Our Life Stories in Christ

Paul Koptak, emeritus professor of communication and biblical interpretation, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

Here is the idea of this article in a sentence: when we attend to the life story being written for ourselves and others, we live into the gospel story of Israel, Jesus, and his body the church. As spiritual directors we learn to help ourselves and others listen for God every day, watching for movements of the Spirit of Christ. In doing so, we are telling chapters of a larger story. Spiritual directors attend to both daily experience and the larger story that is unfolding.

I'll begin with a chapter of my life story from 2008: part of my administrative role as a faculty member at North Park Theological Seminary included work with the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Formation (the Weborg Center). It was suggested that I attend a retreat for spiritual directors as an observer in the Covenant's Pacific Southwest Conference. There I was allowed to watch practice sessions in triads: one person was the director, another the directee, and a third was appointed observer. After a session of about fifteen minutes, the triad debriefed, noting where careful listening took place and where helpful comments were made. I remember thinking every minister ought to learn what these ministers were practicing. Then a nudge of the Spirit added, "That includes you." I began to tell friends and students that one day I would enter the program, just to make sure I would do it.

I finally enrolled in 2013; it was a good decision. When your friends and family tell you they notice the positive changes in behavior and attitude—that you are less anxious and more open—one can only give thanks. We learned through a combination of practice, lectures, and reading. During the first intensive week, our cohort was divided into listening groups. Each of us brought a story about a significant event in our lives. As we read or told it to the group, the others thought of comments or

observations that required careful listening: "I noted. . . I'm struck by. . . It sounds like. . . . " No questions were allowed.

Another assignment asked us to read a spiritual classic and write a two-page response, reporting on the content that made an impact. I chose *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work that urges its readers to "forget what you know" and move into the presence of God without words—quite a challenge for someone working in an academic environment! But I took the point and saw the connection between that ancient writing (dated in the fourteenth century) and quiet, contemplative forms of listening prayer practiced today. Toward the end of the program, I wrote another paper that set out my interest in narrative and biography as informing the way I would practice spiritual direction. It became the basis for what I've written here.

Those papers also became the start of presentations I now offer to entering students in the same program. (I claim no expertise in these areas, only that I'm glad to share what I've learned along the way.) I talk about the value of spiritual reading and share stories about the desert, Celtic, and medieval saints, along with the German and Swedish Pietists who laid the foundation for Covenant theology and life. I then point to those life stories as inspiration for telling our own story in spiritual direction. I ask these novice directors to think of their future work as helping others tell their life stories in Christ. This article will do something similar. I'll limit the scope of spiritual reading to memoirs and autobiographies and then show how we might practice a similar kind of "writing" when we offer or receive spiritual direction ourselves.

Reading Spiritual Classics

First, why read the ancient works at all? Often the experience is disorienting. The writers lived in places and times very different from our own. Reading them can feel dull or confusing; it takes some practice and accommodation, like learning to appreciate the best of silent movies when we are accustomed to twenty-first century screenwriting, acting, and cinematography.

Louis Cameli says it is a good thing to recognize the differences. It helps us to read with some critical distance so we can do the work of translating the writers' experiences and perceptions of God. That way we don't impose our own categories and experience on the older texts.[1]

[1] Louis John Cameli, *Stories of Paradise: The Study of Classical and Modern Autobiographies of Faith* (New York, NY/Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 15.

In speaking of the spiritual discipline of study (that includes both Holy Scripture and devotional writing), Richard Foster recommends memoirs like Augustine's *Confessions*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, the letters of Brother Lawrence, and journals like John Woolman's. Writings like these, Foster says, help us bring together our prayerful study of Scripture with experiential study of human nature and its interactions. "Remember, that the key to the Discipline of study is not reading many books but experiencing what we do read."[2] Tilden Edwards believes the older writings of these gifted individual guides from England (Baxter, Law, Herbert), France (Fenelon, de Paul), and Germany (Spener, Arendt) are a form of group direction, the one writing for the many.[3] These European writers represent one stream of the many cultures of past and present that feed into the larger river of devotional writing. Thinking of their value for spiritual direction, Anne Solomon adds that these writings were preserved and handed down as examples of "a very ancient and simple process of one person offering another spiritual guidance and counsel."[4]

