

**FRIENDS OF THE HEART**  
**By Elaine A. Heath\***

Personal faith nurture, the careful tending of one soul's health by another, is in short supply these days. We are hurried people, busy people, estranged people, anemic people. In our haste to go important places and do important things, we have taken the swing off the front porch of our souls, removed the welcome mat, and turned off the lights. It is not that we meant to become isolated. It just happened.

There are seasons in our lives when spiritual direction is more needful, times when we are driven to hang the swing back on the porch and call a trusted friend. While group direction is perhaps adequate for most people most of the time, (small Bible study fellowships, a Sunday School class), at certain junctures in life one-on-one direction is necessary. Adolescent and midlife crises, grief due to death or other loss, times of difficult vocational decision-making, and times of "spiritual darkness" are all times for personal direction. In these contexts, as Adrian van Kaam puts it, spiritual direction is not

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mainly to educate the mind, nor relieve the Christian's bodily, cultural, or psychological needs, but "...to assist his innermost search for his spiritual identity."<sup>1</sup>

The search for spiritual identity is a continuous process for all of us, though, whether in crisis or not. The search for spiritual identity is, quite simply, the search for God. It is the quest of all quests, the homing instinct of the human heart. Without spiritual direction we tend to, in the words of an old country western ballad, "go lookin' for love in all the wrong places." Evelyn Underhill puts her finger on the problem when she speaks of our restlessness, heroisms, and attainments as the effort to "still that strange hunger for some final object of devotion...some great and perfect Act within which your little activity can be merged."<sup>2</sup>

While private, one-way direction is, as van Kaam says, not available to most Christians and is filled with risks,<sup>3</sup> companionable direction is not only accessible, it is a key factor in "stilling the strange hunger." We need companions, fellow travellers who walk with us in our restless, homesick longings, who help us find our way home to the One who is Love. As Simone Weil wrote in a letter to one of her spiritual friends, "... nothing among human things has such power to keep our gaze

fixed ever more intensely upon God, than friendship for the friends of God."<sup>4</sup>

Macarius, one of the outstanding spirit spiritual giants in Eastern Orthodoxy in the last century, writes of the necessity for spiritual direction for anyone serious about a deeper life in Christ: "Whenever we set out firmly to tread the inner path, a storm of temptations and persecutions always assails us. It is because of the dark host that spiritual direction is profitable, nay necessary to us whether we retire to a monastery or continue to live in the world."<sup>5</sup>

What is the "dark host" of which Macarius speaks? It is the evil of this world, both within and without one's own soul. It is also the desolation of some who travel the inner way, seasons that John of the Cross called "dark nights of the soul." For those who love God, there is probably nothing more frightening, more spiritually alienating, yet more purifying than dark nights of the soul. These are seasons when God and things spiritual seem to have evaporated, when the abyss seems to have opened within one's own soul. Spiritual darkness cannot be theologized or psychologized away, nor can it be assuaged by books, sermons, or advice. At such times the thing most needed is the presence, prayer, and love of another. Spiritual darkness, as Kenneth Leech says, is not a pathological condition in the Christian life, "...it is a symbol of the entire

process of movement toward God. Those who enter the night never leave it, though the night changes."<sup>6</sup> Thus we find spiritual companionship a critical need during spiritual desolations--dark nights of the soul.

Surprisingly enough, then, those most in need of spiritual companionship and direction are those whose lives are given over to knowing God. If contemplatives are, as Kenneth Leech says, "the clear eyes of the church," those most in need of special care,<sup>7</sup> mystics and prophets are the heart and mouth, and equally in need. These are the ones who face the abyss both within themselves and mystically, intercessorily, on behalf of the Church. As Paul wrote, they are the ones who "...complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Colossians 1:24). While we may easily argue for the importance of spiritual direction to anyone serious about discipleship, those who are most in need of support and companionship are those most sensitive to the Spirit.

What then, is the end result of good spiritual direction? First, one becomes increasingly aware of the movements within oneself, increasingly able to discern what is true and what is false, what is of the Spirit and what is of "the world, the flesh, and the devil." The Light shines with growing splendor in the thoughts of one's

own heart. Rather than becoming more compulsive about religious duty, the maturing disciple grows more relaxed, less inhibited, more dependent upon God, more accepting and appreciative of life as it unfolds. There is a steady deepening and broadening of prayer. Fearful clinging gives way to generous release of all that one holds dear: people, places, and things. Most telling of all is the increase of love. Those who go into the depths of Christ are lavish, joyous lovers. Their hearts are warm, roomy, hospitable. Laughter and tears spring with equal ease from the fountain of their souls.

Alan Jones speaks of spiritual direction as the force that helps us move from choosing to being chosen. "Spiritual companionship helps me move from being a consumer to being a lover and a friend."<sup>8</sup> It is the fidelity of holy, impassioned love that grows from spiritual companionship. Is this not the flame of God's own heart?

