THE COVENANT QUARTERLY

Fall/Winter 2024

CONTENTS

NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN THY LIGHT SHALL WE SEE LIGHT
EST. 1891
CHICAGO, ILL.

THE COVENANT
QUARTERLY

ISSN 0361-0934 (print)
ISSN 2380-8829 (online)
Vol. 82, No. 2
Fall/Winter 2024

THE COVENANT QUARTERLY is published two times a year (spring, fall) in Chicago, Illinois.

The Covenant Quarterly is the ministerial journal of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Published by North Park Theological Seminary through Covenant Publications, the *Quarterly* seeks to foster theological reflection on ministerial praxis in service to Covenant pastors and the broader church.

Editorial correspondence should be sent to the editor, Paul H. de Neui, c/o North Park Theological Seminary, 3225 W. Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60625; (773) 244-6230. pdeneui@northpark.edu.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606; (888) 665-ATLA; atla@atla.com; www.atla.com.

This periodical is also abstracted by *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, P.O. Box 215, Myerstown, PA 17067, (717) 866-6734; admin@rtabstracts.org; www.rtabstracts.org.

Comment

Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies, North Park Theological Seminary

One of the reasons for the Evangelical Covenant Church to publish *The Covenant Quarterly* as its primary scholarly journal is to remember, reflect upon, and celebrate the important milestones of our denominational life. With this issue we celebrate the beginning of the twentieth year of the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction at North Park Theological Seminary (the Weborg Center) and present seven articles on themes representing the diverse voices and perspectives of staff and alumni who have been impacted by its work and ministry. We praise God for the good work of the Weborg Center and look forward to the newest cohort starting their training toward certification as spiritual directors.

To begin this anniversary issue, we are privileged to present "Living with God," an article written by John Weborg previously unpublished in this journal. Following this, current Weborg Center director Rob Peterson interviews Weborg reflecting on themes found in the first article. Peterson also presents the impact of spiritual direction through awareness, hearing, living, and discovery in his article "The Gift of Spiritual Direction." We include a personal testimonial, "Our Life Stories in Christ," written by professor emeritus of communication and biblical interpretation Paul Koptak. Pastor of the largest African American church in the Covenant (Oakdale Covenant Church) D. Darrell Griffin introduces the work and world of Howard W. Thurman as Christian mystic and social justice advocate in his article, "The Centering Moment: The Spiritual and Soul Care Practice of Howard W. Thurman." Christina Burrows shares her perspective on various tools and practices that contribute to a growing spirituality by introducing "Intercultural Agility in Spiritual Direction." Lastly, five alumni of the Weborg Center share their personal recollections

of the process of completing the two-and-a-half-year academic program to become spiritual directors in "Selected Essays by Alumni of the Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction."

We believe the five book reviews included in this issue provide the reader with suggestions for input to enrich spiritual formation in several levels of life. All of these will be expansive and informative for ministry in your setting.

Special thanks for the initial suggestion for this issue goes to Rob Peterson and Paul Koptak, who are also alumni of the Weborg Center. Their contributions to this issue are many and the work they both do continues the legacy of the Weborg Center in what has remained NPTS's most successful certificate program for many years. We would be remiss not to mention that the Weborg Center continues to welcome new cohorts each summer. More information about enrollment in NPTS's certificate of spiritual direction can be found at https://covchurch.org/2022/03/16/apply-now-for-next-npts-spiritual-direction-cohort/. Thanks also to the Covenant's Marketing and Communications team and the team of Serve Clergy, and all who serve on NPTS's Library and Publication Committee who help with layout, edits, funding, and personal support.

May this issue enrich your spiritual formation in ways that equip you to lead others to a deeper faith, a more receptive mind, and an awakened heart to creative ways of participating in God's reconciling mission in the world. We welcome further submissions from our readership for future journal issues at https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/about/submissions.

Paul H. de Neui

Living with God

C. John Weborg, professor emeritus of theology,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL

The obvious vocation of a theological seminary is the preparation of persons to do ministry: preach, teach, administer the sacraments and other rites, train the laity, and serve the larger church. The more subtle, maybe even more foundational vocation of the seminary, is to prepare the persons who do ministry to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18) and to capacitate them continually to make a fearless personal moral inventory and to practice those habits of life conducive to personal and public virtue.

My thesis is that we prepare for life in the course of life. The period of seminary education does not put the life of the seminarian on hold, restraining whatever it is, either of ease or adversity, that might intrude itself into the seminarian's life. Experience provides the lived material to work with, provided one is willing to experience the experience that memory makes available.[1] Kierkegaard called this the task of becoming a "subjective thinker"[2] which requires "the grave strenuosity of faith."[3] The threat and promise of this entire enterprise is to have the stamina, steadfastness, and will to experience.

Living *for* God is the more conventional way of describing the Christian life. Such discipleship calls for discernment, sacrifice, zeal, commitment, conviction, and a devotional life supportive of these demands. Living *with* God is a concomitant factor of discipleship. Persistence,

---

1 C. John Weborg, "Spiritual Formation in Life for Life in the Interlude Called a Theological Education," *Covenant Quarterly, LVIX* (November 2001): 3.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson, completed and with Introduction and Notes by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 73, 84, 267–270.

3 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 188.

perseverance, protest, gratitude, a capacity for disillusionment as well as devotion, and at times a dogged game of hide and seek all make living with God a venture of faith continuing to act in love. As the Christian serves in faith, acting in love, he/she waits in hope for God to vindicate God's promise of presence, fruit, and covenant loyalty. The structure of the theology presented here, both as prima and secunda, is theocentric rather than Christocentric. In the process of living with God while at the same time living for God, faith, hope, and love are kept alive as the Holy Spirit, by means of word and sacrament, attests that "the renewal of creation has been wrought by the self-same Word who made it in the beginning."[4]

The Problem

Barry and Connolly say, "Resistance is a critical element in the development of every interpersonal relationship."[5] Resistance inhabits the space between the perceived need for change and the risk required to address it. Persons know the need long before it is brought into speech, adding to the accumulating tension contributing to its repression. No less than in significant human relations, the same agony often accompanies the negotiation of a relationship with God.

According to Barry and Connolly the accumulated literature of spiritual direction specifies five crucial areas where resistance can assert itself in uninvited ways. Variations on these five themes are ubiquitous:

1. Issues relating to the image of God with which each directee has lived. This can be related to experiences of power, gender, maturation levels, laxity, scrupulosity, etc.

2. Fear of losing one's relationship with God, including being overcome by the immensity of God, especially if one cannot pray in mature ways, expressing genuine feelings, memories, grievances, etc. Directees can be taught that there is no "right" way to pray, a kind of hidden code that needs to be found in order to legitimate one's prayers. I find the staple antidote to this fear is to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the prayers in Scripture (Proper 28, *Book of Common Prayer*).

---

4 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (London: D. Nutt, 1891), 2.

5 William A. Berry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 81.

3. In the maturation of relationships, differences between oneself and the other, including God, may intensify. Expectations get undermined or even derailed in the process of allowing others to be other than one's image of them. In turn the painful process of letting one's self be other than one's projection of one's ideal self is set in motion. Here the capacity for receptivity to grace as the ground of freedom toward God, self, and others is the crucial factor. The God who is other than one's image of God can be lived with in the process of mature differentiation, and the self who is other than one's ideal self can be lived with by grace.

4. There is realistic fear of texts calling for a demanding discipleship. Some examples might be: "Be angry and sin not," "sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me," "in everything give thanks," or "pray without ceasing."

5. The presence of secret sins.[6]

It is striking that three of the five categories relate directly to the God issue. If the issues in the first three categories are not dealt with appropriately, the last two will fall victim to the first three. For example, if one's images of God are drawn from the field of jurisprudence or from authoritarian models only, one might not have the confidence required to pursue the risky demands of some of the discipleship texts. The risk of displeasing God is too great and the risk of failure in one's own eyes is too immediate. The decisive issues in formation and direction are theocentric in origin and outcome.

With the permission of a former student of mine, I am presenting a "case" early in the paper to demonstrate the inherent theocentric issues in trying to come to terms with the demands of the Christian life.[7] The "case" should make it painfully apparent how early in life these formational issues are engaged. This account concerns missionary kids (MKs) and their need for coping capacities dealing with long separations from families, both immediate and extended. The event in question is leaving home (the place of parental missionary service) to attend a boarding school where other MKs are educated. The single event of leaving home

---

6 Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 82–91.

7 James Gould, "Bringing Spiritual and Emotional Healing to Adult Missionary Children Through Rituals of Lament and Assurance," paper submitted in Theology of Caring and Health, North Park Theological Seminary, July 2001.

involves four losses: relationships (parents and friends), material (familiar objects and surroundings), control (familiar routines, interactional systems), and role (a sense of one's place in a social network).

James Gould enlists the help of Ruth E. Van Reken, who underwent the same experience he did, to verbalize the process: protest (parents said the plane ride would be fun; it was tears all the way); despair (I quit crying at bedtime; it doesn't do any good); the teachers think I'm well adjusted (they don't know that I've given up); and detachment (withdrawal of investment in parental relationships; it's as if I have to count you as dead). As can be imagined, the thought of reunion with parents is not very comforting.

Spiritual formation issues enter the picture when missionary circles stress a "victory only" spirituality,[8] masking grief and anger. Painful feelings are a sign of spiritual weakness and worst of all, people are expected to spiritualize their experiences rather than to express true feelings. It is not hard to conceptualize the toll this takes or the future occasions when this will erupt in anger and opposition to the church and to the faith that landed the family in a place where the faith failed them (as the perception goes).

Van Reken, according to Gould, argues that these losses are tied directly to God since God is the one who calls to missionary service and is the one whom they serve. Pain issues and faith issues coalesce. "To question the pain is to question God."[9] Expressions of pain by MKs were rebellion against God. "Pain and faith were antithetical." One MK said,

> If someone had been . . . able to accept my questions about why I felt so rotten if God wanted my parents to do what they did, instead of speaking platitudes about God taking care of everything if you trust him, I might have found an easier way through those years. Instead, I ended up feeling . . . [that] my pain was a consequence of my failure to trust God. But I didn't know how to trust any more than I was and the pain didn't go away. [The] lesson I learned was that you couldn't count on God. . . .That is a very lonely place to be—not able to trust people or to trust God.[10]

---

8 Ruth E. Van Reken, *Letters I Never Wrote* (Oakbrook, IL: Darwill, 1985), 5, 9, 37, cited in Gould, "Bringing Spiritual and Emotional Healing," 5, 6.

9 Doug Manning, *Don't Take My Grief Away from Me* (Hereford, TX: In-Sight Books, 1979), 78, quoted in Gould, "Bringing Spiritual and Emotional Healing," 8.

10 Ruth E. Van Reken, "Possible Long-term Implications of Repetitive Cycles of Separation and Loss During Childhood on Missionary Kids," unpublished paper presented at Christian Association for Psychological Studies Convention, Lancaster, Pa., 1987, 7, quoted in Gould, "Bringing Spiritual and Emotional Healing," 9.

Nearly every one of Barry's and Connolly's five areas of resistance are included in some way in this case. The theocentric issues dominate. Living with God, especially if it is one's parents' God, is more than can be expected. What is more, missionaries undergo some kind of formation during their preparation. For that very reason the image of God, let alone concept of God, communicated by home, church, and school of preparation could not serve as a conversation partner. As Gould's narrative shows, the consequences were for a lifetime.

Intellectual and spiritual dishonesty can be mitigated in part by a theological education that stresses God as both subject and as subject matter, as someone lived with and as well as lived for, a relationship as symbiotic as the ancient formulation "the law of prayer is the law of believing" (*lex orandi*, *lex credendi*). This in turn requires a theological approach that can hold *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda* in tandem as the seminary prepares persons for ecclesiastical service. Such persons can develop a capacity for an intellectual integrity and a spiritual integrity that can permit God as both subject and subject matter mutually to inform and interrogate each other in the life of the person living with God, a life that does not go on hold even in seminary.

Perspective

A brief distinction needs to be drawn between *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda*. *Theologia prima* as primary theology is speech *to* God. It is speech in the second person, direct and personal—as if face to face. When God is the conversation partner it is not a conversation between equals. Primordial thinking is its *modus operandi*. John Macquarrie explains primordial thinking by contrasting it with calculative and existential thinking. *Calculative thinking* clearly differentiates the subject from the object. Control belongs to the subject; objectivity inhabits the distance between subject and object, and instrumentality—the subject's use of the object—is the aim. *Existential thinking* does not aim at use or distance. It is subject to subject conversation wherein each shares in the same humanity, and there is reciprocal participation in the revelation each one unfolds. Third, *primordial thinking* is also subject to subject but in a unique fashion: one of the parties is transcended, mastered, overcome, but in such a way so as neither to be objectified nor necessarily robbed of personhood. In fact, the overwhelming of one being by another may be a time of great freedom, as in the case of grace, or great *angst*, as in

the case of guilt.[11]

Primordial engagements are freighted with ambiguity: attraction and alienation; desire and dread; intimacy and intimidation. In an exquisite *Andact* [devotional reflection] on the encounter between St. John of the Apocalypse and the glorified Jesus Christ, the one before whom John fell down as though dead, Johann Albrecht Bengel comments that John was both frightened and fortified with Jesus's gesture of laying his hand on John and telling him, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17b–18).[12] The ambiguity of this experience and the ambivalence felt by John bear striking resemblance to the encounters of Hannah (1 Samual 1–2), Isaiah (ch. 6), Peter, unworthy of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5), or Paul at his conversion (Acts 9). So astounded is Paul by this sovereign act of grace and vocation that he appropriates an unlikely metaphor: *ektroma*—a miscarriage. More conventionally translated, Paul is one who is untimely born, who is the least of the apostles and unfit to be called such (1 Corinthians 15:8–9). Paul is living with a grace that defies his categories yet daring him to believe it. Too good to be true! Grace easily becomes its own worst enemy and becomes the grounds for its own defeat, basically because it is unbelievable! It frightens yet fortifies—fearful of being presumptive on such grace yet fortified by its gratuitousness. Live with it by living by it. Grace defies a calculus.

Theologia secunda, on the other hand, is speech *about* God. It is speech in the third person. It has some commonality with calculative thinking in that it works not so much with a subject but with subject matter. Secondary theology seeks an appropriate method and a coherent "system" of the Christian faith such as one might find in Tillich's *Systematic Theology*. I offer here a schematic comparison between the two approaches, although it is not in any way exhaustive:[13]

---

[11] John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1977), 91–95. Macquarrie cites his dependence on Martin Heidegger's, *Was ist Metaphysik?*

[12] Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Sechzig erbauliche Reden über die Offenbarung Johannes oder vielmehr Jesu Christi samt einer Nachlese gleichen lnhalts*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Johann Christoph Erhard, 1758), 49 and 63.

[13] Jean Leclercq develops a contrast between monastic theology and scholastic theology in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974). Previously Elmer Colyer and I worked at this way of making distinctions in *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Conversation with Donald Bloesch*, ed. Elmer Colyer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 158–160.

Theologia Prima	Theologia Secunda
Silence	Conceptual clarity
Experience seeking understanding	Epistemology: faith seeking understanding
Bible stories, screams, parables	Hermeneutics, exegesis
Injustice, anger seeking vindication	Theodicy
Guilt seeking remission	Atonement
Death, grief seeking reprieve	Resurrection
Persons in search of community	Initiation and ecclesiology
Good fortune seeking praise	Eucharist
Hope deferred	Eschatology
Prayer, protest, stymied thoughts yet stubborn resolve	Propositions, resolutions

Theologia prima resists systematization and forestalls premature conclusions. When *theologia secund*a is trumpeting the consistency of its logic and hermeneutics, *theologia prima* will provide the text that will not fit! Helmut Thielicke says that "theology betrays its deepest secrets in moments of inconsistency."[14] *Theologia prima* knows that and finds it to be a source of suffering, an occasion to tempt intellectual integrity searching for the quick fix, secretly wishing perhaps that Sebastian Moore was wrong when he said to Kathleen Norris that God behaves differently in the Psalms than in systematic theology![15]

Theologia prima and *theologia secunda* are not alternatives. They belong together as do *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*. Education is painful, learning requires unlearning, concepts need to be distinguished from convictions, and the seminarian requires freedom from the need to personalize everything: every question addressed to the seminarian is not an attack on his/her person. Differentiation of self from one's thought without succumbing

[14] Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 99.

[15] Kathleen Norris, "The Paradox of the Psalms," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Faucett Columbine, 1994), 222.

either to indifference or to total separation from one's intellectual activity is a painful process and belongs in a theological education.

Noel Annan, writing about the emergence of dons at Oxford and Cambridge, says that the one task of the university is to cultivate a capacity for learning.[16] Granted, the radical exclusivity of the proposition may not be entirely satisfying because skills, practice, and knowledge are also the anticipated fruits of an education. Yet the educated person is one who cultivates a capacity for learning, including the painful aspects of recognizing one's blinders, ignorance, and at times unwillingness to recognize, identify, and confront one's resistance to learning.

If education means cultivating the capacity for learning, spiritual formation concerns itself with the capacity for receptivity to the work of the triune God. In the tradition of Pietism (North Park's native air) there was talk of the conviction of sin as the Holy Spirit confronted believers with the law and the gospel. It is natural to resist such exposure because one has no preunderstanding of how deeply or to what extent one's life will be laid bare (Hebrews 4:12–13). The most painful part is to admit the truthfulness of the conviction (Psalm 51:4). To do so is to repent and repentance is the formational equivalent of admitting the need to unlearn something or to admit that what one had treated as fact is only a prejudice, and in social ethics, a custom, not a moral stipulation.

At that point the construction job that is one's life can implode. Implosion is one of the ways God uses to free persons by the truth for the truth. In some ways education and formation are one long (lifelong, hopefully) process of crisis stewardship. Education and formation are never freed from their nemesis, namely a seemingly intractable capacity for resistance to both grace and knowledge. The crisis of which one is a steward is epistemological: the process of knowing is a process of revelation, of uncovering hidden truth whether hidden by ignorance, prejudice, or the plain cussed resistance of "I have my mind made up; don't confuse me with the facts." Paul warns against a darkened understanding due to ignorance and hardness of heart. Classical theology called this the noetic effects of sin. Put plainly, sinners are characterized as unteachable (Ephesians 4:18). The consequence of such hardness and darkened understanding is the loss of sensitivity and an abandonment to a behavior that dehumanizes oneself and victimizes others (Ephesians 4:19). No wonder persons want deliverance from a theological education and a sustained

[16] Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

exposure to formation. It is a continual exposure to one's ignorance and worse, the preferential option for ignorance. Ignorance seems easier.

The mystery of having the capacity for education and formation, for grace and knowledge, is at the heart of the matter. The development of such a capacity requires that *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda* be allowed their rightful place in the economy of a theological education so that seminarians may know in a healthy fashion that God is both subject and subject matter. Seminarians also need to know that to subsume subject into subject matter is to eliminate any possibility of a relationship with God. Subject matter thrives in the atmosphere of calculative thinking and third person speech. Theology or subject matter is unresponsive to human need and unable finally to answer all of the questions posed to it. Yet the pursuit of the final answer, like Stephen Hawking's search for the theory of everything, has a flaw: Who can certify the omniscience to claim such a feat? My view is that when calculative thinking reaches its end result, it too finds that not everything is calculable. For theologians there is always text that does not fit or an experience that is minimized so that one can supply a packaged answer in the manner of Job's friends. I think Godel's proof in mathematical theory is instructive for theologians: "This proof states that within any rigidly logical mathematical system, there are certain questions that cannot be proved or disproved on the basis of axioms within the system. Therefore it is uncertain that the basic axioms of arithmetic will not give rise to contradictions."[17]

Is it not also possible that basic axioms in theology, if always taken to their logical conclusion, can give rise to contradictions? That certain issues in theology cannot be proved or disproved on the basis of axioms within the system? When primordial thinking rather than calculative thinking faces some of these questions, primordial thinking seeks theological perspective more than a theological position. The reason is a seminarian has to live with God as well as learn about God.

I have no idea why God closed Hannah's womb (1 Samuel 1:6), yet that assertion becomes a pretext for Peninnah to turn it into a *cause célèbre* (1 Samuel 1:7) and to continue such harassment year after year. Is the closing of Hannah's womb a verdict rendered by divine revelation? If so, is God aware that it was a setup for Hannah's daily horror? Is it a human interpretation of a physical condition attributed to divine activity? Does such an attribution mask a notion of punishment for latent sin? Can a

[17] Patricia Barnes-Svarney, ed., *The New York Public Library Science Desk Reference* (New York: Macmillan, Stonesong Book, 1995), 42.

modern woman, afflicted with infertility, read this text without some kind of horror and without becoming jealous of Hannah who finally did conceive? Does such a woman get caught in a vortex of centripetal and centrifugal forces wanting to worship a God whom she distrusts?