Second, what will we gain as we read those who have gone before us? I offer three motivations: to receive their spiritual direction of challenge and encouragement; to find inspiration for our own spiritual journeys; to learn from their example in directing others. In my sessions for the Weborg Center's program, I tell the class members to read the classics for their own formation and for learning direction by apprenticeship. We can ask, how are these writers offering spiritual guidance, and what of their example can be helpful to us? In addition, we may ask how "the guide is a model and teacher whose very life teaches with authenticity and evokes a longing for holiness."[5] Then I make the same assignment of a reading and reflection paper that I was given. It is a delight to watch these writers encourage and challenge the students' spiritual lives in unexpected ways.

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2 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978/2018), 72. An appendix offers a guided program of fifty books, "The Great Conversation: An Annotated Bibliography," 204–31.

3 Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Your Life to the Awareness of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987/1995), 64–67.

4 Anne Solomon, "The History of Spiritual Direction," June 3, 2015, https://www.spiritual-life.co.uk/single-post/2015/08/15/Spiritual-Life-and-our-Shadow.

5 Jerome M. Neufelder and Mary C. Cohelo, eds., *Writings on Spiritual Direction by Great Christian Masters* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), xv.

Reading Spiritual Memoir and Autobiography

Jean-Pierre de Caussade said:

> The Holy Spirit writes no more gospels except in our hearts. All we do from moment to moment is live this new gospel of the Holy Spirit. We, if we are holy, are the paper; our sufferings and our actions are the ink. The workings of the Holy Spirit are his pen, and with it he writes a living gospel.[6]

As I narrow the scope of devotional reading to life stories, I will make no distinction between memoir and autobiography—both rely on the memory of the writer. In that I'm in agreement with Richard Lischer: "The point to keep in mind is this: every autobiography or memoir is not a reproduction, but a reappraisal."[7] The person remembering and writing is not the person who lived through these experiences. Actions and words are remembered, assessed, and presented so that we readers might be transformed in ways the writers found to be true for themselves. While we recognize the differences in time, place, and culture, we still find resonance in one person sharing testimony with another.

> Augustine will not be the first in antiquity to write an autobiography—the Roman poet Ovid beat him by more than three hundred years—but he is the first to write his story in a way that not only recreates his own life, but rhymes with ours as well. He will write as one of us—from the interior of his life to the interior of ours.[8]

That resonance helps us to see our own lives as a spiritual journey. Louis Cameli adds:

> Readers who come in contact with several people who can skillfully unfold their life stories will find themselves equipped to articulate their own spiritual stories and those of others. We learn to speak from those who already speak. Similarly, we learn the vocabulary, the manner of selection and expression, the format for telling a personal spiritual story from those

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6 Jean-Pierre de Caussade, quoted without citation in Robert Ellsberg, *A Living Gospel: Reading God's Story in Holy Lives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), ix.

7 Richard Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 2–5.

8 Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless*, 17–18.

who already have done so.[9]

In short, reading spiritual life stories prepares us to appreciate and tell our own stories of life in Christ.

In my sessions, I offer brief profiles of German and Swedish Pietists and the relational emphases of their sermons, essays, and memoirs. Drawing from John Weborg's review of these writers, we talk about their understanding of the believer's fear of God; it is delicate, based on friendship's fear of displeasing, not on wrath's fear of punishment.[10] For example, the autobiography of Johanna Eleonora Petersen speaks of her friendship with God and other believers, including her memory of conversation with Phillip Jacob Spener.[11] Carolina Sandell-Berg wrote, not a memoir but more than two thousand songs based on her life experiences, one hundred fifty of them still in use around the world. The writer of "Children of the Heavenly Father" knew God as "gentle and nurturing as her own father."[12] More recently, the late Jean Lambert, missionary, professor of theology, and ninth woman ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church, spoke "autobiographically" to formulate a "Missionary Theology of God as Friend."[13]

> I begin autobiographically with a woman alone on a rock, in the dark. No, better, a woman on a rock who imagines herself to be alone. The rock feels or does not: the woman does not care. She is filled with fears; they send her thoughts racing in random motion, and the thoughts gather data—possibilities, facts, memories, feelings—that fuel the fears, which grow stronger.
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> She knows of no one who cares what she may experience, so she does not dare to experience it herself. She keeps it all from touching her at her core; she uses most of her energy reciting

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9 Cameli, *Stories of Paradise*, 16.