### The Long Tradition

In his landmark work, Soul Friend, Kenneth Leech traces the history of spiritual direction from the early days of Eastern monasticism up to the present. From the start, spiritual directors focused on being, rather than doing. Directors taught by example more than words. The fourth and fifth century desert fathers and mothers

were regarded as just that - spiritual parents. Tilden Edwards describes their style of direction, saying that following the Romanization of the church they "...replaced the bishop and presbyter as representative of Christ, but charismatically, not hierarchically. His guidance was so personal that it often involved the disciples' living in the same cell, and learning from the abba's whole way of being, not just from his words."<sup>9</sup>

Over time in the Western church, spiritual direction came to be associated with the confessional, a responsibility of priests. Even so, during the counter-Reformation contemplatives both among clergy and laity were often sought out as spiritual guides. In the Eastern church the role of the *staretz*, or spiritual guide, remains virtually intact today as it was in the third century.

The phrase "soul friend" is Celtic in origin, coming from ancient pre-Christian spiritual traditions. The *anmchara*, or spiritual guides, were originally Druid shamans who advised Celtic chiefs. Following the advent of Christendom in the British Isles, the name came to signify a Christian spiritual guide.<sup>10</sup>

Spiritual direction has been a part of Protestant spirituality from the beginning, particularly in the form of letter writing. Early Lutheran leader Martin Bucer wrote On the True Cure of Souls (1538), a guide to

pastoral care and spiritual direction ministries. Zwingli advised the occasional use of a spiritual counselor, while Calvin himself gave personal spiritual direction.<sup>11</sup> The great Puritan, Richard Baxter, wrote A Christian Directory (1673) and The Reformed Pastor (1656), urging pastors to provide competent spiritual direction to their charges. It is noteworthy that Baxter, too, believed that strong Christians are the ones most in need of quality spiritual direction.<sup>12</sup>

Within early Wesleyanism, spiritual direction was carried out within class and band meetings as well as through individual relationships. Mutuality and accountability were stressed in these nurturing efforts.

Howard Rice, in his excellent history of Reformed spirituality, lauds the Puritan method of spiritual direction. Rather than being a function of ordained clergy, spiritual guidance was sought among those with the necessary spiritual gifts. "Since Puritanism was a grassroots movement of the people, pastors were not the center of spiritual guidance. People tended to choose their peers. This was especially true of women, who became spiritual guides for one another."<sup>13</sup>

From the earliest times women as well as men have served as spiritual mentors. St. Macrina, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Mme. Jeanne Guyon, and Evelyn Underhill are but a few. Like

female intellectuals and artists, most female spiritual giants have remained in obscurity because of patriarchal ecclesiastical structures and historiography.

Interestingly, Tilden Edwards remarks that in his experience, he has found more potentially gifted women than men as spiritual guides.<sup>14</sup> Some would say the discrepancy is because women are inherently more intuitive and nurturing than men. Others would attribute the phenomenon to social conditioning. (And some, we might add, would take general offense at Edwards' observation!) Edwards' comments about spiritual quality and sexual complementarity are worthy of full quotation:

There have been recorded Christian women spiritual guides from the early days of the church onward. These included guides of men and mutual spiritual friendship with them (the most well-known perhaps being the relationship of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila). There seems to be an unquenchable sexual equality and complementarity in spiritual wisdom that cannot be held down, even though oppressed. (This contrasts with the much more uniformly male dominance of speculative theology and doctrinal development.)<sup>15</sup>



Whether spiritual companions are male or female, (ideally we will have both), their gifts help us to find and embrace reality. In the words of Evelyn Underhill, they assist in "...the transformation of our personal, professional, and political life into something more consistent with our real situation as small, dependent, fugitive creatures, all sharing the same limitations and inheriting the same half-animal past."<sup>16</sup>

The history of spiritual direction is the story of women and men turning into the bracing winds of life together, hearts open to God, minds illumined by the Spirit, arms lovingly held out to the world.

"And Who is Equal to Such a Task?"<sup>17</sup>

Who indeed? Paul spoke honestly as he pondered his own ministerial call. Is anyone equal to the high and holy task of spiritual guidance? We must answer "yes" and "no" with equal vigor. God calls and equips the most unlikely souls to do his choicest work. He takes particular pleasure in things "foolish, small, weak, and despised."<sup>18</sup> Even a cursory trip through the Bible tells us that. So our first answer is: yes, anyone is potentially equal to the task. The challenge, though, is in the words "call" and "equip." How does one know one is called? How does one become equipped? What are the signs of giftedness in the area of spiritual companionship?

These are vital questions, for the work of spiritual direction must never be taken casually. It cannot be done with integrity apart from God's empowerment.