Theologia secunda argues that God is sovereign, free, and in some theological systems, accountable to no one. *Theologia prima* asks God for some accounting, not only for the sake of humans but for God's sake.

Practice

This section briefly develops how the perspective sketched above might provide a method (*theologia prima*) to deal with the central issue in forming and living the Christian life (*theocentricity*) and how this contour of spiritual formation might become part of formation teaching and practice in theological education.

The two testaments of the Christian Bible show a narrative coherence. In both testaments there is clear evidence that poets, prophets, historians, gospel, and epistle writers were disciplined by the OT story to find their place in that story even as the story was appropriated to "tradition" new traditions. This may be illustrated by several texts. First, within the OT, Jeremiah uses the Exodus narrative as a basis for showing how a redeemed people forgot their redeemer and lost track of their vocation to be redeeming (7:21–26; 11:3–5; and 16:14–15). When Jeremiah engages their ingratitude (2:13) he does so using Deuteronomy 6:10–15 to show how Israel has taken over cisterns they did not dig as though they were children intoxicated with entitlement. Deuteronomy 4:9–24 and 8:2–18, preoccupied as they are with the perils of forgetfulness, made clear to Israel that their forgetfulness of God's election and Exodus jeopardized their existence. Forgetfulness of God was a repeated concern of the psalmists (55:11; 59:11; 78:7; and 103:2). Hosea 12:2–4 retrieves the Jacob story as a heuristic device to bring continuing internecine injustice and conflict in the nation to public exposure.

Second, among many examples in the NT writers' use of the OT, the two genealogies of Jesus are a story of many stories providing the Christian reader with a narrative coherence of the two testaments and forecloses on any identity description of Jesus that ignores the OT. When Matthew composes the narrative of the slaughter of the children by Herod (2:16–18), he does so by appropriating the Rachel story (Genesis 35:16–21 death during Benjamin's birth) and Jeremiah's use of it (31:15 Rachel watching the trek into exile). For Matthew, Rachel continues to weep during Herod's time and the later time of Matthew's congregation. The text on ecclesiology in

1 Peter 2:9–10 is constructed out of Exodus 19:6 (priestly kingdom and holy nation) and Hosea 1:9–10 ("the ones once not a people now are God's people") among others. The good shepherd and hireling themes of John 10 are in contrast to Jeremiah 23:1–5 and Ezekial 34.

One way to account for the narrative coherence of the two testaments of Christian Scripture is that the one and the same God is active in both. The one and same God who called and sent Israel into its ministry called and sent Jesus of Nazareth. The one and the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt brought Jesus out of the tomb.[18] The theocentric character of the documents is evident and can be illustrated briefly in relation to several subjects: in relation to sending the Son—John 5:24, 30; 6:44; 17:3, 18, 21, 23; 1 John 4:4; in relation to the atonement: 2 Corinthians 5:7; Romans 3:25; 8:3; John 3:16; in relation to the resurrection (God raised Jesus)—Acts 2:23–24; 2:36; 3:15; 5:30–31; Romans 1:1–5; 8:11; Galatians 1:1; Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Corinthians 6:41; in relation to salvation history: Hebrews 1:1–2; in relation to the Holy Spirit: John 10:26, Galatians 4:4.

When Jesus prayed, he prayed to the one and same God to whom Abraham, Hagar, Moses, Hannah, Judas Maccabeus, and others had prayed. In this he was instructed and inspired by the story to which and by which he had been disciplined.

The theocentric character of Jesus's life comes to full expression in Hebrews 5:7–10:

> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The one to whom he prayed was the one whose work he had come to do and whose words he had come to speak. This one to whom he prayed was the one to whom Moses and Hannah had prayed. Like them

---

[18] Robert Jensen, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:42–46; Bernd Janowski, "The One God of the Two Testaments: Basic Questions of a Biblical Theology," *Theology Today* 51 (2000): 297–324; and Frederick C. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change–Maintaining Identity: The Emerging Center of Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

he appropriated words from the tradition to "tradition" his own life with God. Note the Psalms which are quoted from the cross.

Jesus could engage this one in ways as vigorous as his predecessors. For example, Psalm 22 begins by asking why God had forsaken his servant. Verse 3 proclaims the holiness of God. In the one prayer there is both accusation and acclamation. The accusation in the English text is prefaced by "yet" followed in v. 6 with a "but," in v. 9 with a "yet," all showing a prayer processing what it meant to live with God. Confusion shares space with confidence. The theology Jesus inherited permitted the process of thinking out loud, praying oneself from confusion to confidence, if not always to certainty and clarity. Was it because of this history of truthful prayer, of story—laden phrases and references, that Jesus could say, "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit"? The location of that text in Psalm 31 is preceded by a lament at being the scorn of enemies, an object of horror, and the victim of a treacherous scheme. It is followed by a petition to be saved from shame and a declaration of praise in honor of God's steadfast love. At the moment of death, if he is conscious of the entirety of Psalm 31, he is relying on vv. 23–24: "Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord."

All the while that Psalm 69 is used to "foretell" the offer of vinegar to the crucified Jesus, the rest of the psalm poses nearly every spiritual issue related to the crucifixion:

- Drowning in tears, vv. 1–2
- Outnumbered by enemies, v. 4
- Shame, dishonor, reproach, and alienation, vv. 6–8
- Zeal for your house has consumed me, v. 9 (cf. John 2:17)
- Object of insults, gossip, and the lyrics of songs, vv. 10–12
- But also prayer for deliverance and rescue, v. 13
- A plea for God not to hide from psalmist's distress but answer quickly, v. 15
- At the end a request that the oppressed might see the reward of the wicked and know the Lord hears the needy, does not despise his own that are in bonds, vv. 27–33

How does all this relate to the practice of formation? Formation people can make profitable use of the expression "the faith of Jesus." The expression opens up the entire issue of Jesus's human nature (Hebrews 4:14–16;

5:7–10). Richard Hays argues that Jesus is justified by faith just as Abraham was (Galatians 3:6, 22; Romans 3:26). The righteousness of God is revealed through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus, meaning I take it, Jesus trusted in God for vindication, kept himself faithful, and was vindicated in the resurrection.[19] God justified Jesus by vindication through the resurrection and in so doing showed that Jesus's faith was not faith in faith but faith in God. Helmut Thielicke argues in a similar fashion, namely "that I have the new life through and in the fact that Jesus Christ believes, so that here he is thus taken as the prototype of my faith . . . the point where I stand is thus the very point where he so believes."[20] The seminarian/ecclesiastical servant believes with Jesus in the same God.

A detailed study of the psalms used in the composition of the gospel narratives orients the reader to the formation tradition which was contextual for the isolated verses quoted in the NT. To read psalms like 22, 31, and 69 in their *entirety* is almost a transcript of people seeking to move from confusion to confidence. The full psalm is the formational context to pray and behave with Jesus and with those who told his story. But to tell the story of Jesus they had to tell the story that shaped him. Our canon exhibits this narrative coherence.[21]

To believe *in* Jesus as well as *with* Jesus puts the believer in touch with marginality. Many of the people Jesus served were the marginalized. By the end of his ministry, he was numbered among them. The pain of the marginalized is known in no other way than by letting them teach one what life at the edge is like. Hannah, Hagar, Lazarus, and the Syro-Phoenician woman all have stories to tell if one allows oneself to hear them. But hearing them creates pain, resistance, and anger at them for exercising a claim on one's life, pity, maybe empathy, and perhaps most of all an impotence in not being able to do anything.

Two types of marginalities can be identified. One can be called "vul-

---

[19] See Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* in SBL Dissertation Series, 56 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 165, 171, 249.

[20] Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Foundations*, ed. William H. Lazareth; 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:189. Additional literature on the subject of the "faith of Jesus" may be found in Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*. trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), 79–139; Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1963), 201–246; and Donald Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 106–132.

[21] Richard Hays, "Paul's Use of an Early Christian Exegetical Convention," in *The Future of Christology: Essays in Honor of Leander Keck*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Wayne Meeks (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 125–127.

nerability-based marginality." People do not choose it. They have it thrust on them in the form of disabilities, wealth, chronic pain, and a host of other factors. The other is "value-based marginality." People "choose" it by choosing to live a prophetic life which generates opposition and marginalization.[22]

Seminarians and church workers will come to know both forms of marginalization. They can be made instantly vulnerable by disease or disaster, "promotion" or "success." They can make a ministry decision according to values and find themselves alone and maligned. This experience was known in classical theology as the *active obedience* of Jesus, i.e., active, intentional obedience to the law, and his *passive obedience*, i.e., what he *underwent* for having actually *undertaken* love of neighbor to the fullest extent. Passive obedience is the hardest since one wants to quit. At this point the seminarian or church worker is called to believe with Jesus that the God who sent Jesus and through Jesus has sent other workers is trustworthy. The faith of Jesus is one's comfort. The narrative coherence of the two testaments, rooted in the story of one and the same God at work, entails the use of the entire canon of Scripture in formation.

The person who experiences one or both kinds of marginalities described above, or who finds obedience to and faith in the God of Israel and Jesus a questionable venture, needs to be taught that the entire canon of Scripture is at one's disposal, the praise as well as protest, the accusation against God as well as the acclamation of God. As for a particular example, take the psalms of lament and anger. When visited by immobilizing sorrow or intoxicated with anger, the person in formation or in ministry needs to know that such visitations need not be denied or spiritualized. They are real and are not incidental to life as such or to ministry. One can pray one's anger or one's lament in good biblical company.

Brueggemann says that generally speaking, the psalms of anger have two parts: own it and yield it. Vengeance belongs to God alone.[23] I have had students use this pattern to write anger psalms to go along with their reading the psalms of anger. This is not a technique. It is a biblical form that frees one to pray angrily one's anger, but pray it nevertheless. There is no way to maintain the relationship except to keep in conversation, at times confronting God, at times conceding yet confessing with Jesus

---

22 Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 72–74.

23 Walter E. Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Christian Brothers Publications, 1986), 70–71.

that even though God is the source of our faith, God poses the most challenging questions to faith.

The model for this spiritual formation is the relation of God to Jesus. God vindicated a faithful but discredited and marginalized person whose faith in God held fast, nourished by the story to which and by which he was disciplined.

The faithfulness of God to Jesus is the seminarian's and church worker's margin of strength to persevere in life and in ministry. No such worker has guarantees that the fruit of his or her labor will be seen. Moreover, ministry copes with a mystery at its very outset: the very message proclaimed and ministry practiced hardens some and heals others simultaneously. The vocation itself can marginalize the minister by his/her very ministry and message.[24]

The source of perseverance is God who promised that his word would not return void but would accomplish the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55). But it is not guaranteed that the servant of the word will see the effectiveness either of word or ministry. Resolve to continue is found in this, that the God who vindicated Jesus and Jesus' faith, will, in God's time, vindicate the message and ministry carried out by faith in Jesus' name.

In this manner the spirituality of those who serve may be able to gain some detachment from ministry as a source of ego strength and some differentiation from ministry as a form of identity. Persons in ministry, like Jesus, must await vindication. In the process of waiting, it may be learned that one ought not ask God "to bless me and my ministry." Rather, following the model suggested, we ask God to vindicate his word and sacraments. In this way some distance may be maintained between the person and his/her vocation so that the vocation does not become all-consuming. In the end it is not the minister's word; it is God's word and God must vindicate God's promises, none of which are subject to human control. The ministry is carried out in the vortex of faith acting in love (Galatians 5:6), a faith that, as God vindicated Jesus, so God will vindicate the ongoing ministry of word and sacrament.

Lutheran Pietism appropriated Luther's uncompromising insistence on the force of the word order of Galatians 5:6: faith active in love.[25]

---

[24] Donald Juel, "Encountering the Sower: Mark 4:1–20," *Interpretation 56* (2002): 273–283.

[25] *Luther's Works: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5–6, Lectures on Galatians, 1519, Chapters 1–6*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 37:28–31, 333–336. See George W. Porell, Faith Active in Love (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954).

Bengel especially appropriated this feature of his heritage to stress the theocentric character of the Christian life. The entire Christian life existed in faith, hope, and love.[26] Faith acting in love is the vehicle for the entire Christian faith.[27] Faith is the empowerment and energy of love. Neither faith nor love is self-renewing. But since faith is not faith in faith but in God, faith is subsidized by the one who renews faith by word and sacrament. Faith then maintains love's perspective.

Faith in God's will to justify persons through Christ grounds the freedom of the Christian to act for the glory of God and love of neighbor. Faith in God's justifying grace is the source of courage to engage the world for the sake of truth and to give service to one's neighbor without placing ultimate trust in one's capacity to do the task. That capacity may prove to be very limited or the motivation to sustain it may burn out. If one begins this service with love alone, it may sour. If one begins with hope alone, it may be discredited too easily.

Faith does not hesitate to act in love out of concern that one's motives are less than pure or one's commitment less than full strength. If the human concern is that one's love must be right before service to God and neighbor can commence, one will never begin. In a telling exegetical note on Matthew 25:25–26, Bengel says of the one servant who from fear buried the money the master told him to invest, "*sine amore, sine fiducia* (without love, without confidence)."[28] Distrust of the master truncated the servant's stewardship. The controlling image maintained by the servant was that the master would honor safety over obedience.

Faith imparts an eschatological dimension to acts of love. Faith can wait for the right time; love wants to make the time now. When love acts in a suffocating manner, it becomes a burden to people in need and gradually deprives them of agency except finally to rebel. In the trying period of waiting the Holy Spirit will bring to our awareness the things of Christ—not just his words but his confidence in God. When the Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ it must include God in relation to Christ (John 14–16 and Romans 8:12–30).

---

[26] Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Das Neue Testament zum Wachstum in der Gnade und der Erkentniß der Herrn Jesu Christi nach dem revidirten Grundtext iibersetzt und mit dienlichen Anmerkungen begleitet* (Stuttgart: Johann Benedict Metzler, 1753), 736.

[27] Bengel, *Das Neue Testament*, "Von der rechten Weise, mit göttlichen Dingen umzugehen," Anhang VII, 1000–01.

[28] D. Joh. Alberti Bengelii, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Editio Tertia, M. Ernestum Bengelium, 1835 edition by Johanne Steudel; Londini: Williams et Norgate, MDCCCLXII), 135.

Faith waits and knows it has no control over the outcome of the love in which it has acted. Faith learns to be conscientious without being compulsive, compulsiveness being a sign of a lack of faith. In this way faith knows of a vindication it cannot see and rests its case on the paradigmatic act of God on behalf of Christ, who on the third day vindicated the work of his son. So, the minister relinquishes his/her ministry to God's future, believing with Jesus that God is true to God's word.

In a results-oriented culture this is probably bad news. It requires the grave strenuosity of faith to plant seeds and see no plant. But dormant seeds should not be mistaken for dead. They just await "the fire next time" as do seeds of the sequoia trees. Ministry and service in league with Jesus Christ require the grace of relinquishment to remain healthy and hopeful. It means living with God whose ways are not always ours, but whose ways require our service for their accomplishment. Formation in this tradition stresses the faith that acts in love and then waits. Waiting is an intrinsic ministry.

Two Biblical Examples

Two brief studies of biblical prayers, one by Moses (value-based marginality—reluctantly he consented to serve his vulnerable people in slavery) and the other by Hannah (a vulnerability-based marginality—infertility) demonstrate *theologia prima* at work trying to traverse the vagaries of primordial thinking.

Moses. In Exodus 32:7–14 the debacle of the golden calf is described. In wrath God says to Moses, "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (v. 10). Moses once again becomes *defensor fidei* and in authentic fashion turns litigious by a cross examination of God. In paraphrase: why will you grant the Egyptians their point that you brought out the Israelites only to kill them? Verses 12–13 are worth citing in full:

> Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever."

Samuel Balentine reports that this is the only occurrence in Scripture

where God is the subject of the sentence, "Leave me alone."[29] It is a command ignored by Moses and, as I read it, the basis for Moses to take initiative to contravene God's intention to obliterate the people. Moses asks God to take his life and let the people live. The people live and Moses grows introspective about his vocation as the leader of God's people. When the dramatic action has come to an end and Moses has time for some solitude, second thoughts set in. "Now, if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways so that I might know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people" (33:13). God answers, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses pushes his point: "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people from every people on the face of the earth" (vv. 14–16). Moses wants to see God's glory. God says, "I will pass by and while doing so, cover your face with my hand and when I take my hands off, you will see only my back" (vv. 20–23). Fretheim makes the point that when the prophets suffer, part of their vocation is to hold the anguish of God before their people as much as their vocation is to hold the anguish of their people before God.[30] Fretheim concludes that in Moses's prayers the future of Israel is not the only source of such urgent intercession but the future of God.[31]

Moses prays two points: What will the Egyptians say? and, God, will you go back on your promise? The former is a forceful question, but the latter is the most persuasive. Moses quotes God against God. It is God's word against God's word. This is *theologia prima* at its finest. Like *theologia secunda*, *theologia prima* builds a case and cites sources. It constructs an argument but not primarily *for* God in an apologetic sense but an argument *with* God for the survival of the intercessor's trust and God's reputation. To be sure, there may be a secondary apologetic outcome in that when God does act it adds to God's credibility. But *theologia prima* speaks *to* God and *with* God for the sake of the one who prays and those for whom prayers are offered. The preservation of faithfulness in life is at stake more than the survival of a theological system.

---

29 Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine–Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 135–139. I also owe my use of "patterned prayer" to Balentine.

30 Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 109. Fretheim refers to the "divine lament."

31 Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 51.

Hannah. Hannah's situation is instructive for our topic. She is the object of Peninnah's sarcasm as well as the solicitations of Elkanah. On the way to the sanctuary to offer sacrifice he gives her a double portion because "he loved her." Even the solicitousness of Elkanah's question conveys no solace. "Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). The last question was the most evocative, the crux of the issue. Hannah's issue is that without sons, who am I, a forbearing husband notwithstanding? Hannah resists any form of solace that evades her truth, and she eschews silence as a way of bearing her fate.

The Hannah narrative requires attention to two matters: the incident as a possible "paradigm shift," albeit subtle, and the prayer itself. The liturgical background of this shift is complex, apparently due in part to the varieties of worship practices that may have preceded the more Deuteronomic standardization and the way women may have participated in these various rites and places, an issue I note but am not competent to assess.[32]

The possible "paradigm shift" happened when Hannah resorted to silent prayer in the sanctuary yet moved her lips. Gerald Sheppard comments about Eli's puzzle over Hannah's prayer practice,

> The tradition assumes that Eli's inability to overhear the prayer is exceptional rather than normal. As in the case of Job, prayers were not considered in general in the Old Testament to be secretive, silent or private exercises. The capacity of a prayer to be overheard is a characteristic rather than an incidental feature of it.[33]

The possible trajectory of this shift has been drawn out by two other contemporary scholars. The Hebraist Marcia Falk, having noted this innovation, argues that the Hannah narrative will later "become the model for the prayer of the heart" (*b. Ber.* 31b).[34] She further asserts that

---

32 Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Pouring Out Her Soul Before the Lord: Women and Worship in the Old Testament," in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. Brian K. Blount and Lenora Tribbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 8–15.

33 Gerald T. Sheppard, "Enemies and the Politics of Prayer" in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard Horsley, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 381.

34 Marcia Falk, "Reflections on Hannah's Prayer" in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Faucett Columbine, 1994), 98–99.

Hannah's protest to Eli that she was not drunk and wanted to be heard "became the basis for a later rabbinic ruling that one must not let a false charge to oneself go uncorrected—one must not be apathetic in defense of oneself" (*b. Ber.* 31b).[35]

Cynthia Ozick argues in a similar way.[36] Hannah lived before the time the House of the Lord had become a House of Prayer. In doing so, Ozick avers a new understanding of God: God is not only the commander of events but also the listener to the still small voice, a voice capable in spite of its weakness to influence an event (the opening of her womb).

Given that Hannah was of questionable value because of her closed womb and thus reduced to instrumentality (reproductive function), when Hannah mustered the *chutzpah* to enter the sanctuary and confront the Almighty using her own words, Ozick says that "intrinsicness declares itself against instrumentality."[37]

The content of Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 1:10–11) is strikingly similar to the words of Exodus 2:23–24. Hannah: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will *look upon* the misery of your servant, and *remember* me, and *not forget* your servant, but will give to your servant a child, then . . ." Exodus: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God *heard* their groaning and God *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God *looked* upon Israel and God *took notice* of them" (emphasis mine). If so, Hannah forged a combination of patterned prayer and personal prayer. Her prayer, having some of the language of *a credo* (I believe), was her petition but was based on a history. Hannah forms an argument from history for a new history in which she would be the chief beneficiary of this new exodus. She prayed the story even as the story prayed her. Hannah was practicing *theologia prima*, quoting its sources and identifying her "innovative" act as perfectly in line with her ancestors who prayed their faith that God heard, looked, took notice, and remembered his covenant with the ancestors.