10 C. John Weborg, "Spiritual Direction in Pietism and the Covenant Church: A Descant on Text and Life," *The Covenant Quarterly*, 70, nos. 1–2 (2012): 27–46.

11 Johanna Eleonora Petersen, *The Life of Lady Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Written by Herself*, translated with notes and introduction by Barbara Becker–Cantarino (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

12 Gracia Grindal, *Preaching from Home: The Stories of Seven Lutheran Women Hymn Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 192–94.

13 Jean C. Lambert. "Befriending in God's Name: Preface to a Missionary Theology of God as Friend," in *Amicus Dei: Essays on Faith and Friendship Presented to Karl A. Olsson on His 75th Birthday*, published as volume 46, nos. 2–3, 1988, of *The Covenant Quarterly*, 37–68.

mentally: "They said. It's not my fault. I can't help it. It isn't my responsibility. Don't blame me. They do what they want to. They never ask me." Sometimes a surge of anger or pain or sadness rises momentarily. She fears giving in. If she isn't strong who will take care of her? She pushes the surge aside, growing cold and tired.

In the dark a stranger approaches. "May I sit there with you on the rock?" The woman is not sure the apparition is even there. She ignores it. It stands there and later asks again. It seems to care about her opinion at least in this respect. She notices that. Later she nods, almost imperceptibly.

Now there are two on the rock, in the dark. The woman is tense. She doesn't speak. The stranger sits with her in the long darkness. She begins to think about the one on the other side of the rock, and wonders whether or not fears preoccupy over there as well. She wonders what the person is doing there. She doesn't ask.

"I'll be going," the stranger says. "Thanks for letting me sit with you. I'll look for you again."

In some way such as this the Christ found this lost creature of God, and kept finding and building a conversation until a relationship of mutual recognition was woven, like a rope-bridge slung across a chasm. It was not until other conversations with other strangers had developed, and one of them expressed doubt or criticism of the Stranger-Christ, that I found myself defending him, and in the process valuing myself. Then I began to suspect the truth. In my nascent awareness of loyalty to him, I discovered he had made me his friend.[14]

Without delving into details, Lambert describes a time of self-doubt and fear: "No, better, a woman on a rock who imagines herself to be alone." There are sentences of self-talk that reveal her inner state: "Don't blame me. They do what they want to. They never ask me." Alone, ignored, hurt, and angry—we don't need to know the details to connect with the experience, although we can read Kelly Johnston's biographical

[14] Lambert, "Befriending in God's Name," 50.

tribute and make guesses.[15] Lambert's open letter "to each woman seeking to obey Christ's call to ministry in the Covenant Church" is in the article's appendix. The letter gives us one way to imagine an environment of sexism that evoked these feelings, but we respect Lambert's decision to use imagination to tell us. It is effective.

The resolution starts with the arrival of a stranger who only wants to sit with her. After a time of silence, the stranger leaves with words about her future: "Thanks for letting me sit with you. I'll look for you again." Lambert finds that this divine initiative is followed with more visits and conversations, some pleasant, some hard. She makes analogy with the Gospels, in which "Jesus calls forth persons' loyalty to himself in the process of embodying his own loyalty to them—to their questions, fears, hesitations, enthusiasms, high spirits, futures."[16] Recognizing the differences in context and culture, she recognizes the identification: "When I read these texts, I sense between the friend who met me in my isolation and these Galileans a harmony, a resonance. I believe we have come to trust the same friend."[17]

As Lambert talks about "a harmony, a resonance," between the experience of the Galileans and her own, she describes a growing friendship that extends its welcome to others. Friendship like this brings "unity and harmony to the disoriented self, thereby enabling relations with other people and the world."[18] I note that her story attends to her reading of Scripture, interactions with others, and experiences of God's companionship, bringing them together in a way that connects with our own.