Alan Jones writes of the surprise element of the call. People spontaneously begin to seek "the called one" out, and he or she does not understand why. At that point, Jones wisely counsels, it is time to get in touch with "...a long and honorable tradition and begin to learn about those who have preceded him or her."<sup>19</sup> The spiritual guide's nurture and protection are ensured by remaining in community with other spiritual companions through the ages, as well as in community with a local body of the Church.

Those who are truly gifted to be spiritual guides are averse to advertising themselves as such. As Christopher Bryant puts it, "For the most part they are pressed into the position by those who discern in them the qualities of insight and sympathy that they desire in a guide of souls."<sup>20</sup> Tilden Edwards says the chief criterion in the selection of participants for Shalem Institute's spiritual directors' training program, is whether others spontaneously seek out the person for spiritual counsel.<sup>21</sup>

At this point it is good for us to pause and remember that *God guides us* to those we need to have as spiritual companions. The kinds of companions God chooses for us are sometimes surprising. As

we mature, we need have different needs, so God provides the ones who will help in the various legs of the journey. (Notice, incidentally, that the word "companions" is plural. No one person can provide all the companionship or guidance that another person needs.) The key in all of this is *God's initiative* on both sides--the matter of calling and equipping and the matter of discovering our spiritual friends.

What then, for the spiritual guide, is needed in the way of preparation? This is an extremely important, even controversial question. The answer to it depends upon the kind of spiritual direction one is doing. On one end of the spectrum we find the argument that no one is ready to give spiritual guidance until they have completed many years of formal training in the areas of psychology and spirituality. This view, of course, is reasonable for those who engage in one-way, therapeutic direction that includes psychotherapy. On the other end of the spectrum are those who point to the great spiritual masters through the ages who ministered with tremendous power long before the advent of modern psychology. Spiritual giftedness is the primary equipment for the guide. This view is more suited to companionable or mentor style direction. Morton Kelsey attempts to strike a balance between the two poles:

The great directors of con-

science, the great spiritual guides, have had an *instinctive* knowledge of what makes human beings tick, and so they were able to reach other human beings and to facilitate miracles of transformation. However, few of them could pass on their intuitive understanding. The science of psychology is not yet one hundred years old. It has provided an accumulated body of data about how human beings operate. If we would lead others or ourselves upon the spiritual journey it is foolhardy to ignore the findings of the least of modern psychology. It is like going to a hungry third-world country with no knowledge of modern agriculture.<sup>22</sup>

Kelsey's affirmation of modern psychology is apt, yet we cannot help but ask ourselves how relevant it is for the thousands of ordinary people God gifts as spiritual guides, who have no hope to study modern psychology. Many devout and gifted believers in remote regions of the world, or even the decaying neighborhoods of Detroit, will never have the opportunity of advanced education. As Kelsey himself points out, the intuitive gifts necessary for powerful spiritual guidance, cannot be passed on. They are charisms, gifts from God, given

according to his will. I would add that all the psychological tools in the world are useless to spiritual growth, without the divine empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Timothy Jones argues that we do not need professional training or credentials to help another in his or her journey. We mostly need to just make ourselves available to others and convey in simple ways what we are learning about God.<sup>23</sup>

Whether one has the tools of formal psychology or not, God himself does most of the preparation for spiritual direction. From the director's own life journey grow the humility, wisdom, discernment, patience, detachment, simplicity, self-knowledge, purity, warmth, gentleness, honesty, love, and deep prayerfulness that are needed for this work. It takes little reflection to conclude that God's educative process is gradual, long-term, and made up of the ordinary stuff of life. There is no greater preparation than suffering.

Dom Bede Frost writes of the particular sufferings common to those called to spiritual direction. They must endure many seasons of aridity in prayer, dark nights of the soul, sensations of being abandoned by God which include, at times, physical suffering. Great spiritual guides, more than anyone else, "...dwell in the wilderness in silence, obscurity, and suffering."<sup>24</sup> Their lives are often a kind of spiritual obstacle course, with one trial after

another. In this way their faith is purified. In repeated brokenness they are driven to God for himself alone. Their spiritual authority and power flow from their very brokenness and dependence upon God.

Loneliness, self-contempt, and moral ambiguity are "the triple agony" known by all who give true spiritual direction, writes Alan Jones.<sup>25</sup> The battles within oneself are the birthing room of holiness. If self-knowledge is the foundation to anyone's spiritual growth, it is doubly so in one who would lead others closer to Christ. True directors must be experienced in the deep struggles of life, firmly accepting of their own humanity, their own mixed condition, and committed to ongoing direction themselves. They must be beyond the "mid-life hurdle" which usually takes place in the mid-thirties, in order to accept their own finitude and to have matured past the drivenness and consuming appetites of young adulthood.<sup>26</sup>

Alan Jones describes the interior freedom and purity in such a one as the embodiment of the three ancient monastic virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These qualities draw others, who "...can dare approach him [or her] and ask for help because this kind of poverty of spirit creates around itself an open and free space."<sup>27</sup>

If we could summarize the qualities,

experiences, and character of those called and equipped for spiritual direction, we would have to say that authentic spiritual guides are people whose lives are utterly abandoned to God.

