



Spiritual Direction without Naming God

Richard Boileau and Stéfán Thériault

Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence.
—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*

In an age that is becoming increasingly secular, spiritual directors must face the question of how to relate to people who neither think nor speak in terms that we typically associate with religious experience, or in categories that have been used historically to understand and communicate spiritual phenomena.

Many, if not most, spiritual directors limit their efforts to accompanying individuals who confess adherence to particular religious traditions. This is where they feel comfortable and confident that they can make a contribution to the development of the spiritual directee's faith and the integration of its practice in daily life. Such interventions are often fruitful and gratifying.

This option leaves unanswered, however, the question of how to relate to people for whom religions, old or new, have little or no resonance. Are we to assume that the Spirit of God is not active in them? Or that their quest and, therefore, our effort to facilitate its progress would be futile?

This article is based on the natural and universal drive for self-transcendence and suggests how a person can accompany spiritual directees who have never had or have at some stage rejected religious traditions and language. Our supposition is that each human is a spiritual being. Without exception, each person is endowed with a particular identity, giftedness, and mission, and is continuously—though often unconsciously—called by God through their intelligence, affectivity, and actions to greater authenticity, virtue, and true happiness by the achievement of meaning.

This fundamental reality can be expressed in religious or secular language. The challenge is to become sensitive to the corresponding religious meaning of commonly used secular terms and expressions. For instance, a spiritual movement may be expressed as a deep and persistent desire or a feeling of agitation. In both cases, we understand the life-giving breath of God to be present.

Similarly, discernment of a vocation or particular mission may be expressed as happiness or frustration regarding certain lifestyle or career choices or decisions.

While it is important that the spiritual director operate from an understanding of the human person that flows from religious belief, it is not essential that God be explicitly mentioned or that traditional religious language be invoked for significant progress in self-transcendence to occur. Even euphemisms such as “Higher Power” or “The Source” are not necessary and may even be counterproductive if they are assumed to be disguises for “God-speak.” Accompanying a person on a purely human level can be a deeply spiritual experience. Language can facilitate understanding but, if it does not match the spiritual directee's words and expressions, it can also divert our attention to concepts that do not correspond to the lived experience of spiritual directees. Besides, there is something refreshing about exploring the reality of spiritual activity beyond the limitations of our own linguistic conventions.

The goal of walking with someone on a journey through the maze of existential questions is ultimately to help liberate the innate spirituality within, often by degrees. Our role is to help spiritual directees become more attuned to God's truth and love within them, a presence that is often shrouded by fear, self-doubt, and self-deceit. Our hope is to be able to assist in the deployment of God-given gifts that are either paralyzed or impaired by woundedness so that they can assume the mission that is suited to their true identity. This is where they will find the happiness and meaning for which they yearn.

A distinction must therefore be made between religious and spiritual direction. The purpose of spiritual direction is not religious teaching or counseling. Definitions that explicitly refer to God or Christ or any particular deity are helpful in the application of certain methodologies, but they are too limiting in response to the frequent opportunities that confront us due to the growing reality of compassionate humanism, entrenched agnosticism, and aversions that are borne out of painful experiences associated with organized religion.

In a lecture at the Jesuit School of Theology in the fall



of 1995, Sandra Schneiders, IHM, a professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spiritual at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, USA, proposed a definition of spirituality that is helpful: “The experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward ultimate value.” Our job is to help spiritual directees become more deeply conscious of the dynamics and meaning of their experiences and to integrate these with the authentic content of their identity, giftedness, and purpose. In the process, notions such as personal responsibility, the human good, and the discernment of desires will almost inevitably be raised.

This approach is more likely than traditional ones to appeal not only to persons of no professed faith, but also to those who understand spirituality to be the heart of all human activity, including economic, social, political, and family life. For such people, conventional terms commonly used to describe religious experience may fail to adequately represent their own experiences or beliefs. Secular language is often more meaningful to those who speak it, even when its definition is not as rigorous as we might wish it to be.

Human beings are intrinsically spiritual. The breath of God (*spirit*, from Latin *spīritus*) that is infused in each person is life itself. It sustains the body, the mind, and the heart, and it returns to God with each exhalation. It forms a vital but invisible bond between the creator and the created, between the lover and the beloved. We neither determine its provenance nor the purpose to which it is directed: “The wind blows where it will, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). Our work with directees is spiritual inasmuch as it helps people to let go of any hindrance in the flow of God’s Spirit, any resistance to the unvarnished truth of who they are in God’s eyes, and any blockage in the love to which their mission is ordained. Such letting go is difficult. It requires healing because resistance sticks stubbornly to deep-seated anguish that stems from multiple wounds of which spiritual directees are often unaware.