To summarize: we who receive and offer spiritual direction profit from reading devotional classics, not only for the guidance they contribute to our own lives, but for the example of direction we may incorporate into our own practice. Moreover, we identify with the life issues presented in these writings, especially in the narratives of memoir and autobiography. Jean Lambert's story of friendship with God accomplishes in a brief recollection what others, from Augustine to Anne Lamott, have done in their longer works. They invite us into their lives to help us reflect on our own. As we do, we live our way into the greater narrative of God at work in the stories of Israel, Jesus, and the church. Lischer again:

> A spiritual memoir becomes explicitly Christian (which is

[15] Kelly Johnston, "Jean C. Lambert: Covenant Pastor, Theologian, Pioneer," *The Covenant Quarterly*, 75 no. 1 (2017): 31–49.
[16] Lambert, 52.
[17] Lambert, 53.
[18] Lambert, 51.

> where I write from and what I know best) when it derives its literary power from the power of Another's story. . . . Another way of asking the question is, whose story enables me to make sense of my life and tell it to others? . . . A spiritual memoirist says: what you have witnessed in my life may reoccur in yours but in a very different way. But first you must close my book and open your own.[19]

I take Lischer's counsel as encouragement to pay careful attention to our lives and find our own ways to speak about it.

Telling Our Own Life Stories in Christ

As we close the book of another to open our own, devotional reading invites us to tell our own life stories in Christ, to see the events of each day as chapters in a longer narrative. Many who I've met choose to write; some I've talked with want to leave a memory for their grandchildren, others write as a way to organize their perceptions and reflections. Books and online programs offer memory prompts to help them move through the various stages of life.

Tammy Devine, a minister and church organist, uses the metaphor of the church balcony as a way of taking a broader view. Just as she can view the whole congregation from her seat in the balcony, so the prayer practice of writing a spiritual autobiography helps her take stock of the whole of her life. For Devine, writing includes finding points of identification with Scripture stories, noting God's presence and purpose in her own.

> Spiritual autobiography invites you to consider when you have felt God carrying you, walking beside you, waiting for you. It also invites you to consider your legacy: What is God's reason for creating you to be you? In the words of the Lord to Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations' (Jeremiah 1:5).[20]

Devine offers a list of questions to guide the remembering, reflection, and writing. We can ask about important people within and outside of our families and their impact; places where important events took place; happiest and saddest life experiences; religious and spiritual experiences;

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19 Lischer, 5.

20 Tammy Devine, "Called to Wholeness," *Word and World*, 43, no. 3 (2023): 280–81.

spiritual metaphors that become meaningful guides; key life decisions and their importance; how we will want to be remembered. In all is an overarching story with themes that indicate "God present and moving."[21]

I believe that similar dynamics of writing a life story as a prayer practice can be extended to the practice of spiritual direction. We "write" our life stories as we recount them in the caring presence of a spiritual companion. Weborg uses the musical descant as a metaphor: "I propose that spiritual direction shares some affinity with a descant in that it forms a texture of lifelines—that of a directee, the director, and the Holy Spirit, to name a few."[22] When I meet with a spiritual director, I usually talk about recent events and note personal growth in relationship with God. I realize that I've often been encouraged to set those events in the context of a larger life story. As I studied and practiced to become a spiritual director I learned to watch for God present and active in the everyday events of life. I repeat the saying I heard from Carl McColman: "God is not elsewhere."[23] As directors, we watch and listen for God so we can help others do the same.

For example, when psychologist Dan Allender was asked to give his counsel on a career decision, he asked a question in response: "What choice allows you to live your life most consistently with how God has been writing your life story?" He celebrates the invitation to co-author our life stories with God.

> We read and study a great variety of sources and spend time researching our options in order to live in the right direction. But seldom do we approach our own life with the mind-set of a student, eager to learn, gain insight, and find direction for the future. . . . We habitually push aside the one thing that can clarify not only how we got to where we are today but also where God is leading us tomorrow and beyond.[24]

Allender is speaking of vocation, the call of God to live our way into the gospel story that begins with the call of Abraham and Sarah, the formation of the people of Israel, the life and resurrection of Jesus

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21 Devine, "Called to Wholeness," 282–83.

22 Weborg, "Spiritual Direction in Pietism," 27.

23 Carl McColman, "What We Need for Union with God," *Anamchara*, https://www.anamchara.com/what-we-need-for-union-with-god/.