Previously in this prayer I had noted Fretheim's observation that Moses, by praying, participated in the anguish of God as much as he presented the anguish of the people before God. In a somewhat analogous fashion Ronald Wallace suggests a similar vocation for Hannah. Averring that she was troubled by the sanctuary corruption as reflected in the behavior

35 Falk, "Reflections on Hannah's Prayer," 98-99.

36 Cynthia Ozick, "Hannah and Elkanah: Torah as the Matrix for Feminism," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, 89.

37 Ozick, "Hannah and Elkanah," 90.

of Eli's sons, she found a reason to reorient her anguish over her childlessness. If she had a child who became a prophet like Moses, he could rebuke corruption and properly set forth God's word. Wallace, taking note that the custom of the day prohibited such a role to her, argues that in praying for a son she was doing so vicariously as if in the indirect way of motherhood she too was entering into conflict with God's opponents and becoming prophetic. In so doing she knew the anguish of a prophet. Living with God meant some understanding of God's anguish.[38]

But the system has problems with too many Hannahs around. In trying to say too much, offering too many explanations based on the axioms of the system, it turns out in the end to be too axiomatic and, at least perceptibly, contradictory. Sometimes *theologia secunda* ends up serving the system rather than the people who are trying to believe or the God who is to be believed.

Hannah's *theologia prima* was short on axioms but long on anticipation that vindication was a prayable issue. Her primordial encounter with God, like that of Moses, did not render her speechless. If anything, it made speech a necessity. Is prayer perhaps God's own speech back to God in a human voice?

A pedagogical move is suggested by Moltmann: "There can be no theology 'after Auschwitz' which does not take up the theology in Auschwitz, i.e., the prayers and cries of the victims."[39] Several recent works demonstrate praying a theology "in" some situation.[40] Readers of these texts will notice an intertestamental as well as intratestamental use of

---

[38] Ronald Wallace, *Hannah's Prayer and Its Answer: An Exposition for Bible Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 6–8.

[39] Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 29.

[40] Marcia Sachs Littell, ed., *Liturgies on the Holocaust* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1986); James Melvin Washington, ed., *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Singing a New Song: On Old Testament and Latin American Psalmody," *Word & World 5* (1997): 155–167; Stephen P. McCutchan, "Framing Our Pain: The Psalms in Worship," *The Christian Ministry* (July–August, 1995): 18–20; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women–Church: Theology and Practice* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985). McCutchen illustrates a narrative and canonical coherence in liturgical use by suggesting Pss 42 and 43 to parents of critically ill children; of reading Ps 39 and the story of Peter's denial as coordinates in the case of suicide; and lastly of reading Ps 88 and 2 Sam 13:1–22 (the rape of Tamar) as a way of dealing with rape and abuse homiletically. Ruether reproduces a rite of healing contextualized in the midst of friends. The rite is a narrative paraphrase of Ps 22 and is reproduced from Del Martin's *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1976), 1–5.

texts, characters, and stories as a way of praying the story to which and by which one is disciplined, as well as allowing the story to pray through the intercessor. Primordial theological thinking is doing its theological work in the only method it knows: prayer, but it is prayer rooted in sources and relying on the canonical coherence of the narratives used.

Conclusion

No matter the marginalizations in life, whether vulnerability-based or value-based, they cannot be put on hold, whether in seminary or in ministry. But such marginalization need not put life on hold. Yet while marginalizations may never be fully remedied, they can be related to the larger perspective of the canonical text, namely, that God is to be trusted. At times one must take another's word for it. Prayer thus is always in company.

God can be lived with but not easily. A grave strenuosity of faith is required to do primordial thinking where thinking and praying seem to merge. When the primordial thinker is tempted to quit thinking, it is probably not that the questions are too hard but that the one thinking/praying is afraid to pray his/her thoughts about God to God. But the fearful can be fortified by the canonical narrative that is populated with persons who can quote God to God, not to blaspheme but to trust more deeply. When one's imaging systems preclude honest prayer, let the narratives embolden and equip one to pray biblically so that the faith in the God of Abraham, Moses, Hannah, and Jesus is allowed to mature in the way it acts in love. If faith does not act in love, it will not mature into a deeper life with God.

An Interview with Dr. C. John Weborg

Conducted by Rob Peterson with Paul Koptak

Dr. John Weborg has spent his academic career thinking about the intersection of theology and spiritual formation and was instrumental in encouraging the start of the spiritual direction training program at North Park Theological Seminary. Rob Peterson developed the following interview questions based upon Weborg's article "Living with God" (p. 3). This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Rob Peterson (RP): John, thank you so much for taking time to talk together about spiritual direction in light of your article "Living with God." You reflect on how seminarians are prepared for ministry by increasing their capacity to "experience experience." As you say, experience provides the material to work on the life task of living with God. I'd like to explore with you themes related to the ministry of spiritual direction that you highlight in this article. My first question is about your own experience of spiritual direction. How did these relationships of companionship support you in living with God, which is not always easy, as you say?

C. John Weborg (CJW): When I read that first question, I had to stop a bit because I never had a spiritual director, but I had an experience of it with my confirmation pastor. One morning I asked my mother how people knew they were Christian. She wasn't prepared to answer that before I left for country school that morning, so when I got home, she

told me she had made an appointment for me to talk with my pastor. He is the one who confirmed me, so she took me to see Pastor Carlson, and I told him about my question, how one knows that they are Christian. He looked at me. And this was his question: "Do you believe in Jesus?" And I said yes. Then he quoted Romans 10:9-10: "If you declare with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with your heart you believe and are justified, and with your mouth you profess your faith and are saved." That was his answer to me; he never asked, "Do you want to make sure?" or anything like that. It was this very simple direct quotation of Romans 10:9-10.

I thought about it later in life, because I read a piece by a German theologian whose name is Werner Elert. And this is the sentence that struck me: "The onset of faith is a pure mathematical point." Period. And I've meditated on that statement. "The onset of faith is a pure mathematical point" apparently means we can't really trace out causation and the steps of how things are refined. So that was one of the most important sentences I've ever read, because I don't know that it explains, but it certainly explored my question to the place of my satisfaction. Elert is a Lutheran and that quotation from Romans 10:9-10 comes as a promise. In Lutheran theology, promises are for the creation of faith. So that you make a promise, and it is the creation of faith. That conversation with Pastor Carlson was probably one of the most helpful, and one of the shortest I've ever had. That was a piece of spiritual direction that was very significant to me. I don't know if you could use the term "solve the problem," but it certainly brought strength and security to my life. And remember this, I was really quite young. He also said, "John, you don't trust your feelings. You trust the Word." Well, that was a big help.

I've also quoted the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who said (paraphrased): "Learn to love the questions. Someday you might live yourself into the answers." Open-ended listening is one way to love the questions. Listening is a form of giving language to the mute. Normally listening is taking the sounds from another or receiving it. We say, "I hear it." But listening as a form of giving has other nuances to it; to listen is to give the speaker space and time. Listening is a way that a listener gives himself or herself to the speaker. The more difficult the speech is, the self-giving of the listener is a gift of presence, especially when the speaker feels thwarted in some way. The listening of the listener conveys a presence not only to the speaker but for the speaker—sometimes in the face of embarrassing silence. It is a gift of friendship and companionship, even with silence.

It confers freedom to the speaker who may feel silenced, perhaps by fear that what is said would be offensive, or not understood. The listener gives language to the mute by inviting speech, even if that speech is troubled, inundated with pauses, or on the verge of retreat into silence. The listener by listening invites speech as a way to clarity and community, and thus offers a way to mitigate loneliness.

RP: In your article you highlight the complex and hazardous ways that God is imagined or portrayed by parents, school, or church. How might spiritual direction address the unhelpful or burdensome images of God that people carry in their hearts or lived experience?

CJW: I think we help people become students of the images of God. If you look up Isaiah 66:13 or Matthew 23:37, there are maternal references to God, that God nurtures us in our life. Another example is Isaiah 49:15: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you," says God. Just that one maternal reference of a mother holding a child, nursing, is a form of security. I think those maternal issues are very helpful because, for example in Matthew 23:37, Jesus says, "As a hen gathers her chicks, so I gather you." These maternal references speak of security and provision; just as the mother provides nurture for the child, so God provides nurture for us as well as protection and security.

RP: You've named the maternal images of God that are present in Scripture. But as you've interacted with students and others, so many images are not helpful, or that people cling to: a disappointed parent, or an angry parent, or a distant God. What reflections do you have about how spiritual directors might help people move away from unhelpful images toward more positive images?

CJW: My late wife, Lois, and I belonged to the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada because she was a musician. At one of the annual conferences we attended, a workshop conducted by a Scottish Presbyterian was on the Calvinistic tradition of singing the Psalms. The leader spoke about the Psalms engaging real life and introduced Psalm 88 that is pure lament. He spoke of another time when a member of his class, a Roman Catholic, said about Psalm 88: "If I would have known that I could talk to God that way, I could have gone back to mass long ago." I think we have to look at those texts that give us permission to

speak our mind to God—not as an act of unbelief, but as a matter of deeper trust, which is what happened to this person. If you've read Psalm 88 recently you know it's not a very pretty psalm.

RP: I like that you're inviting reflection on how we welcome or resist these images of God in Scripture. You say that in some ways education and spiritual formation are one long process of crisis stewardship. What crises have you had to steward? How did these experiences shape your life? And how did spiritual direction or spiritual companionship assist you in stewarding these experiences?

CJW: Well, the crisis I would refer to was when I was afflicted with polio when I was a junior in high school. It was a year before Jonas Salk developed the vaccine, and I was paralyzed totally from my hips on down and my abdominal muscles were also affected. I was hospitalized for ten weeks. I had to go through physical therapy, and I've never had pain equal to that in my life. We had to stretch loose all of the paralyzed muscles. The goal was to get my legs ninety degrees perpendicular to my body lying down, and that stretching was extremely painful. I don't know that I had anyone that I really talked to, except my parents who visited me almost every day. And when they came to the hospital, they couldn't come into the room. They had to visit at the door and because it was an epidemic, we were three patients to a room. So sometimes you had three parents trying to visit at the door. I mean, it was a lot to work with and to work through.

Now there's another part to this crisis. I don't think I used that word at the time, but when I was a student at North Park, I had to go to an orthopedic specialist because of scoliosis of the spine. And I had to take the elevated train downtown. Later, it came back to me—what an effect someone like me had on people who wanted to get on the el because I had to go up the steps to get on the elevated platform. But I could only go one step at a time and had to hold on to the railing, so I didn't fall, and I don't know how many people I blocked or slowed up. But that later became a real cause of reflection on the way we talk about people who are poor or people who are ill equipped, intellectually or physically, how they are said to become—and these are awful words—a drain on society. How they hold up progress, how they interfere. Just think of the controversy it was when towns had to tear out their curbs and put in wheelchair access. Of course that increased the cost, or maybe it raised taxes. I've replayed this memory of how the whole experience of polio

had a sociological dimension that I had no idea about at the time.

RP: In the article you invite us to see that the difficult hardships we face need to be stewarded well. Could you say more about what that stewardship looks like? And why would we steward hardships rather than just run from them?

CJW: Because you can't flee—I mean, I couldn't. And so you learn to live with them, but you also learn that they may not be in their final form when you first experience them so that you have a chance for growth, for healing, and for development, which takes time. It takes discipline, and it takes effort, but you don't make up your mind about that before the time. You leave that future open, because when you've seen yourself mature a bit and you've watched the development as I did, you see that you can make progress, although you do not know where it will end, or if it will. But at the same time, you are encouraged to keep at this work of healing and development.

RP: Were there moments in this journey with polio and your challenge with scoliosis that you would say that you had a sense of the closeness of God, a sense of God anywhere in this story for you?

CJW: I think at the time, I wasn't asking those questions. That's the most honest answer I can give you. But later in life, I could look back on it and see the work of God as the days went on. I think in spiritual direction we are helping people look back over their lives and see what derivatives they get out of that. They might be surprised at how much they find that God was with them at a particular time.

RP: Life, it seems, leads everyone to moments of mystery, paradox, or heartbreak. At these moments, casual talk about God is unhelpful, as you say in your article. What is needed, you write, is an invitation to talk with God—God as subject, not subject matter. What do you think are helpful postures and practices from our pietistic tradition that could help us in living with God during times of confusion or pain?

CJW: We have something like a conventicle in our church, but it's specialized as a grief recovery group. It's a place where people can openly discuss their grief and their experience of death. Then we have sermon discussion groups. We have a prayer chain where people can call a spe-

cial number and make known a special need that is personal or family based. Congregants can call that number and become intercessors for the need there. We have Bible study and work groups for men and women. What we have tried to do is to open up various spaces where people can engage their life with each other, using each other as a support. By making known the needs that are present then, the church starts to function as a support for people. We're more than just a passive listening group; we're an engaging group.

RP: You have been a student of Pietism and our pietistic history for many years. In your article you root so many of your observations in the text of Scripture. A pietistic habit, no doubt. But in addition to Scripture, your perspectives on Pietism's influence on the Evangelical Covenant Church has included deeper investigation into the mothers and fathers of our tradition. In the last few years, you've shared with spiritual direction students your interest in Lina Sandell. Can you say a little bit about her and why you think her life may be of relevance to Covenanters and to our topic?

CJW: Well, I don't know how much is known about her. Lina's father was a Lutheran pastor, so she grew up engaged with the church. At the age of twelve she had an illness that made her identify with the daughter of Jairus in the Gospels. She experienced healing and regained the ability to walk. And then, when she was twenty-six, her father was on a boat and swept off the deck by a massive wave and drowned. She married Carl Oskar Berg in 1867, and they had a child that died at birth. And so, she had many experiences of suffering.

Her dad, because of his education, had taught her three different languages: English, German, and French. She read an extensive amount of American literature and translated American gospel songs into Swedish. She was well equipped to engage life beyond her own self and her own suffering. If you study her hymnody, you'll find the theme of friendship with God that has become a major part of the theology of the early Mission Friends (who are the ancestors of today's Covenanters)—joy and eternity are often found in the last stanza of the hymns. She had a real sensitivity to nature. It's interesting how many of her hymns take on nature, as, for example, "In the Springtime Fair" (*The Covenant Hymnal*, #340).[1] Her husband was a businessman who went bankrupt, and there

[1] Hymn references in this interview are from *The Covenant Hymnal*: *A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1996).

were accusations of mismanagement which were later cleared up. So, her experience was not only that of illness, but of the vicissitudes of married life—having to work with her husband so that they got themselves back on their feet. Lina went through an awful lot in her life that that found its way into our history.

RP: Several times in "Living with God" you make the case that Jesus was formed through the Psalms. Through them, he prayed his real experiences. You suggest the importance of knowing the faith of Jesus, not just having a belief in Jesus. Would you say more about that?

CJW: I think there are times in spiritual direction when people can actually encounter how human Jesus was, and how the Bible is not ashamed of that. Jesus said on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How many times has that been asked by ordinary Christian people? And now we have Jesus praying it. That's one example. There's another in the book of Hebrews 2:11–15; 5:7–9, and 6:10. This is Hebrews 2:10: "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered." Now I don't know that we really pay much attention to this statement that the pioneer of our salvation should be made perfect through what he suffered—that both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. Now here's Hebrews 5:7–9:

> During the days of Jesus's life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he had suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

There are more, but when you're working with people in spiritual direction, it's fitting to say that Jesus prayed and asked the same kinds of things that you are asking.

We read that he was made perfect through suffering. If my memory of the Greek text is right, the word for "perfect" there means complete. It is one way to show people that Jesus endured suffering the same way that we do. If the question comes up, "What does it mean to be made perfect through suffering?" we can get away from the moralistic understanding

of that to the idea of completion. I think you could explore the direct need of what people are going through; that it is the source of so much pain. But are other things happening too? Are they learning something new in terms of growth? I find it very interesting that these texts are in the Bible, but they are seldom if ever touched in church, so people are ill-equipped to know about Jesus going through exactly what we do. He identifies with us because he was enduring all of those tests.

RP: That is a beautiful way to frame how Christ is our model and can walk with us, no matter what's going on in our story. You end the article this way: "God can be lived with, but not easily." Would you say more about that statement and how the ministry of spiritual direction could be a rich resource for anyone who finds resonance with the hardship of relating to God?

CJW: If those texts we just finished reading are looked at carefully, we might ask if or when we have felt silenced, not only by our experience, but silenced by God, as though God is anti-human. Remembering the person who encountered Psalm 88 and said, "If I had known I could talk to God that way, I could have returned to mass much sooner," I think we need to arm—if that's a good word—people with some key texts so that when they encounter life at its worst, they're able to speak about how bad their life is and that God will not reject them. I think that's one of the key things that I've learned from listening to people and reading these texts—that we are able to speak honestly with God, because when you speak honestly, you're speaking in faith. Not in faithlessness, but you're speaking in faith because your honesty and integrity go together. That's what I would want to work on.

There's a hymn in *The Covenant Hymnal*, #86, "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry." It speaks to God's presence with us. "In the middle ages of your life, not too old and not too young, I'll be there to guide you through the night, to complete what I've begun." This is a powerful hymn, and it speaks in contemporary language to people.

Speaking of contemporary concerns, I don't read a whole lot of magazines, but I do take *Time*. In the issue for March 11, 2024, there are three articles that could help spiritual directors understand the forces that are going on in the world: 1) "Why Are We More Exhausted Than Ever?" 2) "20-Somethings Lost Something in the Pandemic," a wonderful attempt to understand the youth culture, and 3) "The New Anti-Semitism." Spiritual directors need to keep their ears to the ground to know what

the people they talk with are coping with. It's important to be able to identify these cultural forces that are so powerful.

RP: I would love to give you the last word of this interview.

CJW: It might sound a little bit esoteric, but when I was writing my dissertation, I saw that these German Pietists had an uncanny way of speaking about the role of fear. Johann Albrecht Bengel wrote about two different kinds of fear. One of them could be translated "delicate fear." That is when the person has a due appreciation of the costliness of grace. We then live our lives carefully so that we don't take the grace of God for granted and think, well, God is gracious and I'm a sinner anyway, so I can just live, and I'll ask God for forgiveness. Then there's something he would refer to as "distressing fear." Fear becomes disconcerting and scrupulous when it roots itself in our unworthiness and uncertainty about God's gracious will. When delicate fear is present, one has taken seriously God's gracious will to redeem people as they are.

In "Amazing Grace," we sing, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." I have no idea if church people have ever thought about what it is they're being taught about fear when it comes to grace, because the common image is something free and God just extends it to us. This whole discussion of fear is interesting and important. It teaches us not to take grace for granted. At the same time, it teaches us not to magnify our sin. That is a real act of humility, because we could do that as an excuse for not wanting to connect with God. We have a hymn by Lina Sandell, "Hide Not Your Face," #769, that incorporates fear. "Grant, then, O Lord, that I fear and adore you." Those two words, that I fear and adore, have a long history in Lutheran Pietism. I've always been struck by the measure of fear, not as something bad, but as having a very important role to play.

RP: Would you make the connection between this thoughtful articulation of two types of fear with those who sit with people as a director? How might this conceptualization of fear be a resource for a spiritual director?

CJW: If we take the word "fear," we can say that it asks us to take God seriously, that God promises forgiveness of sins. And if we start magnifying our sins, then we're getting into distressing fear, because we're putting off the promise of God and dwelling on ourselves and the way we perceive ourselves. Then that fear has done its work in an unhealthy

way because it has turned us away from God's promise.

RP: John, you have been a gift to so many and it's been a delight just to listen to you reflect on several of these themes. Thank you for your work and thank you for your ministry to so many people in the Covenant and beyond.

CJW: You are welcome.

We thank God for our brother John Weborg, for his faithful ministry over many years, and his clarity of thought. We are blessed by his positive contributions to the work of spiritual direction, pastoral care, and theological reflection. May God continue to bless him and watch over him as he navigates increasing challenges. May he experience joy, peace, and strength through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Gift of Spiritual Direction

Rob Peterson, director of the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

> One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus (Luke 5:17–19, NIV).[1]

It is a beautiful and life-changing gift to have a friend or companion carry us into the presence of Christ. The story of the paralyzed man in Luke 5 captures the gift of grace-filled friendships.[2] The story of four unnamed friends unfolds quickly without a lot of details.[3] We don't know if the friends were planning to carry their paralyzed companion or whether it was a spontaneous act. We don't know if the paralyzed man was willing or resistant. What we do know, is that he was lowered down from the ceiling into the presence of Jesus, and Jesus did what Jesus had done so many times; he responded with grace and power toward a person in need. It is a remarkable story of grace and hope.

Everyone needs friends who will carry them to Christ. For every person facing life's hardships or troubles, be it addiction, despair, broken relationships, or burdensome secrets, having compassionate friends who are motivated to get us close to Jesus is a welcomed gift. Central to the story, however, and of central importance to this article on the gift of spiritual

---

1 Scriptural references used are from the New International Version of the Bible.
2 N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 60.
3 Mk 2:3 tells us four men carried the paralyzed man.

direction, is the truth that the four people who carried their friend to Jesus were simply witnesses of grace. Their work was not healing a paralyzed man, but rather, digging a hole in the roof. Their faith, commended by Jesus, was the belief that Jesus had the insight and power to address the life and paralysis of the man on the mat.[4] The friends watched grace at work; they were witnesses of a miracle.

