react to being in line: they don’t like it, they see it as a waste of time and want to get through it as quickly as possible. Holding up the check-out line, I was "sinning" in a way against this construction of reality. My little "confession" ritual became a way of acting out my part in that social web of expectations that, while it was hidden from me, held me in its grip. The African-American couple suddenly made me aware that other people or groups of people construe this particular reality very differently, that there is more than "the" way to wait in line.

What we feel helpless about much of the time is not the injustice of structures, but the cultural assumptions that actually work in our daily lives.

How might grace be operating here? I could have come away from the experience packing all my feeling into the Individual Arena, feeling like a fool for
having been so apologetic, for not having known how to operate the scanner, for not being able to teach the clerk how to do it! Reflecting through the Lifeframe, however, I might notice that this couple had poked a hole in my unconscious adherence to a cultural expectation, that they had opened me up to the possibility of including another, more gracious way of seeing reality, that they had actually provided me the chance to escape from an oppressive mindset—a small change in the way I create my reality and treat others, but a real one.

What if my spiritual director were to catch this little incident and help me explore and pray further about it? She might notice that I tend to center on my feelings of foolishness and shame because, in fact, I can manage those feelings with a humor and self-deprecation that eventually dismisses them. What if she were to draw my attention to the couple and what they may have been offering to me? What if God were taking this opportunity to help me let go of some semiconscious stereotypes and prejudice? This was Kentucky, where things go slower. They were African-Americans, I a white middle-class priest, and we were all shopping in a run-down, poor-white area store. My director may help me discover that an even more virulent layer of environmental smog could be lifted with the incident, the layer that has to do with my internalized cultural expectations of the "rednecks" who had stepped out of line.

God may have been inviting me to live in a more spacious environment. My spiritual director might do me an injustice should she not notice this but be satisfied that I had been helped to bring my personal feelings to prayer. Her action for justice here would be to encourage me to look contemplatively at the length and breadth as well as the depth of my experience.

If this seems far-fetched, consider that it is the same process through which, in the last 30 years of civil rights work in the United States, the Spirit of God has changed the environment, the structures, the interpersonal relationships, and the way individuals act and think. Before Jackie Robinson was employed by the Dodgers in 1947, the first black ballplayer in Big League baseball, Branch Rickey, who hired him, told him privately to think about this: for three years he was not to react in anger to any of the vicious racist treatment he was sure to get. Robinson thought about it, said he would do it, and then fulfilled his promise, even when the worst predictions came true. If he, his wife, Mr. Rickey, or others who believed in him had personalized the insults and discrimination, if he had taken them as aimed at Jackie Robinson, he would never have punched the hole he left in the environment of racism in the U.S., nor would the structure of professional sports have changed as it did. If I had been his spiritual director, would I have helped him to keep his eyes on and find hope in the environmental, cultural event that was going on as well as the personal, relational joys and costs involved? Holistic justice here means balanced care for more than just the individual and his or her intimate relationships.
The story of Alan, whom we considered in the previous section, could gain important perspective if John, his director, has vision wide enough to encompass events in the Environmental Arena. The clericalism that, in different ways, disempowers both clergy and laity may not have been expunged by renewal. The structures have changed in this parish, but the environment remains solid and seemingly impenetrable. Laity give advice, pastors make decisions, curates get stuck in the middle. John may be aware of the justice issues raised by the realities in Alan's life, even eager to help him involve God in the struggle. But if his vision is not wide enough, he may urge his directee into counterproductive prayer.

Aware of the environmental issue here, John might help Alan to ask whether his prayer is not a personalized replay of the staff's gripe sessions; he vents his feeling to God, feels accepted and relieved and gets back to work. If he were willing to look at this, Alan might discover that his old man God has more to say, but that Alan ends his prayer when he feels heard and relieved. His God may want to say, "Bring me to the parish with you tomorrow. Don't leave me at home. I would like to take a tour of that place with you and point out what I see." If Alan is stuck in a reactive-clerical environment, his prayerful tour with God might help him see there are other ways to think and act and live, ways that are more inclusive and more just.

Applying the Lifeframe To Our Practice of Spiritual Direction

The "Lifeframe" is a way of applying a contemplative attitude to the whole of a person's reality. A first task in spiritual direction is to help the directee become contemplative of his or her experience of life and of the God who is active in it. Directors most often teach this attitude by their own contemplative engagement with the person. It is my contention that spiritual directors act justify in direct proportion to the breadth of their vision. God cares deepy for each individual and the loves in our lives, but, in scripture, seems even more concerned for communities, structures, and the culture-bound environments that create and maintain them. For years my spiritual direction has interpreted "holistic" in the Individual and Interpersonal Arenas, as having to do with bringing mind, body, and spirit together. Now this interpretation seems a narrow definition unless I include the person's Structural and Environmental Arenas as well.

It has always been clear that genuine prayer transforms individuals, but difficult to conceive of the bridge to the transformation of structures and the environment because we have thought of them as distinct from the experience of the person sitting before us. But all of us encounter structural and environmental realities many times each day, and action for justice in spiritual direction can occur when
the director expects God's movement in all the dimensions of life. When John invites Alan to talk about his work, to notice his helplessness there, to pray about the "we vs they" antipathy it sets up, to listen to God in the Structural and Environmental Arenas, he is doing justice as a spiritual director.

What can we do, concretely, in response to this? First, I suggest that we ask our supervisors to help us notice the ways we habitually perceive and interpret reality. Does my actual practice of direction indicate that I value one or two of these arenas over the others. Does my working notion of "holistic" need to expand? A second suggestion is to begin to understand and develop skills needed to be contemplative in arenas where I am less naturally inclined. Some of the books listed can help us comprehend and become alert to events and dynamics in these various arenas.