24 Dan B. Allender, *To Be Told: God Invites You to Coauthor Your Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2006), 1–3, 22.

the Messiah, and the continuing presence of the ascended Christ in his body the church. Remembering Jean Lambert's journey toward a missional theology of friendship—extending the friendship we've been shown to others—I'll direct our attention to spiritual autobiography in three senses of vocation: the call to recast the events of our lives as part of the gospel story, the call to come to our true selves, and the call to present our ever-transforming lives as "living gospels" in witness and service. In coming to my own sense of that call, I've found help from contemporary psychologists, poets/novelists, and spiritual directors. In what follows I'll offer brief summaries and more than a few quotations with the hope it will encourage further reading of their works.

Telling and Reframing

Although we develop an "autobiographical memory" in early childhood that naturally turns events into stories,[25] recasting the significant events of our lives into a life story co-written with God takes some effort. One encouragement is to think of it as telling the story from God's point of view. Henri Nouwen asks us to remember:

> You belong to God from eternity to eternity. You were loved by God before you were born; you will be loved by God long after you die. Your human lifetime—long or short—is only a part of your total life in God. The length of time doesn't matter. Life is just a little opportunity for you during a few years to say to God: "I love you, too."[26]

Another encouragement comes from the poet Abraham Van Engen:

> One reason I think we keep making poetry is because we are ourselves poems. There's a verse in the Bible (Ephesians 2:10) in which we are described as the "handiwork of God." But it's the same Greek root that goes into the word "poetry." It means "a made thing." A more literal translation is that we are, as human beings, the poems of God. So we keep making poetry because we are ourselves poems.[27]

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[25] Dan P. McAdams, *The Art and Science of Personality Development* (New York: Guilford, 2016), 253.

[26] Henri J. M. Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 49.

[27] Abram Van Engen, interview with Tish Harrison Warren, *New York Times*, July 16, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/4566a6nj.

Fredrick Beuchner, novelist and author of four memoirs, said something similar:

> . . . what I developed through the writing of them was a sense of plot and, beyond that, a sense that perhaps life itself has a plot—that the events of our lives, random and witless as they generally seem, have a shape and direction of their own, are seeking to show us something, lead us somewhere.[28]

For that reason, Beuchner asks us to pay attention:

> Listen. Your life is happening. You are happening. . . . A journey, years long, has brought each of you through thick and thin to this moment in time as mine has also brought me. Think back on that journey. Listen back to the sounds and sweet airs of your journey that give delight and hurt not and to those too that give no delight at all and hurt like Hell.[29]

Janet Ruffing's *To Tell the Sacred Tale*[30] draws from a wide range of scholarly literature on narrative to state the simple truth that spiritual direction is oral autobiography—directors help people tell their stories in ways that give them shape and meaning. Paraphrasing Sam Gamgee, she sums it up in a chapter title: "It takes two to discover what sort of tale we've fallen into." The intent is to see that our lives are "graced stories." At the time I started Ruffing's book, I also read *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Stories of Faith and Scholarship*[31] and noted that most of these writers did not plan on becoming scholars, but felt led through interests, circumstances, and conversation with others. While their faith grew and changed, it did not disappear, even as it waxed and waned. There's a sense of discovery that I found encouraging. Some spoke of meeting with a spiritual director, but all talked about mentors and significant conversations that guided them. Theirs are "graced stories" that become testimony as they are made public.

Ruffing distinguishes between the events recounted and the framework of interpretation we give them, which can change with time and the course of events. Because they are personal and particular, stories offer

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28 Fredrick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 95.
29 Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*, 77.
30 Janet K. Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2011).
31 John Byron and Joel N. Lohr, eds., *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Stories of Faith and Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

the director more unprocessed human experience than poems or other creative expressions. Symbols and images appear, sometimes with meaning, yet unknown when they are spoken.[32] Ruffing reminds the director that people use images to give voice to what may be ineffable or, at least for a time, difficult to express. Directors can also suggest images that come to them as they listen; sometimes they live on in future conversations.[33] "Spiritual direction is a privileged narrative situation that invites reflection on, and revision or repair of, our stories, especially in a faith context."[34]

Margaret Guenther's short video on spiritual direction echoes Ruffing's "revision and repair of our stories."[35] In telling stories in spiritual direction, we name hard things so we can let them go (e.g., shame, resentment, guilt). Brokenness is universal: our job as directors is not to fix, but to sit with others as they come to terms with their experience. If telling stories is a form of authorship, directors are more like readers than writers. Just as we read to learn how an author decides to resolve issues and conflicts, so directors learn to give the human co-authors of the story the authority to come to the same on their own, but with our companionship and guidance. We encourage them to embrace the whole story, not just the happy parts.