The ministry of spiritual direction parallels the story of the four friends in one central way. At its core, spiritual direction is the compassionate act of holding a directee before God and then giving witness to how God is present. Through the gift of listening and Holy Spirit attentiveness, the director becomes a witness of the movement of God's grace in the life of the directee. Spiritual directors speak often about the secondary role they play in a direction session, drawing attention to the important work of the Holy Spirit who surrounds and interacts with those who come for direction. Lucy Abbott Tucker rightly emphasizes the important distinction that spiritual directors are more like witnesses of God's work than they are helpers. She writes, "I think it is very helpful to remember that as spiritual directors we are not about helping people but rather are about being present to and privileged to witness a directee's relationship with the Sacred in this very moment."[5] Once the paralyzed man was before Jesus, the friends became witnesses of a sacred and holy moment.

In the summer of 2024, the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction (the Weborg Center) welcomed its twentieth cohort of students. We celebrate the twenty-year history of guiding women and men in the art and practice of spiritual direction, a profoundly beautiful and important ministry of listening in the world. The Center for Spiritual Direction, as it was then called, had its beginning in 2005 when the first cohort of students gathered to learn the art and practice of direction. Many people labored to give birth to the Center, but in a fitting ceremony at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare Hotel in July 2011, the Center was renamed in honor of C. John Weborg, who was instrumental in bringing spiritual formation perspectives and practices to North Park Theological

---

4 Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 89. Although the central focus of the pericope is the conflict between the authority of Jesus and that of the Pharisees, Evans points out that Jesus is impressed with all the effort and trouble the friends went through to bring the paralyzed man to him.

5 Lucy Abbott Tucker, *Spiritual Direction Supervision: Principles, Practices, and Storytelling* (Bellevue, WA: SDI Press, 2020), 62.

Seminary.[6] Since the Weborg Center's beginning, spiritual direction has been used by God to lovingly heal and transform individual lives in the Evangelical Covenant Church and beyond. We celebrate with everyone who sought out and found a spiritual director, and with each student who graduated with a certificate in direction, recognizing the beautiful and sacred gift that is opened as two people sit in a spiritual direction session together. This article will describe five ways spiritual direction is a gift to individuals and to the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Cultivating Awareness of God

There are many definitions of spiritual direction, but they all share an important theological center: God is faithfully and lovingly present to each person in every dimension of life.[7] God is in all things, as the Ignatian phrase captures so concisely. Spiritual direction assumes God is moving toward people to bring about comfort, forgiveness, joy, healing, insight, and peace. Like the four faithful friends in the gospel story mentioned earlier, directors are given a front row seat to the work of God; they are witnesses of grace. However, discerning the presence of God and cultivating greater awareness of God are not easily accomplished. Certain conditions and postures are necessary for noticing God's fingerprints in one's life. Although discernment can be difficult, it is important to remember that the lack of awareness of God's presence doesn't shift the central theological premise of spiritual direction. Because God is always with God's people, every occasion offers us glimpses of God's nearness and can be an opportunity to encounter God. Julian of Norwich, a mystic from the 14th century, captures this beautifully:

> *Take it* GENERALLY*, and behold the graciousness of the Lord God as He sheweth to thee: for it is more worship to God to behold Him in all than in any special thing.* And therewith I

[6] Many people were involved in starting what is now the C. John Weborg Center: Richard Carlson, Paul Bramer, Helen Cepero, Ellen Kogstad, Stephen Graham, Dan Pietrzyk, Paul Koptak, David Kersten, Carol Lawson, Sally Johnson, Jay Phelan, and others.

[7] As an example: "Spiritual direction is the exploration of a person's spiritual path with someone trained in listening, deep reflection, and discernment." Teresa Blythe, *Spiritual Direction 101: The Basics of Spiritual Guidance* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2018), 2. Or: "Spiritual Direction is the simple gift of sacred Presence offered to another providing a gentle but tenacious encouragement to open fully to God's loving Presence and to co-discern with that person God's activity in every aspect of life." Definition provided by Jeff Imbach, "What Is Spiritual Direction?" Soul Stream, 2024. https://soulstream.org/what-is-spiritual-direction/#.

> learned that it is more worship to God to know all-thing [sic] in general, than to take pleasure in any special thing. And if I should do wisely according to this teaching, I should not only be glad for nothing in special, but I should not be greatly distressed for no manner of thing: for ALL *shall be well.* For the fulness of joy is to behold God in *all*: for by the same blessed Might, Wisdom, and Love, that He made all-thing [sic], to the same end our good Lord leadeth it continually, and thereto Himself shall bring it; and when it is time we shall see it.[8]

"For the fullness of joy is to behold God in all" is, I believe, Julian's way of stating both the longing of the human heart and the goal of the Christian life: the wonderful and transforming goal of learning to be aware of God at every turn. Cultivating this awareness is anything but easy.

Life happens fast. Schedules fill up, commitments are made, tasks must be completed. At any given moment, most people in North America feel they have way too many things going on in their lives. As John Mark Comer suggests, we suffer from a hurried sickness.[9] Living at this frenetic pace is not conducive to cultivating attentiveness to God. Elijah's encounter with the Lord highlights the need to be attentive to the quiet gentle whisper of God (1 Kings 19:11–13). Similarly, Psalm 46 invites the people of God to be still in order to know that God is God (Psalm 46:10). Why? Stillness is necessary to notice the subtle and gentle movements of God. Again, the psalmist describes the importance of moving toward a calmness and quietude, like a weaned child at its mother's breast (Psalm 131:2). The message is clear: God can be known, but certain conditions are more conducive to hearing and knowing God, and a hurried life is not one of them.

It is in the context of the unfortunate cultural affirmation of hurriedness that spiritual direction can be a gift—a countercultural gift at that. The very act of setting up a one-hour appointment with a spiritual director, someone who will invite us into a sacred and unhurried time, can

---

8 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian of Norwich* (Project Gutenberg, 2016), chap. XXXV, 71, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION. Original author's italics.

9 John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2019), 19. Comer acknowledges that the phrase "ruthless elimination of hurry" comes from Dallas Willard, and the phrase "hurried sickness" comes from his mentor John Ortberg.

offer the weary soul space to linger. Lingering or loitering with a spiritual director is good for the soul because the soul needs a safe and loving space to speak its truth. Parker Palmer describes the soul's timidity this way:

> The soul is like a wild animal, tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If you want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of our eye, but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.[10]

Resistance to slowing down may rise quickly in the directee as she feels busyness pulsating in her veins. Given time, however, the gift of a holy sacred place and pace with a director can help the directee settle into the questions and longings her soul wants most to name and explore, matters that never get acknowledged in the rush of living life so fast.

Spiritual directors, then, play an important role in slowing life down. Directors can guide individuals to notice the movement of God in their heart through invitations to pause or savor an experience, through the invitation to sit in silence for a moment, or through a timely question. Noticing the subtle and gentle movements of God takes practice. Like weak muscles need strengthening through simple exercises, cultivating an awareness of God's presence in all of life starts simply through the act of taking time to reflect on how God is already present. Ignatian spirituality offers discernment and strengthening exercise in a spiritual practice called the Examen.

The spiritual practice of Examen was developed by Ignatius of Loyola to help monks review their day, but more important, to strengthen their awareness of God throughout the day. The movements of the prayer are rather simple but together create deeper awareness of God-given desires and feelings in one's life.[11] The Examen prayer begins with seeking *illu-*

---

[10] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2004), 58–59.

[11] Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 52.

mination from God as one reviews the day; then giving thanks for the gifts of the day; followed by prayerfully *reviewing* the day's various feelings and desires; next, an honest *confession* of one's failures and sins of the day; ending with a *recommitment* to live a renewed life for the day ahead. Spiritual directors offer this practice to directees knowing that the regular practice of it bears the fruit of being more "God-centered by observing the moments when we are or are not so." Directors may offer other spiritual practices, but central to their work is the invitation they offer to each directee to slow down and pay attention to the all-embracing presence of a loving God.[12]

Living from the Heart

Henri Nouwen, one of the twentieth century's most well-known Christian writers, movingly writes:

> Wouldn't it be good to increase God's joy by letting God find me and carry me home and celebrate my return with the angels? Wouldn't it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly? Questions like these raise a real issue: that of my own self-concept. Can I accept that I am worth looking for? Do I believe that there is a real desire in God to simply be with me?[13]

Nouwen goes on to suggest many people live their lives "never fully sure that they are loved as they are."[14] The biblical truth about God's love is common knowledge among God's people, but it is rare to find a person who believes and lives from that center of profound love. Family of origin issues, wounds, sufferings, and other challenges can erode the knowledge that God looks upon each person with great love. Spiritual directors are fully aware of this tragedy and offer each directee a warm welcome and a confidential place in the hope of embodying a love that reflects the love of God.

Embarking on the journey toward a more expansive acceptance of being a beloved child of God can be painful. Past negative images of God or hurtful experiences in the church trap people in unhealthy pictures of God. But the tenacious love of a director, one who listens intently and

---

12 Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 85.

13 Henri J. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal: A Story of Homecoming* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 107.

14 Nouwen, *The Return*, 108.

points to more truthful images of God, one who points to loving and life-affirming images of God, can help dislodge a directee from the past. This movement of the heart happens in part because the core posture of spiritual direction is to lovingly open space for individuals to talk about the joys and challenges of one's relationship with God. The unconditional acceptance of a director certainly contributes to the experience of being loved, but the loving gift and skill of a director offers an experience of love itself. Reflecting on the work of direction, Cathy Hardy is convinced that love undergirds all that directors do.

> As I listen to others, the listening is based on a foundation of trust in love. Love knows this person's story more than I ever will. Love undergirds this life and is attentive to things I will never understand. I am not the healer. I am not the fixer. I am not the magician. I am the one attentive, trusting that we are listening together to Love to guide the conversation, the way in which a life may unfold before us.[15]

More significant still is how the practice of meeting with the director can nurture a way of life centered on the heart. R. Paul Stevens writes about the three centers of Christian living: orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Orthodoxy, which is the ordering of life based on right belief, has been Christianity's chief concern for much of its history. Orthopraxy is the important call to emphasize right living or right practices. This center needs little explanation. Christians are implored time and time again in Scripture to act justly, to seek mercy, and to love others. The third center of Christian living, orthopathy, is less discussed. Living from the heart or with the passions of the heart (orthopathy) is that way of Christian faith sustained by an open-hearted posture to God, others, and the world. Living from the heart is living mindful of the image of God residing in each person. Living from the heart, as mentioned earlier, is living from the beautiful truth that we are the beloved of God. Embracing orthopathic living balances orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and highlights a Christian life centered in the warmth of heart experiences of God, as much as being centered in right belief or action.[16] Spiritual directors work and listen at the level of the heart and invite their clients to do likewise.

---

15 Cathy AJ Hardy, *Walk with Me: Transformation through the Pathway of Spiritual Direction* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2020), 62–63.

16 R. Paul Stevens, "Living Theologically: Toward a Theology of Christian Practice," *Themelios: An International Journal for Theological and Religious Students*, 20, no. 3 (1995): 4–8.

Living from the heart has another dimension that is often reluctantly expressed. Life rarely proceeds in a straight line; rather, it contains moments and even seasons of hardships and sufferings. The gift of spiritual direction is to welcome all of these experiences. Traumatic life events vary in duration and intensity but can be brought into the healing light of the Spirit through a conversation with a director. Spiritual direction can be the place where, maybe for the first time, someone dares to name the pain or even pray the pain of their life. This was true for Anne Richardson, a survivor of sexual trauma.

> Spiritual direction and engaging in spiritual practices with God have been instrumental in changing my life. My spiritual director walked through a dark time with me. She taught me several spiritual practices that drew me into a deeper loving relationship with God.[17]

Additionally, in spiritual direction the director can guide appropriate moments and prayers of lament for the trauma experienced. In spiritual direction people can begin to prayerfully look at the moments when God held them in a painfully dark time. Spiritual direction, it is important to remember, is not therapy, whose primary goals include moving people toward healing and better coping skills. Nonetheless, spiritual direction can be incredibly healing as a directee receives the gift of being heard and understood, and welcomes, even if momentarily, the light of God's presence into the pain they have known. By God's grace, direction can foster living from the heart, a way of life that contemplates and welcomes God's loving presence into each beautiful or difficult moment.

Finding Meaning in Unique Experiences

Spiritual directors are trained to listen deeply to all the experiences people bring to a direction session. Some of these experiences are mundane, while other experiences can be rooted in complex relationships or the challenges of work. Other times an experience is so sublime or unusual that it is difficult to describe, let alone understand. Who can we talk to about these unique experiences? When Jacob wakes from a night of wrestling with an angel he proclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of

[17] Anne Richardson, *Spiritual Direction with Survivors of Sexual Trauma* (San Diego, CA: Anne Richardson Publishing, 2023), 5.

heaven" (Genesis 28:16–17). In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples of Jesus are mystified by seeing Christ transfigured while in prayer. "While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29). The disciples' response to the voice from the cloud proclaiming, "This is my son, whom I have chosen, listen to him" was to keep everything to themselves, and they kept it a secret (Luke 9:36). These mystical experiences are part of a long list of unusual divine encounters recorded in the Scriptures.

Most Christians have mystical experiences to some degree. These experiences are beyond the rational or physical. For example, a woman walking alone outdoors can be interrupted by a sense that she is not alone; she feels a palpable Presence. Or an adolescent girl awakens from a dream knowing that a word from beyond has been offered to her. What are we to make of these moments? Are these encounters normal? Christian mystics of the past highlight the normalcy of special or unique encounters with God. Jason Baxter, in his *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, shares an example from Hildegard of Bingen.

> As way of example, one of her first images, as wild as anything concocted by Picasso or Chagall, is of a mountain of iron, with one seated upon it who is so bright that Hildegard said she was blinded when she looked upon this figure with the eye of her heart. From this bright one a river of sparks flows forth and then pours out onto a figure covered in eyes who stands next to a child wearing simple garments. After describing this vision, Hildegard explains: the mountain represents the "strength and stability of the eternal Kingdom of God, which no fluctuation of mutual ability can destroy"; the bright one is the one who "rules the whole world with celestial divinity and the brilliance of unfading serenity, but is incomprehensible to human minds"; and the figure covered in eyes represents the "fear of the Lord," which stands in God's presence with humility and gazes on the Kingdom of God, surrounded by the clarity of a good and just intention, exercising her seal and stability among humans.[18]

There are even more extreme examples from other mystics, but Baxter's

[18] Jason M. Baxter, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Recovering the Wildness of the Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 21–22.

purpose in writing is captured well by his subtitle: *Reclaiming the Wildness of the Spiritual Life.* God came to Hildegard in this vision and revealed something of God's wildness and mystery to her heart. Spiritual directors, at least those who have offered direction for a season, gently attempt to come alongside individuals who seek to make sense of these uniquely wild, maybe even crazy, experiences of God. Without judgment, directors encourage people to hold these experiences, helping them wonder, pray, listen, and discern their significance.

The nature of direction is to welcome and unpack the mystery known as God. Mystical experiences can be seen as a gateway leading to more of God, rather than something to be avoided. A wise director can help with the exploration. It should not surprise us that those who live their lives with the triune God should be wooed into the greater mystery of God. God is beyond our understanding yet chooses to reveal himself at times in mysterious ways.[19] One of the good gifts of meeting with a director is that mystical encounters can be examined and their meaning brought to light, even if the meaning is simply a renewed sense that one is not alone in the universe.

Hearing God's Voice in Times of Decision

What is God's will for my life? This question emerges most often at times of transition. Whether it's navigating the shift from high school to university, from university to a first job, or from one city to another, Christians have sought to discern and respond to the will of God. Discerning the will of God, however, has been wrought with oversimplification and problems. The most significant misunderstanding is the belief that God has a single predetermined blueprint for our lives. This unfortunate line of thinking results in attempts to get God to tell us what the blueprint is. Gordon Smith explains,

> In determining the will of God, the focus is on external signs and counsel that help the individual determine God's perfect plan or purpose. Those who take this approach assume that there is one and only one perfect plan for each individual and that this perfect plan can be discovered by an examination of signs, or what are often called open doors.[20]

---

[19] Celtic Christianity describes these mysterious encounters as "thin places"—places where the space between heaven and earth is thin.

[20] Gordon T. Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choice: The Art of Discerning God's Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 16.

A better approach, one that is important to spiritual directors, is to see times of decision or transition as times to listen to the voice of God. Or as Smith says, "There is a whole stream of Christian thought that has consistently affirmed that in times of choice we can and must listen to God. God is present; God does speak; and we can, if we will, hear and respond to his prompting."[21]

Spiritual direction offers God's people a different way to discern God's voice during times of decision.

> Discernment refers to both a posture and a process. As a spiritual posture, discernment entails fostering a contemplative attitude that helps us to spot the presence of God in the concrete events and experiences of ordinary life. To live with a discerning heart is to believe, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed it, that "earth's crammed with heaven" and that God is everywhere to be found in the holy ground of our existence. As a process, discernment involves making decisions in a way that allows God to be a telling influence in our choices. The goal is to refine the acoustics of our heart so that we can better hear the Spirit's guidance.[22]

Almost all spiritual directors who are trained in the historic understanding of spiritual direction are taught the way of discernment as practiced by Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius, attempting to bring renewal to monasteries in the fifteenth century, wrote one of Christianity's premier guides to decision making. Believing that God is present in love at every juncture of life, Ignatius wrote a clear and helpful process for listening to the voice of God. At its core, discerning the spirits, as he called it, is an intentional and thoughtful way to discern which life decision would be most in keeping with God's desires and most in line with a life lived for the glory of God. The gift of direction during times of decision lies in the gift of having a director who can lead a directee through a discernment process.[23]

---

21 Smith, *Listening*, 17.

22 Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 19.

23 Elizabeth Liebert summarizes the foundation of Ignatian discernment as: 1) Seeking your heart's desires, 2) Remembering your personal story, 3) Embracing your role as co-creator, 4) Learning to practice spiritual indifference, 5) Affirming the call to seek more in one's life. Having a spiritual director who can guide this process is a wonderful gift. Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2008), 23.

For anyone who has felt the heaviness of making decisions alone, direction is a wonderful place of companionship in the art of decision making. For anyone who is uncertain about next steps or fearing that a wrong decision may disappoint God or others, spiritual direction offers a wise and gracious place that invites individuals into a posture of freedom and curiosity, knowing God's will is not a single blueprint to be followed, but rather is a joyful exploration of multiple ways of honoring God. This kind of decision making, offered by directors, centers the heart and mind on God and invites the directee to listen for God's voice in moments of decision.

Discovering New Ways to Encounter God

As individuals grow in their faith, they open their heart to new ways of encountering God, partly because of the normal maturing process and partly because of challenging life experiences. Many faith theorists have postulated that faith is anything but static. "A point comes on the spiritual journey, however, when a healing of one's early religious experience must occur in order for wholeness to be realized."[24] Faith expressions and perspectives well suited for adolescence must be shed for a faith more suitable for young adulthood. Faith perspectives that were central during midlife won't necessarily be helpful in the later stages of life. This is not to suggest that every dimension of faith is up for grabs, for there are important tenets of Christian faith and life that should be retained. What is important to highlight, considering the gift of spiritual direction, is that a relationship with a wise and gracious director can be the kind of place where faith and life transitions are navigated with care and where new ways to encounter God can be explored.

Over the last several years many authors have explored the decline of church attendance and the corresponding deconstruction movement.[25] At the heart of this analysis lies a communal angst. Christian behavior across denominational and theological lines has been anything but exemplary, leaving many disheartened and disillusioned with Christian denominations and supposed Christian leaders. The deconstruction movement, however, is not a new thing. Each past generation had to struggle to

---

[24] Janet O. Hagberg and Robert H. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 2005), 3.

[25] See Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Faith Stopped Working and What to Do About It* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2021), or Bradley Jersak, *Out of the Embers: Faith After the Great Deconstruction* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2022).

find new perspectives and practices of what fidelity to Jesus Christ looks like. As stated above, spiritual direction offers a hope-filled relationship for making the transitions from one stage of faith to the next. It is in the confines of a loving and nonjudgmental relationship with a director that individuals can express frustrations, doubts, questions, and longings for something more. Spiritual directors can offer a timely word that encourages people to continue in their faith journey even when the next steps are not clear.

> Our strivings after meaning and purpose, indeed, after God, have brought us to the end of ourselves and our own ability to encompass God. As we stand at the edge of these limits, we face nothing, or so it seems. But paradoxically, just at this point when we face nothing, rather than ourselves or any other elements of creation, we may come to know our creator.[26]

Spiritual nurturer Sandra Cronk highlights the supportive role directors play when people can't seem to find a way forward and are tempted to stop growing or believing.