### Creating an Open Space

Having considered the purpose and need for spiritual direction, the "long and time-honored tradition," and the calling and equipping of spiritual guides, we are now ready to focus our attention upon the nature of the relationship itself. What is the difference between pastoral counseling and spiritual direction? Is a truly mutual spiritual friendship possible, advisable, or necessary? What does spiritual direction look like? Here we enter the murky waters of controversy.

Pastoral counseling can include spiritual direction, but for the most part it is like its sister discipline, psychotherapy. People usually go to a counselor because they are "diseased," overwhelmed with problems that are too big to handle alone. Thus both pastoral counseling and psychotherapy are crisis-centered, aimed at problem solving and the restoration of coping skills. Spiritual guidance, on the other hand, is life-process centered, having to do with ongoing spiritual health. Kenneth Leech goes so far as to say that one needs to be emotionally stable and healthy

for spiritual direction to work. "The ministry of spiritual direction indeed is more important when there are no particular crises."<sup>28</sup> He makes further distinctions by saying that counseling is clinic or office-based, while spiritual direction is rooted firmly in one's family, community, and congregational life contexts.<sup>29</sup> Dyckman and Carroll see yet another distinction in that the direction session will involve frequent pauses for reflection and prayer concerning what has been discussed.<sup>30</sup> Scripture may also be used in these pauses. Thus there is an intentional waiting upon God by *both the director and the directee* throughout the session. It is very clear that the Holy Spirit is the real director.

There are four reasons why at least some knowledge of psychology is helpful to those who give spiritual guidance. Christopher Bryant emphasizes the need for self-knowledge in the director, a task that is aided by psychology. The deepening knowledge of one's own psycho-spiritual amalgam enables the director to intuitively understand, empathize with, and touch the need of the directee.<sup>31</sup>

Spiritual guides must also be able to see when a referral is needed. While struggles with sexuality, childhood scars, and authority are normal issues in spiritual growth, these and other issues may require professional therapeutic assistance. Sometimes a person needs both spiritual



direction and therapeutic help. For this reason it is a good idea for spiritual guides to build a network of relationships with others in helping professions so that when referrals are needed, resource people are available.

The third reason some knowledge of psychology is important is that an understanding of basic personality types (i.e. Jung's models) can be very helpful in understanding the particular clusters of strengths and weaknesses a person will usually have in conjunction with his or her personality. Both in understanding and affirming the directee, and in knowing what kinds of spiritual disciplines to suggest, a knowledge of personality theory can be valuable. The caution here, of course, is that no one fits a "type" perfectly. One of the aims of spiritual direction is to help people embrace and give expression to the underdeveloped aspects of their personalities. (At this point we have to smile at God's "built-in" balancing act in creating us to be intuitively attracted to those with personalities complementary to our own!)

The fourth helpful aspect of psychology to spiritual direction is a basic knowledge of human developmental phases. The ego issues of an eighteen year old man are different from those of a sixty year old grandmother. Spiritual guides need to be familiar with the nature of transitional stages in life, particularly those of

adolescence and midlife. Often a person's spiritual turmoil is linked to these natural transitions, but the connection is not always evident to the directee. Here again, though, we must exercise caution. A so-called midlife crisis of identity can happen to people as young as teenagers when the individual is very sensitive or gifted. Then again, some people are frozen in emotional adolescence until their golden years. There simply is no way to get around the uniqueness of each person's inner journey.

Having safely forded the tributaries of psychotherapy and spiritual direction, stepping gingerly across the stones of personality theory and psycho-spiritual developmental phases, let us take the plunge into mutuality vs. one-sidedness in the relationship of spiritual companions. First we will consider the claims of those who say a one-sided relationship is best.

Tilden Edwards suggests that it is rare for two people who are "right" for each other as mutual guides, to find one another. (This is particularly true of marriage partners, who almost never make good spiritual directors for one another.) In Edwards' view, spiritual direction is more effective if it is one-way because the focus of the relationship is one person's life. There is not a cluttering of issues.<sup>32</sup> In those rare cases where mutual direction is possible, Edwards advises structuring ses-

sions so that the first half is devoted to one person, then the second half to the other.