The following method and process were developed at the Centre Le Pèlerin (The Pilgrim Centre; www.lepelerin.org). Its mission is to respond to today’s spiritual

quest with training and accompaniment that is based on a psycho-spiritual approach, which in turn is rooted in Christian anthropology. More specifically, the mission is to develop and supervise competent spiritual directors; to operate as a focal point for research and reflection on matters related to spirituality; to provide a place of welcome and accompaniment that seeks to integrate diverse facets of the human person; to make available paths of conversion, healing, and transformation; and to promote an ecclesiology that is based on these values. The method and process have proven to be effective in facilitating any accompaniment, but they lend themselves also to secular expressions of the inner journey. We begin with the initial request, God’s call, the spiritual movement, the inner dynamic, and the mission of persons being accompanied. Each stage expresses a profound spiritual reality, which is often loosely expressed in purely secular terms.

For instance, in the first phase, a spiritual directee is in effect responding to a call that may be clear or vague, insightful or masked by layers of confusing sensations. The desire that motivates the directee to seek help may be born out of a simple perception that something explicit needs to change, be alleviated or discerned, or it may reflect a complex of distressing thoughts, emotions, and somatic symptoms. On the other hand, it may be the fruit of insights and positive developments in a person’s life that may be expressed as an eagerness to accelerate or consolidate gains already made. Whether they have been prompted to seek help by pain or joy, we encourage spiritual directees to identify impacts on the body, mind, and heart of their current experiences with as much precision as they can muster through the use of language that is familiar and meaningful to them. The terms, expressions, and images that they use will become the instruments of our accompaniment.

As spiritual directors, our theological understanding is that the request is their initial response to grace, God’s call to healing, authenticity, and mission, but that in some situations to say as much would impede the building of a safe and trusting relationship. In some cases, this could sever fledgling ties. Rather than use religious imagery, some may choose to speak of the voice of conscience, others of an inner voice, intuition, or the call of life or of the higher self. All such terms provide a link to the vital movement of the Spirit.



The request may be broad: “I just want to be myself,” or “I want to be loved as I am, without having to prove anything.” Many express the desire to be freed from anxiety, grief, or addictions. Others confess that they feel their lives are lackluster, lacking in meaning. Each time that we help a person to connect with their deepest desires, we help them to connect to God’s call and allow them to become more human, more authentic.

As persons of faith, we know that God is not only calling the person to healing, but also to growth. Each person is the incarnation of a word that already exists in the mind of God. As writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton expressed it, “God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself” (37). The spiritual movement toward incarnation of this unique word is the work of the Holy Spirit. It does not need to be named as such to become a significant force for transformation. It is often felt simply as a source of energy or an instinct to survive tragedy and even thrive in those moments as well as in more auspicious times. It is manifest as a drive to choose healthier lifestyles or relationships; to favor motives that promote values such as justice, truth, beauty, and the common good.

Inevitably, the spiritual movement creates agitation, discomfort, and even distress when it collides with the painful legacy of past hurts that are woven into the psychological dynamic of a person. This complex tangle of often unconscious sources of feelings such as alienation, shame, anguish, and fear distort spiritual directees’ perceptions of their true identity and giftedness. It deafens their hearing of God’s call and diffuses the clarity with which their mission may be understood. The spiritual director seeks to promote courage for the directee to acknowledge God’s call to conversion by the path of greater authenticity. As the avoidance of pain is a strong inclination, encouragement is often necessary.

God’s call to everyone is based on a universal imperative to love, but each person is invited to do so in a manner that is rooted in their unique spiritual identity and that leverages the particular set of gifts or charisms that has been bestowed by God already. This purpose is the person’s mission, which together with their state of living (partnered or single; lay, consecrated, or ordained) constitutes their specific vocation.

For the person whose references are not religious, this vocation is very often understood simply as the purpose

or destiny of their lives. The role for which their existence is ordained is, in effect, the ground that supports their life’s meaning. A crisis in meaning often brings people to spiritual direction—emptiness, fragmentation, or futility, feelings that suggest to us a state at or near the point of spiritual desolation. Simple and common words can indicate a lack of awareness or alignment with their giftedness and mission. This is why we often hear as part of the request a desire for happiness and meaning, which are secular ciphers for spiritual joy and hope, the cravings of their heart and mind for God.

The cry for happiness and meaning is also a plea for love: to be loved and to love authentically. It is also a cry for inner alignment and connectedness with others from a heart that feels deprived of life-giving relationships.

