

Selected Essays by Alumni of the Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction

Collected by Rob Peterson

For twenty years the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction (the Weborg Center) has been training people in the art and practice of spiritual direction. We give thanks to God for God's provision and for the many people who felt called to learn how to offer the world the sacred and holy presence of spiritual direction. Being a spiritual director is like having a front row seat to the faithful and loving work of God in people's lives. What a gift!

The following brief essays are written by recent alumni of the Weborg Center. All of them are directors of color who offer direction in a variety of settings and frequency. They were asked to reflect on the gifts of being in spiritual direction and on the transformation they have experienced as directors. They highlight themes such as growth in self-awareness, renewed intimacy with God, the hard but good work of listening, shifting images of God, and the hope they witness as people encounter God in a direction session. We trust you will find their reflections one more affirmation that offering the gift of sacred space to others is vitally important in our times.

Becoming a Spiritual Director

Fábio Muniz

I knew nothing about spiritual direction until my wife, Johnna, explained some spiritual direction principles to me in our living room in Fujisawa, Japan. We were living there as short-term missionaries for the Covenant almost ten years ago. She looked at me and said, "I think you would be

a good spiritual director!” I had no idea what spiritual direction is, and I could never have imagined that I would fall in love with this new spiritual path for me, one that is still unfamiliar to many Christians.

Spiritual direction has changed my lenses as a pastor by teaching and inviting me to be more fully present. It has changed me as a father to play better with my daughters. It has invited me as a missionary to be still as I see God’s movement in others and in the world. And, as Johnna says, it has made me a better husband, because I have become a better listener.

“Is spiritual direction a Roman Catholic movement?” is one of the major questions among my Latin American and African Protestant friends. Although Catholics have a significant number of spiritual directors, spiritual direction is not only a Catholic tradition. When I tell people I am a spiritual director, some think I am becoming Catholic. I often say, “Well, ‘catholic’ means universal, so in one sense, we are all catholic.” On the other hand, my French Protestant friends hear *accompagnement spirituel* (spiritual accompaniment) and think spiritual direction is what North Americans would describe as one-on-one mentoring or discipling. But spiritual direction is not a mentoring program. When I visit North American churches, I often have to differentiate between therapy and pastoral care. Both are distinct from spiritual direction.

Henri Nouwen explains that spiritual direction is an ancient practice for offering and receiving careful guidance.¹ It can be traced back to the early Christian desert fathers and mothers. A spiritual director is a spiritual friend, seen as a “soul friend,” who is sensitive to the movements of the Spirit. Spiritual direction disciplines play an important role in my ministry in Lyon, France. I regularly lead *lectio divina*, centering prayer, and spirituality hikes according to the Celtic tradition through the charming French villages that surround us. All of these validate the Celtic principle that nature is God’s cathedral.

Since France is known to be one of the most atheistic countries of the world, spiritual direction seems to really touch an unmet need among the people here. Two spiritual direction principles are being incarnationally present and listening to others with empathy. These principles invite me to catch what God is doing in other people’s lives as I seek to embody the good news of Jesus among agnostics and atheists in a post-Christian context.

As a member of SDE (Spiritual Directors in Europe), I had a significant

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 22–23.

experience among my brothers and sisters from different traditions in Iceland a couple of years ago. We were in a beautiful place surrounded by waterfalls, mountains, and hot springs. The person responsible for our meals took us to a beautiful place with an extraordinary view. He explained that recently a brand-new hot spring had emerged from the Icelandic tectonic plates due to volcanic activities. I watched attentively as the smoke came out of the newly born spring. Because of the heat, no one could approach it. He told us that he would place bread dough on a tray and put it in the spring. He would cover it, and after twenty-four hours, the bread would be ready for our Eucharist. It sounded to me like a divine oven.

The next day, the bread was ready. Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, those from the Reformed tradition, and dozens of brothers and sisters from many other Christian traditions participated in the Eucharist. No one felt compelled to ask if it was transubstantiation, a symbol of Jesus's body, or God's mystery among us. Reverent silence and unspeakable gratitude overtook us. The table was set. The words of Jesus on the cross echoed in my heart: "That they may all be one; just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21, NIV).