Timothy Jones, whose book, Mentor and Friend, generally favors mutuality and non-professionalism in spiritual guidance, speaks of the difficulties in establishing a completely mutual direction relationship. One partner may be inadequate, insensitive, lacking in sufficient wisdom or discernment to effectively guide the other.<sup>33</sup>

According to Elizabeth O'Connor, the vital ingredient that is missing in a mutual spiritual friendship (as opposed to a one-way direction relationship), is authority.<sup>34</sup>

Elizabeth O'Connor's position raises two critical questions about the nature of spiritual authority within the context of friendship, questions that are pivotal in the discussion of one-way direction vs. the friendship model. First, does increased intimacy in a relationship automatically decrease authority? Second, is it possible to simultaneously enjoy mutuality in a relationship and to exercise authority?

Let us first consider the relationship of intimacy and authority. If we are to believe the biblical summons to ever-increasing intimacy with God, then we must question the assumption that authority and intimacy are not compatible. One of the first proofs of human intimacy with God is the disciple's yielded life. God's authority increases in the human heart as the

relationship becomes more intimate. If this is true of God, the source of all spiritual authority, then it must follow that it is true in relationships between human beings who are but vessels of divine authority. It is both possible and desirable to increase intimacy and maintain or increase spiritual authority.

We must also answer "yes" to the second question. Mutuality and the exercise of spiritual authority are not only possible, but normal in kingdom living. The problem lies not with authority per se, but with our impossible expectations of those who are spiritual, and our low expectations of friendship. The biggest problem of all is our worldly definition of authority.

Spiritual authority, to our befuddled disappointment, is not expressed in terms of human hierarchy. Jesus' authority was equally powerful in the manger, the storm-tossed boat, and Pilate's judgment hall. Jesus' life and words teach us that authority is a matter of yieldedness to the Father's will. It has nothing to do with controlling people. Authority, rather, is over powers and principalities, over the forces of world, flesh, and devil that ravage human souls. Again and again Jesus told his ambitious and insecure disciples that "lording" is alien to kingdom life. Jesus' paradigm of an authority figure in the kingdom was a vulnerable, powerless slave (Luke 22:24-27). Thus spiritual

authority in a spiritual relationship is not a matter of one person having power over the other.

There is also the matter of how we view friendship. If we approach all our friendships sacramentally, viewing them as reflections of the Triune God, then we are prepared to hear the authoritative Word in the context of those friendships. Alan Jones perceptively writes, "The remedy is to take our friendships more seriously than we do rather than insist on a qualitative difference between [spiritual] direction and friendship."<sup>35</sup>

What, then, is the essential role of the spiritual friend who would serve as a guide for our souls? If his or her task is not to be "over" us in some way, what is it?

Howard Rice likens the spiritual friend to a midwife. "The role of the guide is like that of a midwife, who assists the other in the process of giving birth to that which is seeking expression in the other's life...The midwife does not force the birth to occur, but stands by and gently assists in an appropriate way as needed."<sup>36</sup> The spiritual friend is one who stands by to encourage, affirm, and at times assist with the increased birthing of Christ in another soul. Spiritual friendship is largely a matter of loving, attentive presence in one another's lives. With that in mind, let us now turn to the development of an intentional, nurturing, spiritual friend-

ship.

### A Faithful Friend is an Elixer of Life<sup>37</sup>

As Alan Jones has written, spiritual friends are united to one another not directly but indirectly in God. "Only he is large enough to hold them together and, at the same time, maintain the distance between them which true friendship requires."<sup>38</sup> Intentionality regarding the bond in Christ, is key in spiritual friendship. Personal affinity may be irrelevant.

We might assume that all Christian friends want to be primarily bonded in Christ, but such is not the case. More often than not we Christians choose our friends the way everyone else does, based on personal affinity. Age, social groupings, education, occupation, marital status, denominational affiliation, and gender figure heavily in choice of Christian companions. Spirituality may or may not play a significant role. Spiritual friendships, on the other hand, are not based on personal affinity nor are they haphazard about spirituality. Instead, the relationship is focused, deliberately built to nurture one another in Christ.

Pastor Charles Denison describes his search for spiritual friendship as a long and lonely process. After a careful search he tentatively began to develop an intentional spiritual relationship with an

acquaintance. "Only after we had grown to trust one another - and that took awhile - did we agree to a serious weekly meeting to read, share, and pray together...We held one another accountable...and then we prayed, and I will never forget those prayers."<sup>39</sup>

Denison's simple description encapsulates the ingredients of a fruitful spiritual friendship. It begins with an initial seeking out, a process that often takes time and perseverance. Then the two people agree to meet together to talk about expectations and hopes for their relationship. Once their aims are established (this can even be done covenantally, in writing), regularly scheduled meetings are undertaken. The content of their times together is focused on spiritual nurture by means of formative reading, Godward sharing of life situations, prayer, and accountability regarding any agreed-upon spiritual disciplines such as journaling or fasting.