True Self and Identity

A famous rabbinic story introduces the matter in a compelling way:

> The great Hasidic rabbi, Rabbi Zusia, came to his followers one day and announced he would soon die. And that he was afraid. He said to them, "I'm not afraid of dying. But I'm afraid of the question that the angels will ask me about my life. The angels won't ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' And they won't ask me, 'Zusia, why weren't you Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?' They will ask me the one question I have no answer for. 'Zusia,' they'll say to me, 'there was only one thing that no power could have prevented you from doing! Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"[36]

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32 Ruffing, *Sacred Tale*, 84–91.
33 Ruffing, 91.
34 Ruffing, 101.
35 Margaret Guenther, "SDI Learns From. . . Rev. Margaret Guenther and Christopher McCauley," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxNyTf91f2c.
36 "Zusia," as told by Doug Lipman, *Hasidic Stories*, https://hasidicstories.com.

If the first step in telling a life story is simply acknowledging that we are a kind of poetry, the next step of this journey is a renewed sense of identity as we realize who God intends for us to be.[37] And just as we learn to embrace all the chapters in our story, joyful and painful, we learn to uncover the truth about who we are now. Here's Buechner:

> It is important to tell at least from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves—because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing.[38]

Psychologist David Benner adds that a review of our life stories reveals that we, like Adam and Eve, "hide in the bushes of our false self." And often we are not aware that we are hiding. Honesty with self is a step out of the bushes. Benner suggests that we ask God to help us see what makes us feel most vulnerable and most like running for cover, then to reflect on the image of self to which we are most attached. How is it used to defend against feelings of vulnerability? These are fig leaves of false self that can be shed. True self is not found or constructed, he says, rather we discover it by seeking God. As we find God, we find our truest and deepest self in God.[39]

Spiritual director Suzanne Zuercher also uses the Eden story as symbolic of our lives; starting out safe and loved in the garden, growing, and needing to differentiate ourselves from our sustainer, finding that our actions are not always accepted, then making choices to shape a new, independent self that will be accepted and loved. She calls it the first task of life, inevitably creating the false self, the persona that seeks to attract approval and survive. The second task of life is to acknowledge the process, to recognize those "unacceptable" parts of our true selves and appreciate that a true self is both loving and selfish, holy and rebellious. Contemplation is a movement of prayer that reveals, enhances, and nurtures this true self; it refuses to make a project of character improvement. Contemplation calls us away from the compulsions of false self.

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37 Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 78.

38 Fredrick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 3.

39 David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 88–91.

I'm struck that while others also speak of direction as prayer, Zuercher frames spiritual direction as the movement *From Compulsion to Contemplation.* "Over time we become better friends of ourselves, discovering where we had made ourselves our own enemy. As more inclusive, more honest, more contemplative awareness of inner and outer reality expands, we grow in consciousness, that experience which makes us human."[40]

Zuercher calls our instincts "pre-conscious . . . present before the awake and responsive self is alert for discerning and deciding." These are "responses to life that are beyond immediate awareness and, therefore, beyond choice." Directors are companions with those who are coming to awareness of their attempts to present an ideal self instead of the real self that is kind and selfish, loving and anxious. "We must allow into our consciousness whatever there is to be aware of. . . . We begin to see 'the awful truth,' eventually getting used to it, and finally realizing it is not so awful after all."[41]

Writers like Buechner, psychologists like Benner, and directors like Zuercher all agree that we fashion more presentable versions of ourselves that need to be shed. Honesty in recognizing and revealing our virtues and shortcomings is essential in spiritual direction. It echoes Philipp Jakob Spener's call for inner transformation. Spener spoke of the "new birth" of the "inner man" that works from inside out: "The inner man which God produced in regeneration has come to be the outer man."[42] We trace a movement toward a whole and holy life, congruence of inner and outer life, of faith and practice. Could we say that the Spirit of God is calling out that true self as we recount our lives in direction?