Transformed to Be Effective

Wytress Richardson

I landed in the Weborg Center with a strong personal calling that I had contemplated for a few years, but never really pursued. I also had a profound yearning for a deeper relationship with God—an intimate friendship without fire and brimstone. After tremendous losses, the pandemic, and the social uprisings all seemingly colliding so closely together, my soul was stirring for something deeper. I knew I needed to unlearn, relearn, and be transformed to be effective in a new service in the faith. I was unsure what that looked like, but I knew my spirit yearned for something more profound. The Weborg Center offered it, so I enrolled.

The spiritual direction program was genuinely life-giving for me. I gleaned so many nuggets; however, distinguishing how my soul needed care was one of the most prevailing. For many years, I had focused on caring for others as a wife, mother, caretaker, and educator. Direction ushered me into growth, as caring for others required me to do the pro-

found soul work needed for my own healing and wholeness. The time spent in silence, reflecting, journaling, and listening created a path for my own personal growth and soul work expedition.

Learning different ways to pray gave noteworthy significance to my growth. I found contemplative prayer to be the most meaningful. I had the space to wait silently for the Lord's still, small voice that taught me to listen and discern, which is at the core of spiritual direction. This has contributed significantly to my growth and development as a director. I have continued to hone my listening and discernment skills since the program. Spiritual direction has been an invitation for me to learn and grow, and I have become more self-aware in connection to my relationship with God and discovering God's grace. My soul yearns for a deeper connection to Christ. Direction is the sacred space where I explore my most profound beliefs and discernments while growing in the knowledge of who I was truly created to be.

Being a director offers the privilege of sitting with others in a posture of holy listening as they seek more profound meaning and purpose and crave growth in Christ. The Holy Spirit creates an opportunity for a transformative, soul-stirring journey in that sacred space.

The ministry of spiritual direction has reshaped my understanding of who God is and what kind of relationship I desire with God, while also reinvigorating my faith in the power of community. It has put me on a path of healing, growth, and freedom for more profound work. In a broader sense, I have become more discerning in the actions I take and the types of conversations I engage in, which gives me greater inner peace every day. This informative transformation has allowed me to share spiritual direction within my community for others to embrace.

My Heart's Work

Kitchie Ranillo Bakken

Spiritual direction is my heart's work. Once I found it, everything clicked into place.

From a young age, I knew that I loved talking to people about their spiritual lives, how they connected with God, and how they experienced God. I graduated with a degree in biblical and theological studies and intended to go to seminary to become a pastor. After graduation, I had what people might call a "faith crisis" but, at the encouragement of my

own spiritual director, I now call it a “spiritual shift.” Naming the season as a spiritual shift feels more authentic to what I was going through. Yes, it was a time of crisis or intense difficulty, but it was also a season of growing and deepening.

I was taught at a young age that “God is big,” “God loves the whole world,” and “God welcomes all who are hungry.” I believed it to my core. The idea of a big, grand, all-loving God is what captivated me and lulled me into God’s arms. However, it’s hard to hold on to these truths when you consistently see contradictory actions from people who claim the same God. To be honest, my soul got weary, my heart broke, and anger seeped into my body.

My questions abounded: “How can we believe in the same God but come to such different conclusions?” “How do I contend with a God of a religion that led to the annihilation of millions of people and systematic elimination of indigenous cultures, including my own?” “How do I contend with a God of a religion that purposely shuts the door on certain groups of people or parts of people?” “How do I contend with a God of the same people who spew hate in this world?” “If I leave the church, will God be there?” God started to feel smaller, my questions started to feel bigger, and my belief started to shrink. I shut my ears, mind, and heart to God. No more lullabies beckoned me to rest in God’s arms.

I didn’t want to be lulled. I wanted answers. I wanted literal proof of God’s love and especially God’s justice. The God who I thought was so big started to feel so much smaller; a thought which ultimately led me to spiritual direction.

Spiritual direction gave me a space to work through these questions and shifts. Even in my anger toward God, I didn’t feel abandoned. I always imagined God sitting outside my door waiting to be let in. No force. No explanations. No excuses. Just patience and understanding. My spiritual director listened to me through it all. She never judged me. She always made me feel seen, made it known that I was not alone, and continued to invite me to step into a relationship with the bigger and more beautiful God who was being revealed to me. She still does to this day.