What we propose in this article is a process that begins with the act of **welcoming**. Subsequent elements consist of exploration, appropriation, deepening, and communion. These are not linear stages. For example, moments of communion may occur, even fleetingly, at any time. But it is helpful to bear in mind that the process must always start with authentic welcoming.

The spiritual director’s demeanor, from the first greeting, whether in person, by telephone, or by e-mail, should be marked by hospitality. From the beginning and throughout the process, the spiritual director should exhibit a contemplative reverence for the mystery of the other and a compassionate attitude toward the burdens that they carry. Those of us who view our work from a religious perspective must never cease to understand the spiritual dimensions of our engagement with directees. This perspective allows us to enter into this first phase prayerfully, vitally conscious of the Holy Spirit’s primary role and the grace that we need to be attuned to the presence of the divine in us, in the spiritual directee as well as in the relationship that is emerging with the directee.

The central task in this phase of the process is to create the comfort and confidence that are necessary for the arduous work that lies ahead. The spiritual director must establish the conditions for a safe climate in which spiritual directees can distinguish between their true selves and harmful images or complexes and become conscious of the deepest wounds that impair their capacity to make appropriate choices through the creation or liberation of a unifying center.



As identity is essentially experienced as relational, it is our sacred task to create an environment in which spiritual directees can venture, without fear of judgment or the negative consequences with which they may unconsciously associate their wound, into deeper awareness of the dysfunctional habits that stunt the growth of many of their relationships as well as the gifts that will bring them joy once these are deployed authentically. In effect, we move between two parallel spheres, one kataphatic and the other apophatic, in order to liberate the sacred breath of life—oscillating between the grief of woundedness and the celebration of insights.

First, we encourage them to recognize their strengths, talents, aspirations, qualities, and desires. Experience suggests that this is a progressive process. Few people can identify these spontaneously. Many fail to display more than a few of these attributes in their daily behavior. It takes patience to discover and unpack the God-given giftedness that is unique to each person. In part, this is because we have been socialized to believe that naming gifts is vanity. Difficulty in naming these charisms is also related to their being blocked, devalued, or associated with painful experiences.

For this reason, the apophatic approach seeks to help spiritual directees to disidentify with the negative images that crowd their mind, with the “toxic tapes” from hurtful situations in earlier stages of life that echo like nightmarish refrains each time they try to act authentically, and with the false ideas that they may have about what it means to be a “good” person. In effect, our goal is to help spiritual directees discard as much as possible what is destructive and inauthentic in their lives so that they can make healthier choices and better align their thoughts and actions with their true identity.

While this work does not properly belong to the phase of welcoming, the act of welcoming must create the setting that makes it possible to proceed seamlessly in this direction. This phase is also the time in which foundations are laid and agreements are struck to clarify the commitments and boundaries that are necessary for effective accompaniment.

The second phase in the process is a time of **exploration** during which the spiritual directee is encouraged to recount relevant aspects of her life, including memorable events, significant or peak experiences of joy, and

meaningful moments in which she felt connected to something important. The objective is to help spiritual directees begin to anticipate the journey toward self-realization, to create a desire for a new way of being in the world as well as resilience against the pain that inevitably accompanies all progress toward the unfamiliar object of their desire.

Consequently, this phase will also comprise efforts to explore the darkness from which emanates feelings of anguish such as anxiety and fear, anger and shame, and longing and alienation. During this time, spiritual directees may become aware of, maybe for the first time, the extent of control that these feelings have over their present life. Mining the depth of these feelings, the exploration may also uncover their provenance, intensity, and dynamics that produce the undesirable effects. It is this latter exploration that will reveal the relationship between giftedness and woundedness, and help to explain why the first, which has the capacity to bring zest and joy to life, is often suppressed by and even identified with the second.

The third phase is **appropriation**. The goal is to facilitate the process of taking responsibility for two types of change, both intended to better align the spiritual directee’s life with his true identity. This is done by helping to build up the conscious self, which, in turn, makes healthy choices in support of his newfound authenticity and avoids choices that may starve or deform it. The principal goal is to enter into the freedom of one’s authentic identity and to progressively disappropriate habits, beliefs, and inauthentic relationships that drain life of its vitality and joy, and block the deployment of the spiritual directee’s unique gifts in the service of others. Some obstacles are deeply rooted. Others are hidden behind apparently healthy sub-personalities.