Spiritual directors can also provide new perspectives on ancient spiritual practices to those feeling stuck in old patterns of relating to God. Scripture reading, prayer, and service have been the main staple of Christian practices over the years. These habits are healthy and enduring, but the gift of direction provides exposure to other spiritual practices. Most spiritual directors have spent years exploring a wide variety of spiritual practices themselves. Healthy directors attend continuing education events frequently and gather resources and ideas that support the work of offering direction to others. A directee who senses the invitation to create a more helpful way of encountering God can ask for suggestions from their spiritual director. This is normal. The options for exploration are almost limitless: welcoming prayer, silence, retreats, examen, fasting, breath prayer, fixed-hour prayer, body prayer, centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and *visio divina*. All these spiritual habits, which have as their goal to nurture connection with God, can be welcomed and practiced. Spiritual direction offers the gift of a director suggesting practices that fit the moment by tailoring the practices to the personality and experiences of the directee. What a gift it is to be on the receiving end of such

---

[26] Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-patterning Toward a Life Centered in God* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publishing, 1991), 46.

particularized soul care.

The Gift of Spiritual Direction in the Covenant

Spiritual direction, as described above, has the potential to positively impact a person's sense of well-being and their experiences of God. When done regularly, the direction experience sets the directee on a path of increased awareness of God in daily life. More specifically, in the Evangelical Covenant Church, spiritual direction has contributed to clergy flourishing. In the spring of 2021, the Weborg Center conducted a survey of Covenant clergy.[27] The purpose of the survey was to examine the experiences of pastors in spiritual direction. Two hundred and forty-four Covenant pastors responded to the survey (57% male and 43% female) and offered helpful insight into how spiritual direction contributed to their well-being. Of the 244 pastors who took the survey, 44% were currently in direction, 43% had engaged in direction in the past, and 13% never had a director. Those in direction had been seeing a director on average for four years, often meeting monthly for their sessions. When asked about the benefits of being in direction, pastors shared that spiritual direction nurtures emotional and spiritual health, provides encouragement and strength for ministry, and offers the gift of being heard and the gift of a sacred place to talk about God. Additionally, when asked about how spiritual direction helped them navigate hard seasons in life, pastors responded by saying that direction helped them find God in their pain, provided comfort and companionship, and provided a new perspective on suffering. Last, when Covenant pastors were asked what led them into direction, many shared that it was another Covenant colleague who encouraged them to try it. Others stated that a free session of direction at one of the Covenant's yearly events offered them an opportunity, and some shared that a longing for a closer relationship with God drew them into spiritual direction. As the survey data suggests, spiritual direction is a life-giving and sustaining spiritual practice for many Covenant pastors.

As the director of the Weborg Center, I can affirm the findings of the survey. In the last two decades I have observed Covenant pastors becoming increasingly aware of and benefiting immensely from meeting with a spiritual director. This happens through the work of training spiritual directors, through the resources made available through Sustaining

[27] The survey was designed in partnership with Dr. Elizabeth Gray (PhD) of North Park University and was distributed to Covenant clergy with the help of the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors and the Covenant Ministerium.

Pastoral Excellence and Thriving in Ministry grants, and through the birth and growth of regional networks of Covenant spiritual directors. I should add, spiritual direction may not be for every Covenant pastor, but the countless stories I have heard along with the stories shared by the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors (ACSD) lends credibility to the belief that spiritual direction functions as an important and beautiful gift in the soul care of Covenant pastors.

There is, however, important work still to do. At the Covenant Midwinter conference in January 2024, the ACSD met to pray and talk about spiritual direction in the Covenant. Two themes emerged as important areas of focus.[28] First, increasing spiritual direction among Covenant laypeople needs a strategic plan. Second, ongoing advocacy and communication among and for Covenant spiritual directors of color needs attention. The acceptance and appreciation of spiritual direction among laypeople will take time. Much like the history of spiritual direction among clergy in the Covenant, which took years to cultivate, informing and educating Covenant laypeople about the gift that direction represents will require intentionality. This work will take the cooperation of many leaders and departments to get the word out and increase engagement in direction itself. Covenant pastors along with conference superintendents will need to be at the center of this effort.

Equipping and resourcing spiritual directors of color will need particular attention and strategies. D. Darrell Griffin writes,

> As I move deeper into the ministry of spiritual direction, I am more confident that there is a place for African Americans at this table. Regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, each of us longs for a more conscious experience of God's presence and love. Each of us has sacred stories unfolding within us that invite our attention. Spiritual direction provides a place to notice, discern, and discover where God is present and active in our everyday lives.[29]

Today, there is an increasing number of spiritual directors of color

[28] The unpublished minutes of the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors (ACSD), January 25, 2024.

[29] D. Darrell Griffin, "The Healing Wisdom of Those Who Came Before: Discovering Spiritual Direction in the African American Context," *The Covenant Companion*, February 2010, 19.

in the Covenant and beyond.[30] There is excitement among Covenant spiritual directors of color as they share the work they do and as they offer direction to others in their context. Considering all the good work Covenant spiritual directors do, and in light of the growing number of individuals and pastors receiving the benefits spiritual direction offers, it is fitting to give thanks and praise to God whose love endures forever.

[30] R. Neil Siler affirms this point and highlights ways that direction is increasing in African American contexts. See R. Neil Siler, "The Efficacy of Spiritual Direction in the African American Christian Community," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 10, no. 2 (2017): 304–312. Additionally, Mosaic Spiritual Formation (https://www.mosaicformation.org/) and the Spiritual Directors of Color Network (https://sdcnetwork.org/) are doing good work to train directors of color. In the Covenant, Christina Burrows and Cindy Wu offer workshops for directors in intercultural agility, and the Weborg Center continues to be intentional in recruiting supervisors and instructors of color.

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.

---

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

---

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.
>
> 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

---

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;

---

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

---

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]

---

[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

---

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]

---

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.

---

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

---

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.

The Centering Moment: The Spiritual and Soul-Care Practice of Howard W. Thurman

D. Darrell Griffin, senior pastor of
Oakdale Covenant Church, Chicago, Illinois

In my sermons, spiritual direction sessions, and personal conversations, I often mention Howard Washington Thurman, a twentieth-century African American Baptist mystic theologian whose enduring works speak to future generations of diverse Christians. Listeners always want to know, "Who is Howard Thurman?" Many of them have never heard of him and thus do not appreciate his invaluable contribution to American religious history and Christian spirituality. Their unfamiliarity with Thurman deprives them of benefiting from his spiritual and soul-care practices. His body of work offers a means of exploring spiritual formation and soul care utilizing the biblically based teachings of Jesus. Thurman distinguishes between formal, official Christianity and the "religion of Jesus." In this article, I would like to offer a brief introduction of Thurman himself and his spiritual and soul-care journey.

Howard Thurman is arguably one of the foremost contributors to African American spirituality specifically, and American spirituality generally, in the twentieth century. Yet his significant impact remains widely unknown in most Christian and religious communities. I first encountered the thoughts and writings of Howard Thurman more than four decades ago while a student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Thurman graduated from our alma mater in 1923. His books were required reading for courses I took in religion and philosophy. During my seminary and graduate school studies, I delved more deeply into his theological system of Christian and mystic spirituality. His work

persists as a significant and resounding voice in my spiritual odyssey. I utilize his spiritual practices in cultivating my own spiritual disciplines. My formal introduction to spiritual direction strengthened my desire to explore Thurman's extensive collection juxtaposing spiritual formation and social justice.

I glimpsed the life and interior spirituality of Thurman through the prism of a congregant whom I served at Oakdale Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois, where I have enjoyed the privilege of being senior pastor for more than a quarter of a century. The late Wilverlyn Williams was the goddaughter of Thurman and his wife, Sue Elvie Bailey Thurman. The Williams family enjoyed close relational ties to the Bailey and Thurman families. Her brother, Samuel Woodrow Williams, attended Morehouse College partially because of Thurman, who became his mentor. Interestingly, Williams would become a faculty member at Morehouse College who influenced Martin Luther King Jr. Thurman consistently acknowledged Samuel W. Williams as a source of inspiration. In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart,* Thurman reminisced about the importance of Samuel Williams's teaching, writing, and friendship. "Samuel W. Williams was a great teacher. . . . He lifted us to the highest levels of responsibility in scholarship and commitment."[1] Wilverlyn Williams shared many stories and fond memories of Thurman and their families. She particularly recounted the close relationship between her brother, Professor Williams, and Dr. King. I still marvel over this connection between Oakdale Covenant Church and these theological and spiritual giants. Mrs. Williams's life and legacy personified this historical link.

(L-R) Corretta and MLK, Samuel Williams, John Lewis
Undated photo, courtesy of Williams family

In this article, like a museum curator or a tour guide, I would like to expose the reader to the profound spiritual and soul-care insights of Thurman's work and legacy. What was his early spiritual formation, and how did it shape his spiritual journey? Consider the impact of his formative years and community. What foundational questions guided

[1] Howard W. Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Company, 1981), 33.

his life and ministry? His answers challenged and empowered King and other advocates in the Civil Rights Movement. Thurman advanced that spiritual maturity inevitably yields social transformation and justice.

On November 18, 1899, near Daytona Beach, Florida, Thurman was born, three years following the *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 US 537, 1896 decision of the United States Supreme Court that constitutionally sanctioned and legalized segregation throughout the nation. He missed slavery by two generations. This grandson of previously enslaved people remarkably became one of the most influential African American spiritual, religious, educational, and social leaders of the century. Through collegial and personal relationships, writings, sermons, speeches, pastoral service, and otherwise, Thurman employed primary Christian tenets of spirituality to encourage and empower followers of Jesus to internalize and practice the religion of Jesus. Although he did not use contemporary terms such as "spiritual direction" and "soul care," Thurman taught meditative and contemplative practices in his writings and lifestyle. In fact, these spiritual principles and practices appeal to people of all faiths. In his vast writings, sermons, and lectures, he was intentional in his pursuit of promoting spiritual formation and social justice.

A versatile leader, Thurman excelled in multiple roles such as preacher, educator, theologian, multiracial and multicultural church planter, pastor, mystic, and a few others. He did not march in any of the major campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, like the March to Selma, the March on Washington, or other events. Nevertheless, he played a crucial role in constructing a theological framework for social movements for justice and legal equality. Practicing contemplative spirituality, Thurman progressed in mysticism as he believed religious experience is most effectively explored within one's consciousness and character. A complete understanding and study of African American spiritual direction and soul care must include an appreciation for his contributions.

Parenthetically, I define "spiritual direction" and "soul care" as they relate to one's personal beliefs and values. In its simplest form, spiritual direction is personal communication and relational intimacy with God that fosters self-realization as a unique child of God and the ability to live according to the principles of this relationship.[2] Practically, one Christian assists another in paying attention to the unfolding communication and revelation of an intimate relationship with God and encouraging a fel-

[2] William A. Barry and William J. Connally, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 8.

low disciple to live out the consequences of that relationship. Soul care is the intentional nurturing of the soul through fostering a deep and maturing connection with Jesus Christ. Thurman's work is especially beneficial to anyone who dedicates themselves to spiritual wisdom and progress. Thurman emphasizes introspection as the means of flourishing in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thurman, as a provider and recipient, wove spiritual direction and soul care into his theological system and daily living. Throughout his life, Thurman sought spiritual guidance from family, peers, mentors, and myriad sacred texts. As he received empowerment, he guided others in his pastoral ministry, teaching, and writing. Three persons, however, were pivotal in building Thurman's spiritual and existential foundation: his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose; the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones; and Mahatma Gandhi of India. Whereas there were others, these three individuals appear consistently and repeatedly in his work.

Thurman's approach to spiritual formation emerged from the deep wells and roots of his Christian faith and his commitment to the universal and enduring principles of love, compassion, and justice. This pastor, professor, and mystic posited spiritual development as a collaborative journey between a seeker and a guide. This relational experience employs mutual respect, trust, communication, and openness to the movement of the spirit. Thurman stressed the importance of wholehearted listening, silence, withdrawal, and discernment in the process of spiritual direction. These practices enable individuals to learn from their inner wisdom as it occurs within God's presence.

Many global indigenous religions and spiritual traditions value contemplative practices. Thurman emerges among spiritual leaders in this movement as a pioneer through his passion for blending contemplation and social justice. He set a precedent for integrating spirituality with social justice advocacy. Thereby, he insisted that personal contemplative awareness is insufficient as an adherent to the religion of Jesus if disciples fail to combine it with social action. More specifically, activism includes different and equally important approaches. Caring for the most vulnerable people, whom Jesus in Matthew 25 characterizes as "the least of these," through the provision of food, clothing, housing, education, healthcare, transportation, employment, environmental health, global geopolitical justice, safety, and other embodied needs are all meaningful means of advocating for social justice. These are not subordinate to marching, speeches, legislation, public policy, governmental affairs, social media presence, or public discourse.

Thurman grew up in the years of unapologetic southern segregation and vile, blatant racism. He wrestled with defining an articulation and system of Christianity that combated this social dilemma. He grappled with conceptualizations of Christian and biblical teachings that were complicit with laws, social structures, theology, and economic policies that vehemently dehumanized a large swath of humankind and the Christian community. He did not understand professed Christians who advocated racial segregation, discrimination, violence, and lynching of African Americans and other people of color. Direct agents of oppression believed that God sanctioned their behavior. From slavery to segregation to the burgeoning global village which responded in horror to violence, countless African Americans and people of color share Thurman's concerns about the incompatibility of Christianity and racial injustice. How does Christianity, which possesses the transformative power to liberate a person from enslavement to sins such as addiction, crime, and other forms of perpetual immoral, illegal, and unethical behavior, marginalize, exploit, and oppress certain ethnic groups based upon their skin color? Thurman's writings give voice to the pain of living under segregation.

> There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever-present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crashing down upon you.[3]

As disciples contemplate such evil, they equally discover means and methods of eradicating it. Thurman's concepts of spiritual direction yield empowerment to do so.

"Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin?"[4] That question flows through the river of African American history from its inception in 1639 when slavery, racism, and White supremacy were first codified into American law.[5] Thurman answers this profound theological question that contends with theodicy, evil, and the will and character of God in his short, compelling, and powerful book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, first published in 1949.

---

3 Howard W. Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 39–40. Originally published in 1949 by Abingdon Press.

4 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

5 A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 19.

Is religion itself inherently weak? Is Christianity's impotence a betrayal of the genius of the religion itself? Thurman proposes yet another question as he answers the primary one: "What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those with their 'backs against the wall'?" Thurman was perplexed by Christianity's failure to address and utilize one of its chief tenets. The Gospel evangelists record the necessity that Christian disciples love their neighbors as they love themselves and love one another as Christ loves each of them. The fourth Gospel specifically articulates love as the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of Christians.

Thurman stated that as early as he could remember, he was puzzled by the fact that in his own religious background, training, and exposure both before he went to school and all during the years that he was a student, that maybe only once or twice did he ever hear any sermon which dealt with what the religion of Jesus had to say to the person whose back was against the wall. It was always how you must treat him; you must administer to his needs. But this was his concern: What did it say to the man who was up against it? Could it address him? Not his needs, but him.[6]

He lamented the failure of previous generations to ask this question. Conceivably, their inability or unwillingness to do so retarded the materialization of social justice protest movements and personal civil disobedience. In response to his disappointment in finding intellectually respectable questions and answers, Thurman began his own search. Perceived as radical and revolutionary for his time, Thurman explored many concepts that drew wisdom from myriad sources as the questions loomed on the canvas of his life and era. I posit that his grandmother Mrs. Ambrose, Rufus Jones, and Gandhi combined to offer suitable intellectual and existential answers. They were primary architects in his theological system.

It is hard to underestimate the spiritual treasure of Thurman's grandmother in assisting him in arriving at a logical and experiential answer to his foregoing questions. Her view of Christianity greatly influenced Thurman's theological and spiritual thinking. A survivor of the horrors of slavery, Nancy Ambrose questioned whether the New Testament approved of the diabolical system that relegated her forebears to being property and treated like livestock. In his autobiography, Thurman recalls his grandmother, when listening to the reading of the Bible, would direct the reader to skip any passages like the Pauline letters that seemingly endorsed slavery. Her difficulty with those texts became his dilemma,

6 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 13.

given their very close relationship. Thurman's father died suddenly and unexpectedly when Thurman was a young boy. Accordingly, his mother became the head of the household and the sole provider for his two sisters and him. While his mother worked to maintain their family, his grandmother served as the primary caretaker. Not surprisingly, many people acquire their cardinal values, principles, and beliefs from their grandparents. Thurman enjoyed the blessings and benefits of that pivotal relationship. Mystically, she chiseled his character into the values that would guide him toward his lifelong spiritual path.

Her indelible influence instilled within him a profound and enduring faith, dignity, and resilience. Those key attributes would guide him in formulating an authentically Christian and biblical response to racial segregation and its residual, systemic inequities. Grandmother Nancy Ambrose's stories of resilience and faith in the furnace of oppression inspired Thurman's unwavering commitment to social justice in answering his profound spiritual inquiry. She embodied the fortitude and legacy of generations of African Americans who endured prevalent and persistent injustices. Despite unimaginable hardships, she maintained her self-worth as a unique child of God, thereby imparting these values to her grandson. Her stories of survival and perseverance amid adversity empowered Thurman and bequeathed an immeasurable resilience of the human spirit. Her prayers, hymns, and religious teachings provided a foundation for Thurman's spiritual journey, nurturing his connection to the Divine and his commitment to social justice.

Thurman described his grandmother's lessons as having directness of speech and simplicity of faith. She posited "that life was to be lived by a simple trust in God."[7] More significantly, Thurman recalls, "I learned more, for instance, about the genius of the religion of Jesus from my grandmother than from all the men who taught me all…the Greek and all the rest of it, because she moved inside the experience [of the religion of Jesus] and lived out of that kind of center."[8] Essentially, Thurman considers his time and lessons from his grandmother as more beneficial than the formal training in systematic theology, biblical studies, religious history, and missional and practical components of ministerial studies. Reminiscent of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, published originally in 1829 during the decades of radical abolitionism,

---

7 Thurman, *With Head and Heart,* 1–29.

8 Luther E. Smith, Jr., ed., *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 15.

Ambrose's ideas attack the contradictions between Christian concepts of human liberty and equality and racial injustice.[9] Walker, on the eve of the American Civil War ("The War Between the States"), exhorts Christians, generally and ironically enslaved Christians of African descent, to rise up in social, political, and military upheaval to resist the evils of chattel slavery. He unequivocally stated that slavery existed in total contradiction to the will and character of God. He further contended that Christianity demanded that they resist and eradicate this evil. Thurman's grandmother felt the same about the continuation of White supremacy through the century of social segregation that followed slavery. True to Thurman's description of her frankness, she did not mince words relating her disdain for the manipulation of Christianity to support inherently contradictory ideas and values. She rejected several of the Pauline letters because she suspected they condoned slavery, a brutal system of human degradation under which she personally suffered.

During a summer break following his sophomore year in college, when reading the Bible to his grandmother, Thurman summoned the courage to inquire about her refusal to listen to some of Paul's writings. She referenced the Baptist and Methodist ministers who evangelized enslaved people using Pauline passages to assure them that God intended chattel slavery as their purpose and a fulfillment of his will. Invariably, these preachers expounded upon the text found in Ephesians 6:5, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters for this is right in the Lord." Ambrose, having heard it and similar passages, resolved never to listen to its hearing when she became an adult.[10] Her objections and resistance toward the standard interpretations of the dominant culture regarding Christianity and race typified lingering theological debates about the character of God, the presence of evil, the allowance of evil, and the human tendency to categorize people according to race, ethnicity, culture, and other differentiating factors. Her protest of using the Bible to endorse systemic injustice foreshadowed the development of Black theology, a theological and scholarly movement borne of the Civil Rights Movement and simultaneous unrest on college and university campuses that insisted upon articulating a distinctly African American perspective of Christianity. Ambrose indirectly contributed to this system of thought through her

[9] David Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America,* written in Boston, Sept. 28, 1829, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/triumphnationalism/cman/text5/walker.pdf.
[10] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 31.

mentoring influence on Thurman. His pen would write subsequently for both of them.

The Quaker mystic scholar and social activist Rufus Jones introduced Thurman to the formal study of mysticism. Jones served as a tour guide of sorts as Thurman navigated this new and unfamiliar academic and theological terrain. Thurman later described his tutelage with Jones as "a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life."[11] Thurman credits Jones with demonstrating for him the confident and pragmatic insight that revelations from a person's interior religious life could equip someone to confront the contradictions of daily experience. Essentially, religion did not have to be accommodationist as it relates to social and political contexts. In Thurman's words, "categorically, the religion of the inner life at its best is life-affirming rather than life-denying."[12] Learning with Jones, Thurman immersed himself into the Quaker tradition of silent worship and contemplative prayer. These spiritual disciplines disclosed mysticism as a conscious and direct encounter with God. Thurman's journey integrated mysticism, spiritual practices, and social activism.