Growth is a painful process. Growth is a necessary process. Growth is a beautiful process.

Our relationship with God should always shift as we learn more about life, which is true in any relationship we have. My spouse and I have been tethered together for ten years (three years dating and seven years of marriage). I can confidently say we are different people than we were ten years ago. It’s not bad. It’s just life. We naturally change and grow

over our lifetime, and so should our relationship with God. Spiritual direction gives space to find that spark and connection with God. It gives space to discern and wrestle with God. It gives space to explore and wander freely with God. That is why I became a spiritual director, to create space so people can experience the breadth of God's delight in them and to know that God will always meet them wherever they are.

I believe we are all beloved, holy, and sacred beings created in the image of God. This same God desires to be in an authentic and thriving relationship with us in every season of our lives.

Becoming a spiritual director has been one of my greatest joys, and I am grateful to the Weborg Center for fostering such an impactful learning environment. The spiritual direction program is formative not only for the work of spiritual direction, but also for your spiritual life. It's like digging a well and finding a spring of fresh water beneath. It's hard, sweaty work, but in the end you feel refreshed and nourished. It's a life-altering experience. As long as you bring your whole self to it, you won't regret it.

The What and Why of Spiritual Direction

Su K. Lee

When I told my evangelical friend I was about to enter the Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction program at North Park, her question was: "What is spiritual direction?" Around the same time, my Roman Catholic friend asked, "Why, as an evangelical, are you learning about spiritual direction? This is more in line with Catholic tradition." From these conversations with friends of two different faith traditions came two burning questions that would guide my journey as a North Park student: "What is spiritual direction?" and "Why spiritual direction?"

My two years in the program working toward a certificate was a shared journey with past and living saints, under the joyous direction of the Holy Spirit. My fellow sojourners were men and women from the past like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Howard Thurman; the nineteen men and women in my cohort; and other directors, supervisors, and instructors, all of whom nourished me physically and spiritually. I read from authors whose diverse and challenging theologies would stretch my Christian imagination and view of God.

One of first things I did as a student was to *unlearn*. I unlearned

what I thought I already knew well, so I could listen anew to the Spirit, to others, and to my own self. I learned what it means to be present in the moment. I discovered the gift and the burden of listening. I came to love silence. I came away with a deeper understanding of God, who is inclined to listen to us with his whole heart. God offers me an invitation to listen to him with expectation and love.

After my graduation, my heart was drawn toward sojourning with women in ministry. As I sit with them and hear their stories of deep pain and joy, I learn to hold their stories sacred and release them to God again and again. Every session, I remind them and myself that we are the beloved of God. As I sit with leaders who have experienced church pains, I have sometimes felt triggered by my own painful experiences with church. Yet I also experience myself trusting the Holy Spirit in the moment to direct me and my directee as the Spirit pleases. As I watched one of my directees choosing to become a spiritual director herself, I felt a gratitude for her desire to offer a gift of presence to others.

I often begin my first session inviting the directee to say their full name and invite them to explain the history of their names and what they mean. As I hear women say their name aloud, explain the origin of their names, and share the stories of God and the family they attach to their names, I see my directees come alive. Names elicit both good and painful memories. It is as if they've forgotten their name or forgotten who they belong to, but in this spiritual practice they reclaim a foundational truth of who they are, what formed them, and their identity as beloved daughters of God. I am grateful to accompany them on this journey to hear the voice of the One who calls them beloved.

I am still learning to be spiritually led in many different, mysterious ways. I am continuing to learn to refine the acoustics of my heart so I can listen to God and journey with others as they try to tune their hearts to God as well. I discovered that I have the gift of empathy, and this gift is coupled with a protective posture for my directees. I care deeply for those whom I sit with and lovingly hold them in their sacred space. However, the same protective posture also has the potential to take over, stealing suffering from others who would otherwise grow through adversity. I still find myself hesitant to release them to walk their own path of suffering with God. I need the gentle reminder that they are not suffering alone, and that God will walk with them. I accompany them not as the lead, but as a support.