The fourth phase is one of **deepening**, in which the true self becomes incarnated in practical ways as a result of self-surrender to ultimate meaning. This radical shift from self-absorption to self-transcendence is, in effect, like falling in love (Boileau 2013 and 2014). In the truest sense, it is a decisive immersion into Love in an unrestricted way. The spiritual director will experience at this point a strong inclination to refer to God directly because the spiritual directee is now experiencing a great force and must from this point onward submit to its



“Avant-Garde Etude 5” — Lena Karpinsky

guidance. A decision to name God or not will be a matter for careful discernment.

Finally, we come to **communion**, the object of everyone’s deepest desire, whether hidden or acknowledged; the desire to love authentically; the desire for unity with others and harmony among all aspects of the self. Merton wrote, “To live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others, is absolutely necessary if man is to remain human” (55). The desire for communion that God places in each person’s heart leads to the central reality that humans are social in nature and that selfish individualism inevitably leads to desolation. Communion occurs in those moments when the self is intimately linked to the happiness of others, the common good, and the search for ultimate meaning, which we understand to be God.

As stated at the outset of this article, the spiritual directee need not necessarily use religious language for the spiritual director to observe the workings of God’s spirit and to decode secular language as an expression of that profound spiritual reality. We can and must be mindful of what is happening at a spiritual level, even

while echoing the spiritual directee’s secular terms and expressions. What we call the spiritual movement is the breath or Spirit of God that we cannot see, but we can notice its effects in the spiritual directee’s actions, thoughts, and feelings. These reflect both a deep-seated desire to live life in abundance, in truth, and in grace, and the detours along the journey that were caused by imprintings and traumas that have shaped the spiritual directee’s personality, attitudes, and beliefs.

The spiritual directee’s mission is the concrete realization or incarnation of that call. To fully understand one’s mission, some degree of consciousness of the spiritual dimension of life is necessary. This might come about from consideration of religious teaching, or through some sense of the transpersonal self, or the essential quality of self-transcendence in human existence. The amazing thing about one’s particular mission is that it is always an expression of divine love that heals the servant while she is preoccupied with serving others.

People come to spiritual direction because they have heard God’s call, though they may not know it as such.



Often, they are unable or unwilling to fully understand its meaning or implications. In part, this is because of aspects of their inner dynamic, which affect their relationship with themselves, with God, and with others. Complexes, knots, and misconceptions make it difficult for the true self or God to be heard above the cacophony of discordant voices.

Exploration deals with the spiritual directee's various experiences of desire and his search for meaning. Spiritual directors understand that the desire of the human heart, to quote Saint Augustine, is to "rest in God," where all meaning resides—in union with God. God is the object of their desire and search. From a Trinitarian perspective, God is also the subject of that desire and search. The exploration stage of accompaniment endeavors to situate the current state of this desire and the search by focusing on some experiences that bring consolation and others that result in despoliation. In exploration, we discover areas of vulnerability and the need for moral conversion as well as cognitive and behavioral changes. For a spiritual directee to risk the exposure of fragile aspects of the self or the presence of sins of omission or commission that give rise to shame, an atmosphere of trust must exist. The good news is that progress facilitates deeper exploration because it frees the person to shed biases and compulsions and assume the truth of who they are. Truth makes them free to grow in truth.

Appropriation is rebirth from above, or from the transpersonal self—the higher self that is the place of encounter with the living God. It is witnessed by the spiritual director as both an insight and a commitment. We recognize this stage as the moment of realization that all good things come from God and the pivotal time of election to act responsibly in accordance with a life force that is not their exclusive property. What in secular language we call the true self is to the spiritual director an incarnated word that is lovingly conceived in the heart and mind of God.

Appropriation results from the desire for authenticity, which is the fruit of deepening through a movement from identity to mission, from self-interest to other-centredness, from self-satisfaction to the values that are named and articulated in sacred Scripture. In turn, deepening reaches its fullest expression in communion—integration of the self, hospitality toward others, and union with God.

Fragmentation, hostility, and alienation—signs of a life that was previously torn and worn by division—begin to reveal signs of unity. The fruits of the Holy Spirit mark the progress: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22).

In parts of the world where religious practice has dropped off dramatically in recent years, people still sense a need for change, what we would call conversion. They may be gripped by anguish or animated by desire for a better world. Some people will say, for a variety of reasons, that they are opposed to any reference to God, but our understanding is that the impulse that prompts them is a movement of God's Spirit.

In his book *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes, "For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory'" (57). There is a special joy in helping spiritual directees to discover that their insights are glimpses into the vast universe beyond isolation and self-absorption, beyond the limitations of language and concepts, into a transcendent reality that we must have the humility to confess we may not know any better than they do. We must learn to hesitate before the inclination to assume that we understand the other or what God is doing in their life, opening instead in ourselves a larger space for awe and trust. Who knows where such a journey would lead? ■

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