Howard Thurman studied and embraced various spiritual practices, drawing from varying religious traditions and cultural experiences to expand his connection with the Divine and cultivate inner peace. His developing ideas about spirituality, social justice, and human dignity solidified in these practices. Prayer became a central spiritual discipline for Thurman. This modality furthers and facilitates communication with the Divine, wherein adherents receive guidance and obtain strength to surmount struggles in daily living. Thurman offered structured prayers from Christian tradition and spontaneous, heartfelt prayers that arose within his personal reflections and experiences.

I reiterate a major theme of this article. Thurman's thoughts and life embody a powerful example of spiritual consciousness, interior reflection, personal practice, and preparation for social justice activism. Twenty-first century American Christians from diverse backgrounds and global citizens who adhere to other major faiths can glean spiritual development from Thurman's writings. His mysticism and social activism translate into many contemporary geopolitical and regional challenges. Those in the

---

11 Thurman, *With Head and Heart,* 77.

12 As quoted by Matthew Fox, "Howard Thurman on the Via Negativa," June 25, 2021, https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2021/07/25/howard-thurman-on-the-via-negativa/#:~:text=Thurman%20wrestles%20with%20the%20question%20of%20asceticism,its%20best%20is%20life%20affirming%20rather%20than.

struggle for social justice and equality can read Thurman and, respectively, find the bread of life and living water. Additionally, his concepts appeal to committed people of faith from all walks of life because he presents the religion of Jesus, which rests fundamentally upon the Ten Commandments, the Torah, the justice teachings of the Hebrew prophets, the Greatest Commandment, and the new Law of Love as evidenced in the Gospels and New Testament writings in a manner adaptable and transferable to all human societies. Thurman presents Christ, who embodies God's clearest and inimitable revelation of unfailing love, as a mediator of love, truth, peace, and justice. Indirectly, Thurman appeals to some people of other faiths who resonate with following Christ as Thurman's understanding of Christian mysticism and contemplative practices.[13] Instead of a formal and official Christian religion that furthers the political ideology and economic goals of its purveyors, the religion of Jesus reaffirms God's love for each person as a child of God and empowers each individual to achieve self-realization, which includes seeking the fulfillment of Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O mortal what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV).

Let us consider five rudimentary spiritual practices that Thurman faithfully pursued: meditation, contemplative reading, reflection and journaling, nature contemplation, and community worship. First, Thurman embraced meditation as a way to cultivate inner stillness, mindfulness, and spiritual awareness. He often engaged in silent meditation, focusing his attention on the present moment and opening himself to God's presence. Thurman saw meditation as a means of deepening his connection with the Divine and accessing inner wisdom. Second, Thurman was an avid reader of sacred texts, spiritual writings, and poetry, which he approached with a contemplative mindset. He saw in these texts a source of spiritual insight and inspiration, engaging with them deeply and reflectively to discern their deeper meanings and implications for his own life and spirituality. Third, Thurman regularly reflected and journaled to process his thoughts, feelings, and spiritual experiences. He saw writing as a form of spiritual practice, using it to explore his innermost thoughts, wrestle with questions of faith, and document his journey of spiritual growth and discovery. Fourth, Thurman found solace and inspiration in the natural world, viewing it as a manifestation

[13] Jean Burden, "Howard Thurman," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1953 (4) 39-44.

of the divine presence. He often spent time in nature, contemplating creation's beauty and wonder, connecting with God, and renewing his spirit. Finally, as a minister and spiritual leader, Thurman participated in and led community worship services to nurture his own spiritual life and that of others. He saw communal worship as an opportunity to come together in fellowship, praise, and prayer, and to experience God's presence in the gathered community. Faithful and diligent practice of these five spiritual disciplines will enhance the spirituality of any committed adherent or community. Thurman's example endures to galvanize a myriad of people and faith communities.

At the heart of Thurman's mystical inquiry was a quest for direct, experiential encounters with the divine presence. He believed true spiritual insight could not be confined to intellectual understanding alone but required a deep, intuitive connection with the sacred. Thurman emphasized the importance of inner silence, contemplation, and prayer as pathways to encountering divine mystery. Thurman's mysticism transcended narrow sectarian boundaries and embraced insights from various religious traditions. He considered mysticism to be a universal human experience in which a profound encounter with the divine transcends the limitations of language, culture, and doctrine.[14]

The concept of the "inner sanctuary" was cardinal to Thurman's mystical worldview. It is the untarnished and sacred space within the human soul where an adherent communes with the divine presence. Sustained and steadfast adherence to spiritual disciplines is the passageway to the inner sanctuary where one experiences a profound sense of unity with God and creation. Thurman's mysticism was also deeply engaged with the world. It called individuals to embody the divine love and compassion they encountered in their mystical experiences. He saw mysticism not as an escape from the world but as a catalyst for social transformation—a source of inspiration and empowerment for those committed to justice, peace, and reconciliation.

Thurman's mystical vision profoundly influenced his theology and approach to social activism. He believed that the pursuit of justice and the quest for spiritual enlightenment were inseparable, calling individuals to engage in both inner and outer work to transform self and society. Thurman's teachings on mysticism inspired many activists, including Martin Luther King Jr., who saw in Thurman's vision of a beloved community

[14] See Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 19.

grounded in love and solidarity a robust framework for their struggles for justice and equality. Thurman invites us to explore the depths of our own souls, thus encountering the divine presence within everyday life. This internal journey enables us to work tirelessly to create a world where love, compassion, and justice permeate society. Seekers of truth and justice embrace mystical dimensions of life and strive for a more compassionate and interrelated world.

Thurman's spiritual practices departed radically from the spirited religious worship services and practices of the African American church of his formative years. Thurman's religious tradition included choirs singing, ministers preaching with unique cadence, peppered with shouts of "Amen!" and "Praise God!" There were no silent moments and very little quiet reflection. Thurman incorporated aspects of the Quaker tradition into a new religious tradition that nurtured his soul and expanded his spiritual journey. Thurman's mysticism sought social transformation by seeking healing for both the oppressed and the oppressor. His legacy continues to inspire individuals to seek inner transformation, cultivate compassion, and work toward a more just and inclusive society grounded in love and understanding.

A brief yet determinative meeting with Mahatma Gandhi became a defining moment for Thurman as it potentially answered his festering question about Christianity's inability to redress racism and bigotry. In 1935, Thurman led a group of African Americans on a mission trip to India. Intriguingly, this group was the first delegation of African Americans to meet Gandhi. On the trip, Thurman felt challenged to explain his reasons, as an African American, for retaining a belief in Jesus since Christianity had been manipulated to affirm the extensive suffering of people of color. A prominent professor on the faculty of one of India's universities forthrightly confronted Thurman. "What are you doing over here? I know what the newspapers say about a pilgrimage of friendship and the rest, but that is not my question. What are you doing here? That is what I mean." The straightforward professor continued,

> More than three hundred years ago, your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" and "Amazing Grace"—there may be others, but these are

> the only ones I know. The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was "Jesus." The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. . . . During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. Even in the church, I understand there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country sent me a clipping telling about a Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God. I am a Hindu. I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem rude to you, but sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker people of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.[15]

Provocatively and pivotally, the professor crystallized his dilemma into two basic, sensible questions: "Why are you a Christian when everyone connected to your bondage professes to be a Christian? Why are you so committed to something that is committed to your oppression and destruction?" Thurman struggled to answer. He was left without words.[16]

Thurman's meeting with Gandhi yielded a critical and workable solution to his lifelong question regarding the ineffectiveness of Christianity. Gandhi's ideology of nonviolent resistance greatly resonated with Thurman and motivated him to promote social change through love and reconciliation. At this meeting, which Thurman deemed as a central event of his life, Gandhi told Thurman, "It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world."[17] Gandhi's commitment to truth, love, and nonviolence profoundly influenced Thurman's approach to social activism, shaping his belief in the transformative power of love and reconciliation. He correspondingly incorporated principles of nonviolence into the African American freedom struggle. King and other protest leaders coopted the phrase during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s.

---

15 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 14–15.
16 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 14-15.
17 Thurman, *With Head and Heart,* 132.

Upon his return to the States, Thurman traversed the country and shared the relevance of nonviolent resistance as a means for addressing racial injustices. Smith, editor of Thurman's primary writings, summarizes Thurman's message and purpose: "Directly and indirectly, Thurman was the messenger for connecting the spiritual methods of India's struggle for independence to the need for a spiritually based nonviolent movement to transform racial injustices in the United States."[18]

Thurman's influence extended beyond theology and spirituality to practical activism. An early advocate for desegregation and social justice, he tested his theory of the beloved community by co-founding the first interracial and interfaith congregation in the United States, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco in 1944. Inspired by his experiences traveling and studying various world religions, Thurman envisioned a congregation that welcomed individuals of all races, ethnicities, and faith traditions, fostering a spirit of inclusivity and mutual respect. Its diverse membership included African Americans, European Americans, Asian Americans, and individuals from various religious backgrounds, united by a shared commitment to spiritual growth and social justice. In this place, people of diverse backgrounds came together in worship, fellowship, and solidarity. The Fellowship Church was a pioneering institution that embodied Thurman's belief in the power of community to transcend racial and religious divides. Beyond its walls, the Fellowship Church was a beacon of hope and inspiration for the broader community. Through its social justice initiatives and advocacy efforts, the congregation stood at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, challenging systemic racism and injustice while advocating for equality and dignity. Thurman saw multiracial churches as potent symbols of the beloved community—a vision of society characterized by love, justice, and inclusivity. He believed that such congregations had the potential to transcend the racial divisions and hierarchies that plagued society, offering a glimpse of a more just and equitable world.

Howard Thurman's spirituality encompassed a thoroughgoing consideration and exploration of the human experience. It posited the interconnectedness of all beings and the pursuit of inner peace for the individual and social upheaval when necessary to achieve justice and equality. Thurman's spirituality transcended religious boundaries. It offered a universal message of love, compassion, and social justice. One of Thurman's core

[18] Smith, *Howard Thurman,* 20–21.

teachings was the search for common ground. He believed that differences in race, religion, and culture existed to create a shared humanity that united humankind. This belief compelled his commitment to fostering understanding and unity among individuals and communities. Thurman's contemplative spirituality evolved from his experiences of solitude and reflection. Inner silence and stillness are pathways to encountering the divine presence within oneself and the world. Through meditation, prayer, and mindfulness, Thurman encouraged individuals to become aware of their inner lives and to listen attentively to the voice of the spirit. Contemplative spirituality illuminates the path toward greater understanding, compassion, and social transformation. Thurman's legacy inspires countless adherents to embrace inherent human sacredness and, therefore, strive to achieve a more just and compassionate world.

Thurman answers the question relating to the existential worth of Christianity for African Americans and other people of color in his thought-provoking book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. When it was published in 1949, this book materialized within the historical context of fierce racial and social segregation in the United States. It offered (and still offers today) an adversarial theological analysis of that prevalent social injustice. Thurman centers upon the idea that Jesus of Nazareth, a marginalized Jew living under Roman occupation in the Ancient Near East, understood the struggles and aspirations of his fellow disinherited and oppressed people. Thurman interprets Jesus's teachings through the prisms of experience of those marginalized communities and through the lens of twentieth-century American social and economic inequality. He submits that these teachings proffer empowerment, liberation, hope, and dignity to people who suffer from systemic oppression. The disinherited suffer primarily because of race, class, culture, and social status. He contends that Jesus's message primarily addresses marginalized and vulnerable people, thereby offering a radical vision of a beloved community sharing love, justice, and social cohesion.

Thurman suggests there are three dangers that plague the hearts of the disinherited: fear, deception, and hatred.[19] Nonviolent resistance, forgiveness, and love of one's enemies surmount fear. Violence feeds upon and replicates itself. In attacking one's enemies, one prepares for one's own eventual destruction and death. Nonviolence invents the possibility of nullifying your opponent's violent impulses as you resist the obvious

[19] Thurman addresses all three in his book *Jesus and The Disinherited:* Fear on page, 36, Deception on page 58, and Hate on page 74.

tendency to respond violently.

Moreover, it is possible to redeem an opponent's base motives and instincts as they may recoil from violence when met with nonviolence. Love for an enemy, as Jesus teaches, enables a nonviolent response to the horrors of segregation and lynch mobs. Thurman details the methods and means of how individuals overcome their fears and reclaim their inherent human dignity. More specifically, Thurman proposes a radical concept, "the love ethic," which is a revolutionary vision of love that transcends conventional notions of sentimentality or romantic affection. He clarifies Jesus's commandment to love one another as a call to action, thus challenging individuals to embody love as a force of social transformation and justice.[20] Thurman provides a re-evaluation of traditional theological norms and pragmatic spiritual guidance to resolve daily dilemmas. He emphasizes the importance of silence and solitude in nurturing the spiritual life from whence empowerment to combat evil, oppression, injustice, and turmoil arises. Quieting one's spirit in prayer and meditation unveils God's presence, which daily busyness often obscures. In reflective prayer, one finds divine resources to triumph over deception and hatred in addition to defeating fear. Contemplative spirituality eradicates emotional, mental, and practical dangers that plague the hearts of the disinherited.

"Why are you a Christian?" That question blared like neon lights on Thurman's theological canvas and mental consciousness. He concluded that he is a Christian because he belongs to the religion of Jesus and not the religion about Jesus. Thurman exhorts adherents to study and internalize the actual biblically based teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He rebuffs the widespread commercial, official, and socially acceptable conceptualizations of Jesus, which affirms oppression, exploitation, and subjugation of the disinherited. A religion about Jesus commodifies an image of Jesus that distorts his teachings to further the political and economic aims of the ruling class. Those ideas affirm the destitution of the disinherited and argue its theological permissibility. As someone born poor and subject to daily oppression, Jesus was one of the disinherited and taught a religion that sought liberation, dignity, and justice for vulnerable people. Thurman remained a Christian because he formulated a concept of Christian and contemplative spirituality that enabled adherents to oppose and defeat systemic oppression such as slavery and segregation. Reminiscent of his grandmother, Thurman rebuffed official and orthodox Christianity, which demanded that African Americans uncritically accept

20 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 89.

racial, social, political, and economic injustice. For Thurman, the true purpose of spiritual discipline was to "clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us. The aim is to get rid of whatever may so distract the mind and encumber the life that we function without this awareness, or as if it were not possible."[21]

Thurman's formal and enduring response to the question, crystallized in his theological understanding of mysticism, is practical, most evident, and authentic in social realities. It furthers transformation and healing for the oppressed and oppressors. He viewed Jesus' teachings as a spiritual toolbox with which to attain self-realization and achieve personal destiny despite the rigors and ordeals of daily life. He sought more than favorable laws. He advocated for individual and societal wholeness and the recognition of divinity in each of the more than eight billion people who inhabit the globe. He knew the power of poverty and racism to destroy imaginations and hope in the minds and hearts of parents and children who are the disinherited. Thurman insists that God is present in everyone, and therefore, transformation occurs within the greatest and the least of any society. He believed anyone could become a mystic.

Thurman's lectures on "Mysticism and Social Action" defined mysticism as "the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul.…Such a response is total, affecting the inner quality of life and its outward expression as its manifestation."[22] Suggestive of Rufus Jones's teachings, Thurman proclaimed an "affirmative mysticism," which posits God moves through our social structures as well as personal experience, seeking spiritual and interpersonal unity of all things. The mystic desires that everyone receives an opportunity to experience holiness and value borne of a personal relationship with God. Maturing beyond self-interest, the mystic sees our common humanity and empathizes with the suffering of the oppressed. Mystics embrace contrasting viewpoints as they progress from polarization to reconciliation. Understanding God as the source of all creation, the mystic wants all people to experience wholeness embedded within their unique personalities, cultures, and experiences. The mystic opposes conditions that threaten anyone's encounter with God; they feel compelled to confront

---

21 Howard W. Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (1961; repr., New York: Friends United Press, 2007), 280.

22 Richard Boeke, *Mysticism and Social Action: Lawrence Lectures and Discussions with Dr. Howard Thurman* (London: International Association for Religious Freedom, Book 3, 2015), 177–79, Kindle. Transcript of the Lawrence Lectures of 1978.

them. Social action resists systemic barriers to the disinherited actualizing their God-given talents, abilities, and endowments.

Spiritual wholeness is a necessity for healthy, functional, and just societies. Mandating social, political, and economic equity is a prerequisite to enabling average persons to pursue intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual growth. When people lack the daily necessities of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, employment, and other ancillary concerns, they equally lack the capacity, energy, and time for creative and self-empowering pursuits. The mystic strives for the annihilation of the foregoing impediments to any child of God manifesting God's revelation, will, and presence in daily living. The mystic's social agenda resolves personal trauma and removes widespread obstacles to personal development.

Powerful and wealthy perpetrators of injustice are also in spiritual jeopardy. Notwithstanding their social privileges and economic advantages, they are subject to the same limitations of injustice, particularly if they fail to redress seemingly intractable oppression and manipulation. Consumerism, political power, and entitlement cannot construct a fortress of self-gratification that shields them from natural and social forces. Moreover, the oppressor's injustice ultimately stunts their own soul in addition to those of the persons whom they oppress. Summarily, Thurman maintained that a vibrant mysticism which holds together the duality of each individual's uniqueness as a child of God and the nonnegotiable pursuit of a thoroughgoingly just society, is necessary to allow everyone a chance for self-realization.[23]

As I conclude this brief introduction of Howard Thurman and his groundbreaking contributions to twentieth-century American theology and spirituality as an African American Baptist and mystic, I invite you to pause and allow the emergence of a centering moment. Consider the mysterious and many ways in which Thurman's writings and spiritual legacy can enhance your own relationship with the Lord. Thurman's primary theological tenets complement American evangelicalism like a hand in a tailored glove. Commitment to a vibrant, growing, and deeply personal relationship with Christ is a cardinal principle of evangelical discipleship. Thurman expands this notion to posit that it requires the faithful practices of prayer, meditation, silence, solitude, and mindfulness, which in turn empower adherents to seek a just society that enables all of God's children to actualize God's will and their own capacities. Social

[23] Alton B. Pollard, *III Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 44.

transformation surpasses the self-seeking and ulterior motives of political ideology and societal norms. Rooted in one's intimate communion with the Divine is the obligation to ensure that each person receives respect and dignity as a child of God.

Thurman conceived a religion that honors all people, especially the disinherited, persons whom society historically marginalizes because of distinguishing characteristics such as race, culture, language, ethnicity, religion, and much more—embracing an ethic of love for humankind that demands the removal of any systemic impediments to self-realization and acquisition of personal destiny. More practically, allocation of economic resources, proportionate sharing in governance, freedom in assembly and relationships, and wide latitude in belief and worship of God are the means and methods by which spiritual, religious, and reasonable people determine progress in achieving a just society. The combination of pursuing unity with God, attaining unconditional self-acceptance, and striving for a society that affords wholeness to its members are significant components of the religion of Jesus. Thurman enduringly challenges anyone who professes any religious creed to withdraw from daily busyness to center themselves in God's presence. Withdrawal yields renewal and resilience which empower adherents to choose a mystic path wherein one becomes one with God by exemplifying God's unfailing love for humankind. The religion of Jesus rests fundamentally upon the new law and ethic of love. In fulfillment of the Greatest Commandment, a mystic wholeheartedly loves God and their neighbor as much as they love themselves. A mystic conclusively progresses toward self-acceptance and self-realization within an interdependent relationship with God while striving for a just and equitable society that affords everyone a chance to attain the same.

Intercultural Agility in Spiritual Direction

Christina Burrows, president of the
Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors,
adjunct faculty member,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

We come to spiritual direction, either as a director or directee, with unique cultural experiences and preferences. Culture intersects everything. There is no neutral ground. Intercultural agility in spiritual direction has always been necessary, but we have only begun to bring this part of our formation as spiritual directors to the fore in recent years.

First, what is culture? Soong-Chan Rah defines it this way:

> It is a human attempt to understand the world around us. It is the programming that shapes who we are and who we are becoming. It is a social system that is shaped by the individual and that also has the capacity to shape the individual. But it is also the presence of God, the image of God, the mission of God found in the human spirit, soul, and social system.[1]

And what do we mean by intercultural agility? It is the ability to create new cultural spaces with empathy and effective communication. This is something we do by anticipating, recognizing, and adjusting to the culturally defined behavior of others.[2]

---

1 Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010), 38.

2 www.interculturalagility.com. This definition is adapted from the Dubai-based consultancy KnowledgeWorkx's Intercultural Agility framework that includes the Three Colors of Worldview and the Twelve Dimensions of Culture. The founders of KnowledgeWorkx have described the foundational philosophy for their material as the Christian ministry of reconciliation.