In the ministry of spiritual direction, there are no right answers, only

clearer visions of ever-deeper questions.² My vision is getting clearer. I am discovering that we are more loved, heard, and held by the Lord than we can possibly imagine or think. I end with this invitation to the reader: “Let us enter into a time of silence and hear from the Spirit.”

Celebrating the Gift of Spiritual Direction

Gillie Abdiraxman-Issa

The ministry of spiritual direction is truly a mystery. Through it, I have discovered God’s gentleness and the significance of not leaning on my own understanding. In each session, I am guided down a path that unlocks hidden treasures of my identity. One key avenue illuminated for me is leaning into the Scriptures. Partnering with the Holy Spirit has led to personal growth and a deeper understanding of God’s movement in my life.

When I first began my training in spiritual direction, I was struck by discovering the gentleness of God. I realized that I could be angry and still feel comforted by God’s presence, safe in God’s care. The space became sacred as I recognized the Holy Spirit’s presence and understood that the Spirit of the living God was leading my director. This realization allowed me to partner with the Holy Spirit, who is always present in the room, often symbolized by a candle representing God’s presence and movement.

Several experiences in the program invited me to grow as a spiritual director. Year two of my training was particularly intense due to being under supervision and observing how what was learned in the first year’s assessment was at work in my life. During year one, I had learned about the movement of God within myself, uncovering hidden treasures of identity, trauma, hurt, pain, and disappointment. This journey taught me the true meaning of invitation and the importance of not leaning on my own understanding. By embracing divine guidance, I evolved as a person, a leader, a listener, and a servant of Christ.

I have learned the value of being slow to speak and quick to listen, which allows me to hear the Holy Spirit’s guidance for me and those I am directing. Particularly powerful are the imagery, visions, and symbolism the Divine uses through storytelling. By sharing experiences, I deepen

² Alice Fryling, *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 46.

my understanding of God's movement in others and the world around me. Not only can a person sit in wonder in a session, but a person can also challenge God in that session. A person can approach the mysteries of God through symbolism, storytelling, sharing what happened on their calendar, and sharing what happened in their celebrations.

Year two, also known as the critical year, was a time of immense learning through observation and feedback. Other spiritual directors evaluated my listening and response skills. In today's world where everything is recorded and documented, the training during those sessions does not allow documentation or recording; rather, the path forward is found by relying on the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, I had to navigate six different sessions with various people, functioning as a spiritual director who listens deeply. The feedback I received was often challenging. As an Enneagram type seven, I am characterized as someone who always seeks joy and avoids pain. This clashed with my desire to be taken seriously and to be recognized for my depth and kindness. The feedback I received was about the need to allow directees to express their pain, and to not rush them to where I wanted them to go. Suffice it to say, this was humbling. Over time I learned to slow down, to truly hear my directees, and to sit with them in their discomfort.

Director training makes you aware of what is inside of you, so you can deal with it. I will never forget a lesson from a beloved teacher in my second year who used the animated movie *Inside Out* to teach about emotions. As a joy-centered person, I was frustrated with the character Sadness. This character revealed deeper issues present within me. Who knew this movie would become a catalyst for realizing my unresolved trauma? This Disney movie was a perfect invitation to take my discomfort to God in spiritual direction and to explore why it troubled me so much. That process highlighted my need to embrace both joy and sorrow, to do as Scripture tells us in Romans 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (ESV).

Spiritual direction acts as the master key to unlock mysteries, as we lean into Scripture's advice to acknowledge God in all our ways, trusting that God will direct our paths. This spiritual practice transforms us, bringing peace where there is turmoil, solace where there is pain, and the ability to lament deeply. We are enabled to cry out, sit in wonder, and even challenge God. We come into this space and celebrate how God has moved, and we get to celebrate how we have grown in return.

I honor and respect my directors and supervisors for not succumbing

to their own understanding but truly partnering with the Holy Spirit. Their example led me to become a director. They embraced my silence, the discomfort of my tears, and the need for timely, Spirit-led inquiries. Through this practice, supervision, and growth in my faith, I learned to be inquisitive, not for its own sake but for the movement of God's Spirit granting peace, healing, and the revelation of divine mysteries. In this space, we celebrate how God has moved and grown within us, transforming every aspect of our life and deepening our relationship with God.

Become what God designed you to be; I am what God designed me to be.