The shape of a given spiritual friendship will be unique, since each relationship is a kind of world unto itself. Seventeenth century spiritual director Francis Quillore insightfully spoke of the need to imitate God's creativity as we seek to support others in their journey.<sup>40</sup> God adapts himself to each of us, not forcing change, but adjusting his approach to the nuances of our temperaments. Gentle, respectful adaptation of approach to the real condition of our friend is a guiding

principle in building a spiritual friendship.

Timothy Jones offers several practical helps to getting the spiritual friendship off to a healthy start.<sup>43</sup> An initial meeting should focus on both people's expectations for the relationship. It should be clearly stated that neither person is the answer-giver or authority over the other. If one person has sought the other out as a wiser, experienced guide, then it will be helpful to discuss the dynamics of a more one-sided relationship rather than mutual friendship. By making it plain in that situation that the relationship is primarily for spiritual nurture, not a general socializing friendship, boundaries can be set from the beginning, thereby preventing misunderstandings and hurt.

After times and a meeting place have been agreed upon it is a good idea to specify a date to evaluate the relationship after a "trial run" of 3-4 meetings has taken place. At that time all aspects of the relationship need to be reviewed. Changes that seem needful can be agreed upon or an unsatisfactory relationship can be brought to a gentle conclusion. (It is important to recognize the need for a goodness of fit between both people. Sometimes a direction relationship does not work simply because of personality differences.)

Frequency of meetings may vary



depending upon time constraints, presence or absence of crisis (greater frequency is needed during crisis times), and distance to be travelled. In general a meeting every 3-6 weeks is adequate. Some friends prefer weekly meetings. Usually one hour provides enough time to share and pray. Letters and telephone calls may supplement face-to-face discussion. It almost goes without saying that individual spiritual companionship is a supplement to, not a replacement for regular corporate worship and ongoing participation in a spiritual community.

It is helpful to have room and furniture arrangements that are simple, quiet, and comfortable. Conversation is facilitated by chairs that are at a slight angle rather than directly facing one another, and as close as possible while still providing leg room for both people. When planning the comfort of the room consider chair size, lighting, plants, art objects, ventilation, and a good supply of facial tissue. Probably the most important element is to be out of the main traffic flow, free from interruptions.

In general it is good to begin and end the meeting with prayer. The beginning prayer is to help both people become "centered" and to focus on the hour to come. This prayer may include silence and a time of confession that deals with feelings of failure, sin, guilt, or anxiety. After confessional prayers it is important to pray

thanksgiving for God's forgiveness and cleansing. Howard Rice suggests occasionally making the sign of the cross on the person's forehead at this time.<sup>42</sup> The concluding prayer may be a benediction over the time and words shared, with supplication concerning specific issues raised. Thanksgiving and worship are important elements as well. As always, it is important to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading regarding when and how to pray. The necessity of a listening posture cannot be over-emphasized.

The primary subject matter for discussion is the person's life, particularly his or her feelings about what is happening in day to day living. Signs of grace operating, spiritual disciplines that are being followed, blocks or aids to the person's prayer life, relational issues, dominant images of God and self, the person's dreams, spiritual experiences, expectations, faith issues, and life commitments are all ingredients of his or her spiritual formation. The companion's task is to help the friend discover God in the context of all these things.

The most important human skill needed is the art of reflective listening. By sensitively listening to and reflecting what is said we can help the other person articulate and objectify what is going on inside. In addition to words we must listen to body language, tone of voice, pictures or

music shared, clothing, facial expressions, and what is not said. Dyckman and Carroll remind us that "...most people have very poor self images and find their stories discouraging and depressing or, worse, boring. The sensitive listener hears the bright spots and underlines them."<sup>43</sup>

Tilden Edwards suggests beginning the shared journey by asking the other person to take inventory of his or her journey thus far. Before the next meeting ask the person to spend an hour or two writing about "the footsteps of God" in their lives thus far: events, relationships, and experiences. When the person returns to share his or her reflections watch for the following elements: growth patterns, fruits of increasing conversion of the whole person to holiness, the role of disciplines, tradition, and spiritual friends. Look for ways in which the person's images of self and God have developed along the way. After working through these reflections together allow a few moments of silence, then have the person complete this sentence: "My spiritual journey now is like..."<sup>44</sup> This exercise can help with tentatively charting a course in terms of recommended spiritual disciplines, becoming familiar with the other person's spiritual vocabulary, and current spiritual needs. It helps the ones being guided to appreciatively look back and see "goodness and mercy" following them, as well as to look hopefully toward the future.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present an extensive discussion of how to deal with various issues raised in the course of a spiritual direction relationship, it is worthwhile to note some of the general issues that may be expected to surface.