To do this well, we need to grow in self-awareness of who we are as unique cultural beings, that we might recognize and stretch toward other people's ways of seeing God, themselves, others, and the world around them. This is part of our call not only as spiritual directors but simply as followers of Jesus. We are all called to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves and to make disciples of all peoples.[3] Unless we are ministering with exact clones of ourselves, we need intercultural agility in spiritual direction to effectively help others notice the movement of God in their lives.

Defining Spiritual Direction

There are many different definitions of spiritual direction, so before we talk about becoming interculturally agile in our practice of spiritual direction, I would like to loosely define what I understand to be the core of spiritual direction practice.

We use different metaphors for spiritual direction, including sifting for gold, candlelight, tending the holy, dancing prayer, offering hospitality, being a spiritual companion, and attuning our awareness toward God. We are soul guides and pilgrims. We are witnesses, helping others to find their authentic voice in their lives with Christ.

Letha Kerl is one of Serve Globally's regional coordinators for Europe and has practiced spiritual direction in Mexico, France, and with global personnel serving in other countries. She speaks of the image of the spiritual director as midwife. In the past, she worked as a doula, so this image is a powerful one for her that she identifies with closely. She said, "I am a holder of space," listening and noticing what God is doing in people's lives.[4]

Each of us has our own definition of spiritual direction. This is mine: "Believing that God is at work in every area of our lives, spiritual direction is a ministry of listening, presence, and prayer, where we walk alongside another to notice together the movement of God in their life." I believe defining our key images and metaphors for spiritual direction helps us know what to hold on to and what to express in new cultural ways of being, thinking, speaking, and doing. All of this helps us learn to flex and become agile in our practice.

---

[3] Matt 22:36–40; 28:19–20. Unless identified otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

[4] Interview with Letha Kerl on the topic of spiritual direction with global personnel, March 30, 2018.

Missio Dei

Intercultural agility is not an optional extra to our practice of Christian spiritual direction. It is integral to our calling as followers of Jesus. I would like to highlight a few Scriptures showing that God creates and delights in different cultures and is always reaching out with relentless love across cultural boundaries.

In Genesis 1:26–31, God forms the beginning of the mosaic kingdom with man and woman (diverse humanity from the beginning) as well as the vast array of God's creation. God calls this diverse creation good. God also commissions the man and the woman to become culture creators. God says to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth" (v. 28b).

After the Fall, we start to see the unfolding desire of God to pursue and seek shalom for humanity. Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation.[5] God calls Abraham and in Genesis 12:1–3 declares his intent to bless the nations of the earth through his descendants. "I will bless those who bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (v. 3).

We see threads of this declaration in the weaving of Gentile women into the messianic bloodline shown in the genealogy in Matthew 1. Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Bathsheba the Hittite are all named.

When we pay attention to the life of Jesus, it is impossible to miss the intercultural nature of his disciples. Mortimer Arias describes the group.

> They were as heterogeneous as they could be: men and women, clergy and laity, fishermen, tax collectors, matrons, former prostitutes, the affluent and the poor. But they had one thing in common: they had been "cured," "healed," or "set free" by Jesus' kingdom evangelization. They were living manifestations of the new life in the coming kingdom . . . an incarnational sign of the kingdom.[6]

This intercultural group was an incarnational sign of the kingdom. Everyone has a place in the kingdom of God. What does this mean for

---

[5] Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

[6] Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 6.

spiritual directors? It means our directees should also be a diverse group, not just people who are like us. But one might say, I'm not prepared to offer spiritual direction to former prostitutes or the affluent! Indeed, that is why we need to grow in intercultural agility—so we can minister alongside a more diverse group of people.

Jesus declares to his disciples in Luke 10:25–37 that the law and the prophets hang on the commandment to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. He then gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan to ensure that we understand how broad his definition of neighbor is. In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus gives us his great commission:

> All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Love your neighbor, make disciples of all nations, all peoples, and all ethnicities. Christian spiritual directors[7] because they are first and foremost simply followers of Jesus, are included in this call to love and to lead people of all nations into a living, vibrant life with God, and to recognize that God is already at work in our directees, no matter their cultural background. "If mission is God's work, then God's plan is manifest not only in those being sent out into the world, but in those throughout the world with whom he has already been at work."[8]

The missio Dei, or God's activity in the church and the world in the book of Acts, shows the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost on people from a multitude of cultures and languages, followed by the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit is already at work in many of those they meet. Philip is sent to an Ethiopian (Acts 8) who was already a worshiper of Yahweh, Peter is sent to Cornelius (Acts 10), who was devout and God-fearing. Paul preaches to the people of Athens (Acts 17), appealing to the evidence of the unknown God among them, quoting their Greek philosophers and poets.

God is inviting us into those places where the Holy Spirit is already at work in all the various countries and cultures of the world. We are fortunate in the US and Canada that we can minister as spiritual direc-

---

7 There are also spiritual directors of other faith traditions. They may take a similar approach, but I do not presume to speak for those of a different tradition.

8 Rah, *Many Colors*, 31.

tors alongside people from all over the world. In the same way that Paul used his knowledge of Greek poets and philosophers to effectively communicate the good news of Jesus in Athens, so too will increased intercultural agility help us communicate more effectively with others.

In 2 Corinthians 5:11–21 Paul teaches that believers are all called to be Christ's ambassadors, and to live into his ministry of peacemaking and reconciliation. We get to see that reconciliation occur in the context of spiritual direction. This means that we are seeking shalom, or wholeness, for our directees in their relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

In what ways is the Holy Spirit inviting us to notice and join where God is already at work beyond groups of people with whom we are comfortable?

Re-forming Our Approach to Spiritual Direction Training

I want to address the idea that spiritual direction is a ministry shaped by white Christian spirituality. Some BIPOC students training as directors in the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction (the Weborg Center), have said they need to contextualize the training when the practice and gift of direction moves into other cultures or people groups, noting that most of the training materials are derived from white sources. Looking at the list of people who created the Weborg Center and shaped the initial curriculum, we see a group of intelligent, gifted, and Spirit-filled women and men, some of whom trained me in Cohort 12. All are indeed white North Americans with European ethnic heritage. That has certainly shaped the Weborg Center curriculum and formation culture.

Asian American theologian and spiritual director Cindy Lee talks about this awareness in her paradigm-shifting book *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation*. She came to a crisis point when she realized the majority of her education and spiritual formation had been through a culturally white North American/European cultural lens. "In all my studies and explorations of Christian spirituality, . . . it suddenly dawned on me one day that as much as I esteem the many saints and mystics of our faith . . . very few of them look like me."[9] That led her to an exploration of unforming and re-forming her approach to spiritual formation, relearning ways to practice listening for the Spirit together by focusing on three cultural orientations and nine postures. I find these orientations and postures

[9] Cindy Lee, *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 1.

extremely helpful, but I will not be outlining them here.

In the past few years, the faculty of the Weborg Center (on which I have served for the past three years) have recognized the need for this unforming and re-forming in training spiritual directors. This includes bringing in more culturally and ethnically diverse faculty and supervisors, including texts from BIPOC authors in each of the five courses, and offering workshops on topics that increase intercultural agility. In addition, NPTS now provides additional financial aid for BIPOC students at the Weborg Center to ensure we are training a more diverse group of spiritual directors for the future makeup of the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors (ACSD).

Nevertheless, although we do need to develop a more diverse ACSD membership to reflect our broader Covenant ministerium and congregations, that alone will not ensure we are effectively ministering in an interculturally agile way. The majority of our members are female, over sixty, and white. There is no shame in any of these things. We are all created in the image of God and beloved by God. All ethnicities are made for good, have experienced brokenness, and can be restored by Jesus.[10] We simply need to recognize how this group has shaped the dominant culture in our practice of spiritual direction in the Covenant. Any of us, no matter our background, can embrace the posture of a cultural learner and become a spiritual director who is interculturally agile. It is encouraging that over the past several years, we have seen numerous groups of spiritual directors in the ACSD doing just that, by joining Antiracism Discipleship Pathway cohorts and Intercultural Agility cohorts for spiritual directors, going on Sankofa journeys, or pursuing other avenues for growth.

Creating a Space for Healing from Racial Trauma

A history of racial trauma is a universal thread in BIPOC directees' past and present experiences.

> Racial trauma is real. Every day in the United States and across the world women, men, and children of color experience racism and witness lives and livelihoods devalued or lost as if they do not matter. The result is that people of color are carrying unhealed racial trauma.[11]

[10] Sarah Shin, *Beyond Colorblind: Redeeming Our Ethnic Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 21.

[11] Sheila Wise Rowe, *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 8.

> Most people of color arrive at spiritual direction with scars derived from their stigmatized status in society. Often they have issues with self-esteem and question why God permits their oppression.[12]
>
> The gross inhumanity that crushed our people was of the most horrific and vulgar in Western history.[13]

Becoming trauma-informed is essential to our ability to come alongside people of color in an empathetic and interculturally agile way. This comes both from learning about trauma and racial trauma, as well as learning about the history of racism and colonization in the contexts where we are serving or in the contexts where our directees have lived, wherever that is in the world.

As a British Korean immigrant to California, I experience this in a complex way. My mother experienced oppression as Korea was under Japanese occupation when she was born. She then lived through the Second World War and the Korean War before emigrating to the US, mainland Europe, and finally, England, where she once said of her experience of racism there, "You don't know what it is like for everyone to treat you like a monkey." Knowing that we carry generational racial trauma in our bodies,[14] I wonder what I still need to unpack to become whole.

My father is British. I was raised in England and I am culturally very English. Knowing that the British have historically been the source of so much colonization and slavery around the world is overwhelming. These are my ancestors too. Perpetrators of wrong carry trauma because their actions dehumanize themselves as well as others.

Resmaa Menakem highlights the fact that the brutal practices white bodies perpetrated against Black and Native bodies in the United States were learned and practiced in medieval Europe. "The carnage perpetrated on Blacks and Native Americans in the New World began, on the same soil, as an adaptation of longstanding white-on-white practices. This brutalization created trauma that has yet to be healed among white bodies

---

[12] Lerita Coleman Brown, "Praying without Ceasing: Basking in the Loving Presence of God" in *Embodied Spirits: Stories of Spiritual Directors of Color* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 46.

[13] Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 62.

[14] Resmaa Menakem's book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017) gives valuable insight into this, as well as providing practical exercises to help us and our directees move toward healing.

today."[15] I am on a learning journey of discovery and healing as I unpack my family's varied experiences of racial trauma.

In the Covenant, we are blessed to have a variety of opportunities to help us move toward greater self-awareness, healing, and skill in this area, including cohort learning experiences like the Antiracism Discipleship Pathway and immersive learning experiences like the Sankofa journey. As spiritual directors, we need to do our own work of healing as well as learn how to create safe spaces for BIPOC directees to heal from their racial trauma. Cindy Lee suggests, "For BIPOC communities, unforming is just as healing as forming. We need to unlearn the practices, actions, and teachings of patriarchy and colonization that are ingrained in our bodies and habits."[16]

Indigenous theologian Adrian Jacobs also appeals to us to create healing space for Indigenous people in this way:

> To "do justly" we must tell our story and express all the pain of our history. You will hear our bright hopes and our painful deaths. Weep with us and sing with us. The pain will be so deep its only consolation is in our Creator. The great sin against our dignity is answered by a love that brings arrogant violence to its knees. This is the message of the blood of Jesus that speaks better things than that of Abel.[17]

Spiritual directors would do well to grow in intercultural agility by becoming agents of healing from racial trauma through the wholeness that Jesus brings.

The Intercultural Development Continuum

I was introduced to the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)[18] in 2018. I did not like it at the time, because the first time I took it, I did not score highly on the inventory even though I am biracial, speak three languages, and have lived in five countries. Now I use it almost every week. As a Qualified Administrator of the IDI, I find it to be a useful tool for helping people, including spiritual directors, to grow in intercultural agility.

---

15 Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 62.

16 Lee, *Our Unforming*, 34.

17 Adrian Jacobs, "A History of Slaughter: Embracing Our Martyrdom at the Margins of Encounter," *Journal of the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies* 4 (2006), 125.

18 http://idiinventory.com/. For more information about taking the IDI, email idi@covchurch.org.

My initial debrief with Prajakta David-Kelley, director of global advancement and mobilization for the Covenant, helped me to realize that although I had gained skills for connecting quickly and easily with people of a different culture, I tended to think that was enough. I had studied French and German language and culture in depth. With other cultural groups, I realized my emphasis was on looking for commonalities. While that is in itself a good thing, I was not making the effort to go deeper with people, to discover ways we are different. Intentionally seeking out and accepting those differences would help me learn to stretch myself, creating new cultural spaces with others. Those spaces are where we can adapt to one another.

When we talk about cultural differences it is important to remember that we are not just talking about race, ethnicity, or nationality. Our culture is impacted by all the ways humans are different. These include:

- Nationality
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Home/geographic roots
- Conflict style
- Socioeconomic status
- Religion
- Gender
- Communication style
- Age
- Family background
- Ability/Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Personality
- Cultural worldview

It is necessary to reflect on who we are as unique cultural beings, and how these and other factors have shaped our cultural identity. Some like to create a collage of key images that represent our cultural journey.

Intercultural development is the growth journey toward becoming interculturally agile. Spiritual directors need a mirror to reflect our self-awareness in our interactions with people of other cultures. The IDI does this by showing us our perceived level of skill and our actual level of skill. The inventory places us along an Intercultural Development Continuum[19] that includes five major markers or orientations of development from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural mindset. These markers are as follows:

1. **Denial.** This is where we miss differences or are unaware of them. When people talk about being colorblind, that is indicative of being in this orientation.

[19] https://www.idiinventory.com/idc.

2. Polarization. This is where we are aware of and possibly judge differences. Here we may see groups of people as "us and them" and either have a view of other cultural groups looking down on our own group, or we see our cultural group as the "normal" group, and others in a more negative light.

3. Minimization. This is where we de-emphasize differences, highlighting commonalities. The danger here is that we gloss over differences, never going deeper. Some people do this as a survival mechanism if they are in a non-dominant cultural group; some do this as they are not yet aware of the differences, especially if they are in a dominant cultural group.

4. Acceptance. This is where we have gone deeper into comprehending cultural differences and can accept them, but we may not yet know how to navigate those differences.

5. Adaptation. This orientation reflects an ability to bridge cultural differences. It does not imply that we give up our sense of self or authenticity; it is simply being incarnational or interculturally agile in order to create new cultural spaces where everyone feels they belong.

How self-aware are we of the way we relate to others? Are we growing and developing in our ability to reach across differences?

Three Colors of Worldview

Once we understand our level of skill in responding well to cultural differences, we need some cultural frameworks to help us move toward agility. Learning about race, nationality, and ethnicity is important, but that doesn't necessarily help us to understand what makes a person tick. Commonalities may be reflected in certain ethnic groups, but there is so much global migration that ethnic, national, and racial labeling is no longer the most effective way for us to understand our differences. We need to learn to discover people as unique cultural beings.

I am a recent US citizen. I could describe myself as an Asian American, but that is not enough to understand who I am. Asian Americans are not a monolith. They come from an entire continent with vast cultural differences. I have never lived in Asia or in an Asian community, so I am culturally far more British and European than Asian. Any stereotypes one may have about Asian Americans are unlikely to apply to someone like me. Rather than relying primarily on racial or ethnic stereotypes in our

initial interactions with people, we need to learn cultural frameworks that help us recognize cultural preferences based on communication and behavior.

The Three Colors of Worldview[20] (guilt/innocence, honor/shame, power/fear) is one such framework that can provide insights into the cultures around us and the cultures we create in our homes, churches, and workplaces. We begin by identifying our individual cultural worldviews, understanding our own "self-culture." Self-cultural analysis allows us to connect our unique cultural wiring to another person's unique cultural wiring. This creates a space where we can build beneficial relationships, resolve conflict faster, and equip ourselves to be interculturally agile.

Culture can be seen as an iceberg in which only the surface parts are observable. Food, clothing, language, music—these parts of culture are above the surface. The next layer of culture is just below the surface: our different attitudes and approaches to life. The next layer contains our norms and values, our rules for success, and the ways we communicate. For instance, do we use linear communication, sharing information with our listeners in a clear and ordered way? Or do we use circular communication, with a more interactive exchange among a group of people around a central topic of discussion?

Color wheels show three distinct colors—red, yellow, and blue—that can combine to make endless variations of colors. The Three Colors of Worldview are distinct worldviews, but you will never find a person or a community with a cultural worldview that is purely one of the three. Each person has some combination of the three worldviews, and each worldview is a reaction to an environment. Distinct groups of people might prefer one of the three worldviews. It is important to note that no worldview is better or worse than another. They are simply different and have healthy and unhealthy expressions.

Guilt/Innocence

Those who have a predominantly guilt/innocence worldview are focused on doing the right thing and avoiding the wrong thing. They are raised to ask questions, to find the correct answers, and to prove their innocence when necessary. They appreciate a robust legal system and written agreements. They are likely to value direct communication and an individualistic outlook on life. Christians who have this worldview are

[20] www.interculturalagility.com. I am a certified practitioner of the Knowledge-Workx intercultural agility framework of which the Three Colors of Worldview and Twelve Dimensions of Culture are a part.

often focused on the effects of sin and God's forgiveness.

In talking about his experience of spiritual direction with Australian Aboriginals, spiritual director Carl Starkloff describes the fact that "aboriginals . . . were scarcely able at all to discourse on a history of personal sin." He describes whites as having "sin culture" or "guilt culture" whereas Aboriginals have "shame culture."[21]

Honor/Shame

Those who have a predominantly honor/shame worldview are more focused on their community than who they are as an individual. Their actions are closely connected to the will of their family, tribe, or community. They highly value relationships and will prioritize their relational interactions over efficiency or rules. They are likely to favor indirect communication as more honoring, or face-saving. Christians who have this worldview are often focused on the glory of God, or how God lifts us out of our shame.

Many cultural groups have a more collectivist worldview, including most Asian, Middle Eastern, Latine, and African cultures.

> When a Western person, formed in this worldview of the importance of the person and his or her rights and responsibilities, meets an African in the direction relationship, they meet someone whose experience of the self is distinctly different. In contrast to the West, the African individual does not exist apart from the community. The classic phrasing of this intrinsic relationship comes from John Mbiti: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[22]

In a 2020 Antiracism Discipleship Pathway group discussing racism directed toward African Americans, I witnessed two people respond to the same event. An Asian woman replied, "When I heard about that, I felt shame." A white woman said, "When I heard about that, I felt guilt." I almost laughed at how classic their response was, but I too was feeling guilt.

---

21 Carl F. Starkloff, "Interiority and the 'Universe of Discourse'" in Susan Rakoczy, ed., *Common Journey, Different Paths: Spiritual Direction in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 55–56.

22 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 108–9, quoted by Susan Rakoczy, in *Common Journey, Different Paths*, 14.

Power/Fear

People with a predominantly power/fear worldview have a strong awareness of hierarchy. They are aware of the power dynamics in a group of people, in their workplace, church, or broader community, and are likely to interact with people in response to that power dynamic. A person with more power has more freedom to empower and give life to others and to speak directly to others. A person with less power might need to align themselves with someone with more power and speak to them more indirectly. Christians holding this worldview are often keenly aware of the power of God and the works of the enemy. In my experience growing up in charismatic churches, they often reflect a power/fear worldview, both in their view of spirituality and in the way leadership functions. One spiritual director's view of traditional Black spirituality describes a power/fear worldview:

> The nature and being of God in black spirituality are best understood when one pictures God as the Almighty One who is all-powerful, who rules the universe, and who controls all people. Almost always the traditional black prayer opens with a line addressed specifically to "Almighty God."[23]

Many BIPOC Americans I have talked to about the Three Colors of Worldview say they can function in an innocence/guilt working environment because the American educational system has taught them to. At home, however, they may relate to their family and friends with an honor/shame or power/fear worldview.

Three Colors of Worldview in the Gospel

We see all three of these worldviews at the Fall in Genesis 3.

> When man sinned, three great conditions came upon mankind. By sinning man broke God's law and consequently was in a position of guilt. By sinning man also broke God's relationship and consequently was in a position of shame. Finally, when man sinned he broke God's trust and was from that point, in a position of fear.[24]

---

[23] Maurice J. Nutt, "Trouble Don't Last Always: Toward a Spirituality of Hope" in Brown, "Praying without Ceasing," 18.

[24] Roland Muller, *The Messenger, the Message, and the Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter* (Rosthern, SK: CanBooks, 2013), 113.

Ephesians shows us how, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the good news of Jesus Christ is expressed through all three worldviews:

> **Guilt/Innocence:** "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (1:7a). "But God, who is rich in mercy . . . even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (2:4a, 5a).
>
> **Honor/Shame:** "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (1:5a). "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (2:19, cf. 2:12–13).
>
> **Power/Fear:** " . . . the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come" (1:19–21).