In what Thomas Casey calls "a strange inversion," our realization of human limitations and shortfalls awakens the inner movement toward God we know as prayer: "This is something we know about every human being. He or she is made for God; there will always be an incompleteness until a person arrives at God." The Holy Spirit prays within us (Romans 8:26) so that "what is worst in us can give rise to what is best. This is an alchemy we do not comprehend and can never anticipate, no matter how often it happens."[43] Telling our own life story in spiritual direction allows an honesty we can then encourage in others. As a result, both persons in

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40 Suzanne Zuercher, *Enneagram Spirituality: From Compulsion to Contemplation* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1995), 8–9.

41 Zuercher, *Enneagram Spirituality*, 9–10, 19.

42 Quoted in C. John Weborg, "Pietism: A Question of Meaning and Vocation," *The Covenant Quarterly*, 43, no. 1 (1980): 61.

43 Michael Casey, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1995), 3, 5, 7.

conversation become more what we were created to be, complete as we move toward God in prayer.

Service and Witness

Jean Lambert's autobiographical account of the woman on the rock is her launching point for a missional theology of God as friend. Our life stories witness to a deepening relationship with God who has made us friends and called forth the best of ourselves. We re-envision the events/stories of our life as a life story in which we acknowledge what is false and true and put on the new self with Christ (Colossians 3:9–10). In so doing, we find we have a story to tell others; the God who has made us friends would make friends of others as well. Henri Nouwen puts it this way:

> Can you dare to believe that God's story about you puts your story in spiritual perspective? One way to do this is to write down your personal story without editing out your vulnerability and brokenness and to be willing to tell story with others. . . . This is the discipline of witness in the world. Here's how I would tell my sacred story, trusting in the truth of God's story of me.[44]

Taking Nouwen's advice, I will end with another chapter of my life story. I entered the Weborg Center's program without plans to become a spiritual director, but desiring the growth that comes with preparing to be one. I mentioned that friends and family noted its impact on my way of interacting and moving through life. I finished the program, retired from my work at North Park, moved to western North Carolina, and wondered how I might be called to put my preparation to work.

I told my pastor I'd be willing to offer spiritual direction and met with members of the congregation she sent my way. About the same time, at a church breakfast, a retired minister was invited to tell some of his life story. Most recently, he'd been volunteering as a chaplain at Haywood Pathways Center, a residential program for unhoused people hoping to make a fresh start in life. He mentioned that he was going away for a few weeks and hinted that he could use someone to fill in. I took the bait and made a trial run at volunteering in my new community. After some awkward visits during those weeks, we met to debrief, and he asked if I'd like to continue. I surprised myself by saying yes, and we drew up a

[44] Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 46.

schedule so we could take turns visiting.

Over the six years since I made those first visits, I've learned to make a lot of small talk and be ready for the moment when someone is ready to trust me with their past and present. Some of the stories are harrowing, but I've also heard residents say, "I know I'm still here on earth for a purpose, I'm just waiting to learn what it is." Others speak of leaving oppressive churches and wondering what the future holds for their life with God. Occasionally, I ask questions, but I've learned to let the person in the other chair lead the conversation and share what is needed at the time. Too many questions can become intrusive, but every so often an inquiry can invite reflection and suggest that our lives do have a purpose.

Later in that first year, I was asked to share my story at the church breakfast. I spoke about my interest in psychology, my bachelor's degree in that subject, and my postcollege work in a psychiatric unit of a hospital. I then told of my studies in Old Testament and communication, my teaching in those fields, plus a spiritual formation course in hospitality. After summarizing what I do as a volunteer chaplain, I realized that each of my education and work experiences contributed to the ministry of presence I offer today. It is a new chapter in my life story for which I'm very grateful.[45]

[45] I'm especially grateful to Professors Paul Bramer and John Weborg for suggesting readings and offering their time in conversation, always a delight.