The purpose of spiritual direction is to discern the Spirit of God from other influences and to achieve the freedom to choose life. The final part of this essay will ask how we can discern that the Spirit of God is behind one rather than another considered action.

**Action For Justice Is Rooted in the Gospel**

Beneath any system of Christian discernment is the assumption that one is coming to know the God revealed in Jesus Christ and to grow in likeness to this God. Without that foundation, "discernment" is an exercise in psycho-religious management skills and "justice" is determined by the currently governing legal system. Growing in companionship with God, on the other hand, a person can come to a very subtle awareness of the activity of the God of Jesus Christ in his or her ordinary life. What does that activity look like, and how can it be discerned from counterfeit?

At the risk of seeming to simplify the complexity of the Good News, it is fair to say that what Jesus preached, insisted on, and was driven by was a vision of the "kingdom" or "reign" of God. It pervades all he says and does. He points to it wherever he sees it and creates its possibility where it does not exist. The vision is most comprehensively articulated in his constant banquets and feasts, where everyone is invited and no one excluded except by their own choice. The Eucharist, the banquet to be celebrated until he comes to establish the Reign of God definitively, is the central image of God’s desire and human hope. At the heart of God is a table set for everyone, and God is yearning to have them all home again...
This vision is constantly before Jesus. When he insists that forgiveness is the heart of ministry (Jn 20: 22,23; Lk 24: 27) and of effective ritual (Mt 5: 23,24), it is because forgiveness is the way God implements the divine desire to have everyone home again: "But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Mt 5: 44,45). Jesus acts out that vision of the Reign of God when he eats with Pharisees and tax collectors, heals people individually and brings lepers back to their communities. He speaks of it in parables of inclusiveness and in words of forgiveness from the cross.

Scripture is clear about God’s will. We know it because God has revealed "the mystery of his purpose," as Paul says in Ephesians 1: 9,10: "that he would bring all things together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth." Jesus’ words and actions make this divine desire concrete in First Century Palestine. Spiritual directors act more or less justly when their engagement with directees makes this vision of communion incarnate in specific choices today. When spiritual directors act to help individuals bring mind, body, emotions, and spirit together, they are creating conditions for the Reign of God within that person. When directees learn to bring the reality of their prayer to their loves and friendships, the intimacy that results is another instance of the inbreaking Reign of God. God is active when individuals come to accept themselves, when they integrate their past with their present hopes, when they allow their gifts as well as their sinfulness into the banquet. God is present when couples fight or dialogue about what really matters, when friends forgive one another, when strangers treat each other like persons.

Following the Ignatian principle, the more universal the good, the more it is divine, directors need to be aware of more than the Individual and Interpersonal Arenas. When Alan sees the "we vs they" configuration of the parish staffs as antithetical to the desires of God, he is free to choose among options that hinder or promote God’s dream there in his workplace. When John helps him clarify and follow God’s desire to “take a tour of the parish with you,” or suggest that there may be other ways of seeing reality, he may be offering Alan the needed hope that God is indeed involved in these events, that things don’t have to be this way forever.

Spiritual directors need to talk with one another about the ways God can be discerned in the Structural and Environmental Arenas of a person’s life. From our understanding of God’s Reign, we notice God acting in our lives when "we vs they" divisions are recognized and abated, when community or team members with personal visions share their assumptions about one another and try to understand before competing. The ways in which grace can

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be recognized in such structures may be best described in authors like Senge and Argyris, whose work with corporate structures move beyond work seen as a means to an end, to what they call a "more sacred" view, one that has to do with "higher aspirations beyond food, shelter and belonging" (Senge, The Fifth Discipline, p. 5).

Our everyday experience of the Environmental Arena, too, is full of grace and despair. When Nelson Mandela invited his jailers to his inauguration, he was putting a hole in the worldwide environment of racism as well as dismantling its structures of apartheid in South Africa. He did not eradicate racism, but he made it more possible for us all to hope in structures which give life to individuals, families, and friends. Likewise, the vision of God's Reign is alive when Alan perceives that the very clericalism he hates has been his crutch, too, and other alternatives appear before him. Invited to another way of experiencing the world, he can be more compassionate with those still trapped, perhaps able to help them see more broadly, too. This is the same coming-together that marks Jesus' choices at every turn. A hallmark of God is the invitation to be wide of vision, to include all God's creation.

There is one further remark that must be made about inclusivity and the Lifeframe. We have said that the lines between the arenas are porous. They have to be, or we cannot do justice. If I attempt to help directees become more whole but ignore (and help them to ignore) the relationship of that growth to the structures and environment that fill their lives, I am teaching them a limited contemplation that is not inclusive of their reality. That appears to be as unjust as it would be to help someone develop as a manager at work or a member of the community while ignoring the personal and interpersonal results of that development. The Lifeframe is an instrument for holistic contemplative work, and, in that sense, is a tool for discernment of God's Spirit.

Conclusion

Churches insist that gospel values must include action for justice, echoing the long Judeo-Christian prophetic tradition. The heart of the call is God's desire to bring all of creation together. Action for justice in spiritual direction will not look like action for justice in another ministry, but will converge with it if both advance the communion of spirit for which Jesus gives his life. Discerning the concrete particulars of that convergence, discriminating between the truths and the half-truths will be no less complex than discernment has ever been. In fact,
it will be more difficult, since we have yet to delineate the dynamics of consolation and desolation in a broader way. There is a challenge before us, perhaps an invitation to widen our contemplative scope and to develop skills that will enable our directees to see the activity of God where they may not spontaneously look. Our hope is that the God who heals and transfigures individuals can be recognized and accompanied as the God who gives new life and transforming spirit to the communities in which they live.

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