Jayson Georges encourages us that "reading Ephesians three-dimensionally helps Christians fully perceive 'the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight.'"[25] (1:7b–8). Beginning to see the movement of God from all three worldview lenses makes our vision much more expansive.

Each worldview has a healthy and an unhealthy expression. Directors can help directees live into the healthy side of that worldview by asking how their worldview shows up in their relationship with God, self, others, and their environment.

When we are unsure what worldview people have, applying the following "litmus test" to our interactions helps care for people well, no matter their worldviews. We can ask ourselves, "What is the right thing to do? What is the honoring thing to do? What is the empowering and life-giving thing to do?"

The sister framework to the Three Colors of Worldview is the Twelve Dimensions of Culture. Here are two examples:

---

[25] Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Power Cultures* (New York: Time Press, 2017), 9.

Communication: Are we direct or indirect communicators? Do we say what we're thinking bluntly and honestly? Or do we ensure that we preserve the honor of the person we're speaking with, and use more gentle language, communicate via a third party or a parable?

Expression: Do we reveal or conceal our emotions? Do we show everything we are thinking and feeling freely, or are we more careful with the emotions we express, to appear more professional?

We will not describe all twelve dimensions here, but those who participate in an Intercultural Agility cohort based on the KnowledgeWorkx frameworks can take the Three Colors of Worldview and Twelve Dimensions of Culture assessments and practice using these frameworks.

Creating New Cultural Spaces

Intercultural agility is the ability to create new cultural spaces with greater empathy and more effective communication. This is something we do by anticipating, recognizing, and adjusting to the culturally defined behavior of others. To grow in this area, we need to be incarnational like Jesus and take on the humble posture of a cultural learner, something that requires us to be open to and flexible about how the Holy Spirit might call us to practice spiritual direction. How might God be inviting us to respond today? What might it look like for spiritual directors to grow as ambassadors of reconciliation for Jesus?

I want to conclude with the image of the intercultural heavenly worshipers in Revelation, depicted so vividly in the First Nations Version of the New Testament.

> After this I saw a great crowd of people, too many to count, from every nation, tribe, clan, and language. They were standing before the seat of honor and before the Lamb, dressed in pure white regalia, holding palm tree branches in their hands.
>
> They lifted their voices and shouted, "The power to set us free and make us whole belongs to the Great Spirit who sits upon the seat of honor, and to the Lamb!"
>
> All the spirit-messengers who encircled the seat of honor, along with the elders and the four living spirit animals, humbled themselves and fell face down on the ground before the

> Great Spirit to give him the honor that he deserves.
>
> "Aho! It is so!" They said with one voice. "Praise and honor and wisdom and respect and power and strength belong to the Great Spirit to the time beyond the end of all days! Aho! It is so!"[26]

In our practice of spiritual direction, may "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

[26] Rev 7:9–12, *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

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.

Book Reviews

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

Linda Swanson, Chicago, Illinois

Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

John E. Phelan, emeritus professor of New Testament, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

Mark Safstrom, associate professor of Scandinavian Studies, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois

Nicolas Herman, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *Practice of the Presence,* translated by Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2022), 225 pages, $27.

It's not easy to read the spiritual classics. Monks and nuns of centuries past don't speak the way we're used to, and their thoughts and experiences can seem too strange, too deep. However, reading Brother Lawrence is like easing into the shallow end of the pool. Anyone can identify with his desire to be in conversation with God at work and at rest. His simple practice of thinking of God throughout the day makes it clear and doable.

Translations make a difference too. Carmen Acevedo Butcher's expanded edition of *Practice of the Presence* offers fresh translations of the conversations and letters alongside newly translated spiritual maxims and last words. Readers are now able to read the complete works of Brother Lawrence in a style of English as informal and intimate as the original French. She states her desire to let the translation reflect the beauty, calm,

and inclusivity of the original while observing changes in the language we use today. It makes sense to use plural pronouns "they" and "them" when Brother Lawrence speaks of the triune God. Consulting the original 1692 publication corrected errors in the modern French editions. In some instances, masculine pronouns had been inserted; in another, the misreading of one letter produced "in it," instead of "in faith."

Acevedo Butcher's introductions to the works and their meaning for her life are moving devotional reading as well. She begins with a short autobiographical story. Wandering the streets and highways of rural northwest Georgia in a depressed state, she looked down to find a book with a tire mark on its back flap. "Standing in the red dust on the side of that road, I read words on a random page in that book-likely-whooshed-off-a-distracted-owner's-car-roof, and I knew I'd found a friend" (p. 2).

She hopes a similar experience will come to those who meet Brother Lawrence—the man she calls *Friar d'Amour*—in her new translation of his book. This "Brother of Love" also suffered years of depression and inner turmoil in religious practice before he decided to do all things for the love of God, especially the tasks he disliked in the monastery kitchen. After that, the times of work and prayer hardly seemed different to him.

Conversations with a younger priest recalled his conviction that God is present always: "He said we must act very simply with God, and talk to Love freely, asking them for help with things as life happens" (p. 127). He said the simple practice of turning his thoughts toward God at all times was easy, though hard to make a habit. Acevedo Butcher uses "stumbling" as the best way to convey his word for failure; it speaks of the hope of getting up and going on.

His letters counseled others about suffering, drawing from his own injury that left him lame throughout life and bedridden in his last years. "Love God even in your weakness, offering them your sufferings from time to time, even during your worst pain. . . . I will help you in this with my poor, small prayers" (p. 111).

Acevedo Butcher supplements the translations with a short biography of the war-damaged young soldier who became the wise, serene elder we remember today. Also included are a timeline and eyewitness recollections of the "catastrophic seventeenth century" of war and plague.

I compared the new translation to the brown pages of my paperback and noted a few places where I preferred the old: ". . . let go once and for all of everything we recognize as not tending toward God" (p. 133) in the new translation doesn't sound as urgent to me as ". . . all consists

in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead to God" (p. 22). But there are not many such places. The warmth and simplicity of the beloved friar distinguishes this translation as well. We are fortunate to have this new reflection of his wisdom.

PAUL KOPTAK

Harriette Shelton Dover, edited by Darleen Fitzpatrick, *Tulalip, From My Heart: An Autobiographical Account of a Reservation Community* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023), 344 pages, $27.

My father died in 1965, when I was eleven. He was a church planter in rural and remote parts of Washington and Oregon. In my before-school years, dad sometimes subbed for the pastor at a church on the Quinaults Indian Reservation. My first best friend lived across the street from the church. Each time my dad acted as substitute pastor, my little friend and I were inseparable.

She might be the reason I knew there had to be more to the stories I read as a young, avid reader. *The Little House on the Prairie* series and all the books I could find about the Oregon Trail and the beautiful Willamette Valley were told from the pioneers' perspective of facing danger and hardship to settle a new land. That was fascinating to my young imagination, but not satisfying. I knew there had to be more. How had little girls felt when the wagon trains passed their villages, muddied their streams, hunted for game, and depleted their food supply? Were they afraid or worried? Did they want to learn a new language, make some new friends? I wanted to read their voices.

Which leads to why *Tulalip, From My Heart*, by Harriette Shelton Dover, captured my attention. Dover tells the history and stories of her Snohomish people and other Pacific Northwest people in a way that makes me feel we are sitting on her front porch as she gazes into the years gone by. I sometimes feel her gaze turn to me when she has to share a hard truth. I see questions in her prose; "Can you believe this? Will you believe me?"

Dover begins her history with the events particular to Treaty Day, January 22, 1855. From the oral history her family passed down to her,

she relates the years prior to the arrival of the pioneers and after the treaty was signed. Her history becomes more personal after her birth in 1904 and when she began attending the reservation's boarding school as a seven-year-old.

Dover wrote this book with the help of one of her college instructors, who became her project assistant and editor. Darleen Fitzpatrick helped Dover write the story she'd always wanted to tell. They met once a week to tape-record history that had been passed down from great-grandparents to parents, from parents to Dover. Fitzpatrick determined to keep the narrative in Dover's voice so readers can sense Dover speaking directly to them, as if they are her friends.

This is the secret to this book's storytelling success. Sentences sometimes lead to rabbit holes; deep wounds are brought up again. While she is sharing about a topic, one memory may remind her of another. In this style, the logistics of daily life—food, starvation, illness, education, transportation, religion, and relationships—are written about from the depths of her experience and, as the title says, from her heart.

LINDA SWANSON

Carl McColman, *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism: An Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2023), 402 pages, $22.

Don't be put off by the title or the cover (which initially reminded me of books on trucks and trains that I read to my kids during their preschool days). This book is one of those volumes that should be leatherbound with gold lettering and vellum pages. There is rich treasure here that mirrors that of Scripture in its revelatory nature of ancient historical spirituality too long ignored by the self-help devotionality popularly sold today.

Writings about the pursuit of spirituality tends to teeter between the formulaic and the fantastic. This book is neither. What McColman has presented in this updated volume builds on his former work *The Little Book of Christian Mysticism*, expanding its breadth with no pretension as to comprehensiveness. You will not get all your questions answered,

but your inner spiritual appetite will be deepened and aroused in ways perhaps previously unconsidered.

As the author states in his introduction, "mysticism is Christianity's best-kept secret." This is a prescient topic in today's world disillusioned by modernity's linear theologies and systematized spirituality. Recovering the keys to mysticism is to literally step back into an adventurous future whereby the stages of purification (purgation) transform to illumination, ultimately seeking the light of an intimate union with God, in a process all driven by grace (pp. 222–3, 228).

As an instructor who touches on the topic of mysticism as found in all major world religions, I found McColman's explanations of the Christian traditions of mysticism revelatory, inspiring, and challenging. Anyone desiring a spiritual life that opens the door into the deeper mystery of God finds the answer is simple, but the process requires everything. To discover that the essentials for entering into this mystery are readily available now brings eternity into the present.

This book is not for the cloistered community. Indeed, it may surprise many readers to discover that modern mystics such as Howard Thurman found some of his most life-altering encounters with the mysteries of faith not in a monastery but in a train station. "Mysticism isn't about keeping your hands clean and hiding in a separate life or community. Rather it impels you to get those hands dirty—always in the service of love" (p. 5).

The author asserts that each believer is uniquely equipped to be a mystic in the way that she or he is designed by God to be. This is not a one-size-fits-all faith to be copied identically over and over. Instead, several prayer practices are introduced, encouraging all readers to develop their own spiritual life of prayer, meditation, and contemplation.

For those seeking to find a faith deeper than formulas, I recommend this book, particularly the last chapter on "Living a Mystical Life." The three appendices guide a reader through the historical complexity of earlier mystics who wrote metaphorically in genres unfamiliar to us today. This truly is a treasure of resources, re-acquainting the reader in refreshing ways to aspects of the ancient Christian tradition that are desperately needed under today's version of a faith weighed down by postmodern deconstructionism.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: Harper, 2023), 512 pages, $25.

Tim Alberta was raised in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. His father was a gifted, learned pastor who had grown his congregation in conservative southwest Michigan from a few hundred to several thousand. Alberta himself was a church brat practically raised in the building, since both his parents served the congregation. He was, and is, a solidly traditional, conservative evangelical who, like many, has struggled to understand what happened to evangelicalism. How is it that a group that had loudly denounced the sins of former President Bill Clinton so willingly supported "a lecherous, impenitent scoundrel" like former President Donald Trump? And this support, he argues, was no longer "nakedly transactional," voting for the "lesser of two evils." It had morphed into a level of passion and enthusiasm that was as perplexing as it was powerful. How could one account for the fact that someone like Eric Metaxas had even professed himself willing to die for Trump?

In 2019 Alberta published *American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump*. It was strongly critical of the then president and the movement he had started. While he was being interviewed about the book, he tells us, his beloved father unexpectedly died of a heart attack. Alberta rushed home for the funeral. During the viewing Alberta learned that that very day the book had been attacked by Rush Limbaugh. Standing in line, ostensibly to receive comfort, he was greeted "not primarily with condolences or encouragement or mourning but with commentary about Rush Limbaugh and Donald Trump." Many of his "comforters" were angry, "cold and confrontational. One man questioned whether I was truly a Christian. Another asked if I was still on 'the right side.' All while Dad was in a box a hundred feet away." This set Alberta on a quest to discover what was happening to the evangelicalism he had known and loved.

In subsequent chapters he describes the experiences of the famous and less than famous when they dared to question the received wisdom of right-wing media, both secular and Christian. John Torres, a thoughtful, conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church pastor was called "woke," a Marxist and socialist, an advocate of "critical race theory" for daring to raise questions of racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Alberta's father's successor saw his congregation melt away when he refused to follow the hard-edged political tack of other churches in his

area. And then there were solid conservative figures like Russell Moore, Tim Keller, and David French. Metaxas called Keller "Hitler's favorite kind of pastor." One John Zmirak called French "a Nazi collaborator." Tucker Carlson attacked Russell Moore as gutless, commenting bizarrely, "Where's Russell Moore and all the other breastfeeding Christians when that happens—as the U.S. government cracks down on Christianity."

It seemed to Alberta that there was a category of Christians longing for persecution, longing to have a reason to rebel, to fight. I was struck with how many right-wing Christians he describes saw COVID-19 as a scam and pandemic restrictions as a plot to destroy American Christianity—a view that perplexed many health care professionals and government officials! Chapter after chapter demonstrated not only how the lunatic fringe had made it into mainstream but how the religious fig leaf was increasingly being removed to show a nakedly aggressive movement determined to bring the government and society to heel, not through the gospel, but by acquiring power to rule. Alberta's book demonstrates that the support of vast numbers of evangelicals for Donald Trump is not an anomaly, not a historical "blip," but at the heart of what it means to be evangelical. It makes clear that evangelicalism is now, and has been for many years, a substantially white, Christian nationalist movement that has distorted or abandoned the traditional theology that once gave the movement its shape.

I cannot finish this review without mentioning two key sections of the book. Alberta takes a long and disturbing look at Jerry Falwell Jr. and Liberty University. This section of the book is well worth a careful read. His discussion of the sexual abuse crisis among the Southern Baptists and the heroism of a young Southern Baptist lawyer named Rachael Denhollander is one of the few bright spots in the book. This is both one of the most compelling and most painful books I have read in years. I highly recommend it.

JOHN E. PHELAN

Marion Goldman and Steven Pfaff, *The Spiritual Virtuoso: Personal Faith and Social Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 216 pages, $29.

What do Martin Luther, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and Steve Jobs have to do with one another? According to sociology professors Goldman and Pfaff, the thread that weaves these and other historical figures together is the degree to which they can be understood as "spiritual virtuosi." Whereas a virtuoso in the artistic sense pursues the mastery, refinement, or perfection of an art form, a spiritual virtuoso pursues the mastery of a religious discipline or lifestyle. Expanding on a concept coined by Max Weber a century ago, the authors examine what it means to be a virtuoso and identify how an individual's "personal virtuosity unites with collective action" (p. 1). While a spiritual virtuoso's pursuit of perfection may be, and often is, an individual experience, what is remarkable about the virtuosi in this book is that their pursuit of virtuosity contributed to large-scale cultural transformations: the Reformation (Luther), the anti-slavery movement (the Grimkes), and the Human Potential Movement (Jobs). Goldman and Pfaff's book is an ambitious, sweeping exploration of 500 years of history that seeks to clarify the connection between spiritual activism and social transformation.

This book bears potential relevance to *Quarterly* readers in several ways; for those interested in church history, the authors present Martin Luther in the perspective of comparative-historical sociology, and make passing connections to Pietism, as well. Similarly, the analysis of the Grimkes brings this novel approach to evangelical revival movements and American Protestant church history. For pastors and laypeople engaged in ministry contexts, the book can shed light on how this virtuosity has influenced their own traditions and practices, as well as how trends in contemporary Christian ministries can be related to larger societal trends assumed to be wholly secular.

If evangelical leaders read this with critical self-reflection in mind, this book may also help analyze and deconstruct some of the mythos surrounding megachurch pastors and popular spiritual leaders. One important takeaway from the book is that religious movements succeed not necessarily because of the rightness of their theology, but because of their appeal to individuals looking for authentic self-realization in a given societal context. This may be an unsettling discovery for some, as

it analyzes what charismatic social leaders do, rather than taking their message at face value. Furthermore, while a religious leader may be identified as "charismatic," this term often goes undefined, even by scholars; a person is deemed charismatic because they have charisma. By contrast, the authors seek to remedy this by explaining the kinds of qualities charismatic leaders demonstrate, and what kinds of measurable activities they engage in to connect their own personal convictions to society.

Luther is presented as having been a pioneer in modern spiritual virtuosity, providing patterns of thought that influenced twentieth-century cultural figures like Steve Jobs. The authors explain that, as Luther inspired and equipped "ordinary people [to] reach toward sanctification without focusing their lives on cloistered spiritual perfection" (p. 15), similarly Steve Jobs's message was that "people could discover their authentic selves and their higher purpose through personal technology" (p. 4). While some of the historical virtuosi can be seen as representing conservative values, the authors assert that what unites all their examples is a democratic impulse; "when spiritual virtuosi disrupt official boundaries and challenge institutional authority, they always work for more access to spiritual possibilities and a greater range of religious choices by democratizing spiritual privilege" (p. 3). This democratic impulse often prioritized the conversion of the individual, over and against top-down reforms. The authors claim that "[…] activist spiritual virtuosi have emphatically believed that they should not implement their ideals by means of the kinds of external force that prophetic virtuosi might willingly use. They seek external change through their supporters' interior transformations and their adversaries' wholehearted conversions. […] they feel that they must lead everyone to remake himself or herself […]" (p. 33).

Pietism is identified as a particularly vital outgrowth of the virtuosity of Luther, replicated by countless of his readers on the individual level. "Lutheran virtuosity found its most authentic expression in Pietism, a spiritual movement at the faith's margins. Pietist leaders advocated for active, vital personal religion against the academic orthodoxy and conservatism of the newly established Protestant churches. They published moving appeals, created charitable institutions, and organized devotional networks, but refrained from breaking with the established churches" (p. 93). Educational institutions and mass communication through print were mechanisms that connected virtuosi with large segments of society, gathered people into movements, and directed them toward identifiable goals. For example, Luther's reformation was implemented through print and through the University of Wittenberg, at which an estimated forty

percent of the first generation of European reformers studied (p. 87). This continued into nineteenth-century evangelicalism, as Angelina Grimke and Theodore Dwight Weld effected their abolitionist movement through the "mobilization of professional agents" who worked to start abolition societies at the local level, thus duplicating the work en masse (p. 109).

The authors, as sociologists, focus on the human side of religion and refrain from evaluating the authenticity of the virtuosi's encounter with the divine. Their focus is instead on how these historical figures acted on their ideals, their relationships to ordinary people and to the dominant political order, and their personal practices. These comparisons lead the authors to identify at least four types of virtuosi, for example, ascetic (St. Francis), ethical (Mother Teresa), prophetic (Buddha), and activist (Martin Luther King Jr.). There are also combinations of these, such that a virtuoso may be described as an "ethical prophetic activist," which the authors identify for the case of MLK.

Jobs is identified as an "aspiring" virtuoso in that his interest in pursuing sanctification through Eastern mysticism was ultimately crowded out by myriad other interests. Nevertheless, Jobs "channeled his quest for spiritual perfection into the business world" (p. 20). This resulted in Jobs's association with the so-called Human Potential Movement, which "embraced every spiritual system that enabled individuals to create more vital, meaningful lives on earth and improve the world" (p. 124). This movement began in the 1960s, with groups like the Esalen Institute, and later engaged Jobs and other cultural luminaries, including Oprah and her "Life You Want Weekends." "Oprah's intensive, and expensive, weekends resembled the dramatic revivals and camp meetings that spread from England to the American frontier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," albeit with only vague references to God and no references to sin (p. 152).

This book challenges an assumption about modern spirituality, namely that this current age is an increasingly secular one. The authors suggest that religion may be as impactful as ever, despite the decline of formal religious adherence. This is grounded in a distinction between formal religious participation and more diffuse personalization of spiritual practices in everyday life. "It is fairly common to classify congregational faiths as religions and refer to dedicated spiritual practices as spirituality. […] This rigid approach ignores the ways that people bring parts of traditional faiths to collectives…" (p. 11). The authors argue that the decline of formal religion is not synonymous with the decline of spiritual virtuosity, and rather that modern social movements since the 1960s

must be understood as part of a long trajectory stretching back to the Reformation. "Spiritual virtuosity is clearly present today, even if many virtuosi activists no longer claim membership in or inspiration from any established faith" (p. 68).

This is a scholarly book, and the authors make no value judgments about the virtuosi they profile. Their aim is to explain how spiritual virtuosity is connected to collective movements, as well as how seemingly unconnected religious and non-religious movements borrow methods and practices from one another. As such it offers the ecclesiastical reader a valuable and provocative outsider's perspective on how religious leadership functions.

MARK SAFSTROM