The integration of one's spirituality, sexuality, and general physicality is a chronic problem for many religious people. Effective spiritual guidance will help these strugglers accept and appreciate the sacramental nature of the physical world, including their own bodies.<sup>45</sup>

Numinous experiences, inner darkness, and temptation require careful, prayerful discernment on the part of the spiritual companion. As Kenneth Leech points out, from the earliest times spiritual directors expected the inward journey to include encounters with evil spirits, temptation, and seasons of darkness. Ignatius Loyola, among other spiritual masters, believed the discernment of spirits to be pivotal in the direction relationship.<sup>46</sup> In these matters it becomes particularly clear that wisdom and spiritual maturity are necessary characteristics to one who would serve as a spiritual companion.

Certain theological themes emerge repeatedly in the ministry of spiritual guidance. Skewed theology concerning the nature of faith, God, the law, works, and grace create major obstacles to a mature

view of God and self. Questions of theodicy naturally arise during times of suffering. While spiritual guides need not have professional theological training, it is important to be theologically astute, or, in the words of the author of Hebrews 6:14, to be "...those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil," capable of sharing both the milk and meat of biblical truth.

Past emotional wounds have a strong impact on spiritual development. Perfectionism, low-grade, chronic hostility, compulsions, phobias, and other psychological issues frequently come to light in spiritual direction. While some of these issues can be successfully worked through between trusted friends, referral for professional help may be advisable.

Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, fasting, and journaling are essential issues in a spiritual friendship. Competent spiritual guides are hermeneutically adept, familiar with the spiritual classics, understand and affirm various approaches to prayer (including at least a cursory knowledge of apophatic and kataphatic prayer), and have some familiarity with the three stages of spirituality (purgation, illumination and union). While it is not necessary for the spiritual companion to have personally experienced all the kinds of prayer, stages of spirituality, or mystical experiences, it

is important to have an appreciative knowledge about these matters in order to be able to recognize spiritual movements in the other person and to make appropriate suggestions regarding spiritual disciplines. Tilden Edwards wisely cautions us to maintain a certain lightness regarding the disciplines so that they do not become ends instead of means. "Every discipline is a form of "attentive patience," a way of allowing what is needed to happen, a way of reinforcing trust in a promised, incipient, and dynamic wholeness that unfolds as it unfolds."<sup>47</sup>

While it is hard to overstate the benefits and joys of authentic spiritual friendship, some caution is necessary. Relationships that probe the depths of one's spirit and lay bare the weakness of one's soul are rife with potential for abuse. In spiritual friendships as in other areas of the Christian life we are called to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

### Keeping an Even Keel

The greatest dangers inherent in a spiritual direction relationship may be boiled down to two overlapping areas: emotional entanglement and power. How close is too close? When does guidance become tyranny? Most important, how do we keep an even keel?

"The constant temptation in any love

relationship," Dyckman and Carroll write, "is to control or possess the beloved, but this is precisely what the Lord never lets us do. Prayer will involve the constant tension of letting the Lord more and more possess us, while we become less grasping and more open-handed in that embrace."<sup>48</sup>

Emotional entanglement is the fearsome, insecure, tight-fisted grip of one person on another. Inappropriate sexual intimacy is one avenue of expression of entanglement, but by no means the only or even greatest danger. The possibilities for negative forms of transference and counter-transference are legion. Co-dependency, that catchword of dysfunctional relationships, is an immensely tempting form of emotional entanglement for many in the helping professions, including spiritual directors.

Dyckman and Carroll are correct--entanglement is a potential snare in all loving relationships, including marriage. The preventive and cure for it is healthy detachment, a willful, continuous process of letting go of our insecure clutching of those we love. Such a movement is only possible as we come to deeply experience the unconditional, limitless love of God. Only God can provide the profound degree of intimacy our needy hearts require. It is crucial for those who would be spiritual companions to others, to know themselves deeply so as to recognize and refuse the siren voice of entanglement.

Detachment is an emphatic theme with virtually every spiritual master in history. God calls the spiritual guide to be set apart from the world, unto God, for the nurture of other people. Jean-Jacques Olier, seventeenth-century founder of the Society of Saint Sulpice, likens the possessive spiritual companion to a soldier enlisted by the king, who, after using the king's resources to conquer new land, steals the land for himself. Such a one is an ungrateful, traitorous infidel, guilty of serious evil.<sup>49</sup> As Alan Jones has said, any time we become captivated or infatuated by another person our inner freedom and authority are lost. Thus, spiritual directors, of all people, must cultivate detachment and embrace solitude.<sup>50</sup>

What does healthy detachment in spiritual friendship "look like"? Is it a cool, aloof stance, an impersonal, clinical approach? Not at all. Evelyn Underhill describes it as "love without claimfulness," a deliberate listening for and seeking after God's interests in the other person's life, not my interests or even the other person's.<sup>51</sup> As we have seen, the spiritual guide's own life is the primary source for his or her sensitive and compassionate ministry. One cannot minister from the depths of oneself without exposing a good deal of one's own inner world. The key is not impersonality, but in guarding against "claimfulness." Detachment cannot be



developed unless we recognize the natural but fallen human drives toward claimfulness.

In Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction, Adrian van Kaam provides an excellent discussion of the two instinctive biological drives that need to be "acknowledged and utilized without being allowed to take over."<sup>52</sup> These two forces are the sex drive and the "care instinct." Of the two, the latter is by far more problematic in spiritual direction relationships. The care drive is the natural instinct to protect, nurture, and provide for significant others. All people need to both care and be cared for. This natural, God-given drive has been distorted by sin, however, and can become the source of enormous damage.

According to Fr. van Kaam, when a man or woman is fixated on one person for relief of the care instinct, he or she is overly dependent upon that person. "All other kinds of power seem weak in comparison with this power. The manipulation of another person's needs is the most brutal and tyrannizing form of power."<sup>53</sup> Both people in the relationship may be "hooked" unwittingly. Fr. van Kaam suggests a threefold cluster of traits that may snare a caring spiritual guide: a directee who needs help, protection, and guidance, one who gives the impression of being less knowing, less informed, and less experienced than the director, and who is experienced as being in

some way like the director.<sup>54</sup> When these three traits are evident caution is strongly urged.

If emotional entanglement is one potential danger, the other side is failure to show generous acceptance and love for the one being guided. Spiritual growth is a slow, sometimes laborious process. True change rarely comes quickly or without a struggle. Wise companions recognize the need to exercise steady patience and encouragement to those in their care. Failure, sin, and weakness call for mercy and grace. Never is a soul so vulnerable as when he or she has confessed the dark secrets of the heart. The tremendous need at such times is to be lovingly accepted. With eye contact, tone of voice, posture, and words, the spiritual guide must communicate gentle acceptance.

What about confrontation? Francis Libermann urges directors to: "Be patient with sinfulness for a long time, and if there are occasions when you think you cannot stand it another minute, accept it again. In the end you will recognize that you did a good thing."<sup>55</sup> Confrontation is necessary at times, but only when done with kindness, compassion, and a well-laid foundation of merciful love.

Anglican priest and professor of theology, Martin Thornton, speaks courageously of the need to love boldly in the direction relationship. "The evil is not

that a close pastoral relation of love is wrong, but that the scruples of the devil (and the newspapers) make us think that it might be. We become inhibited through ignorance and frustrated by un-Christian convention."<sup>56</sup>

Fr. Thornton goes on to say that we need to recognize that all our interactions with one another include our whole being: mind, body, spirit, senses, emotions, will, and sexuality. We can no sooner atomize our interactions than we can atomize ourselves. Citing the examples of John reclining against Jesus' breast and Mary washing Jesus' feet with her own tears and hair, Fr. Thornton challenges us to be like Jesus, boldly welcoming the whole person. There is a time and place for tears, laughter, words, silence, prayer, and nurturing touch.

Loving boldly is a tremendous risk. Yet it is the surest way to image our God, the Prodigal Father. For each of us it requires stumbling, trial-and-error efforts. Morton Kelsey really speaks for us all as he confesses: "I find that it is better to love badly and faultily than not to try to love at all."<sup>57</sup>

### Crossing the Gender Line

What about "loving boldly" across the gender line? Many of us in the church have been taught to regard cross-gender friendships with the same feelings we have

for large, angry dogs or small, enclosed spaces. Our highly eroticized culture, patriarchal conditioning, and the general lack of models of chaste, intimate, cross-gender friendships make such relationships challenging if not impossible. There are many barriers to overcome, but the struggle is more than worth the cost.

In considering the advisability of cross-gender spiritual friendships we need to look at three issues: transcendence, complementarity, and sexual attraction. Transcendence is the theological basis for such friendships. Complementarity is the vivifying dynamic of cross-gender friendships. Sexual attraction is the natural drive that must be acknowledged and redirected, for the relationship to remain chaste.

Our first indication of the transcendent nature of spiritual friendship is Jesus' friendships with women. Unlike his nervous male disciples, Jesus unhesitatingly touched, spoke to, and formed close friendships with a number of women. Jesus frankly refused to sexualize the women in his life. He regarded them as whole human beings of eternal worth, made in God's image, capable of spiritual discernment and chaste intimacy (even former prostitutes). Jesus never defined women in terms of appropriate gender roles. Rather, he affirmed women who know and do God's will, a remarkably open-ended commission (Luke

11:27-28, Mark 3:35). By his example more than anything else, Jesus legitimized, sanctified, and ordained cross-gender spiritual friendships. Jesus is our primary role model for cross-gender friendships.

Paul's close friendships with several women, including Phoebe, Priscilla, and Persis further underscored Jesus' egalitarian message. Speaking of the relationally redeeming heritage of all God's children, Paul writes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). When writing to Timothy concerning appropriate relationships with men and women in the congregation, Paul urged his younger friend to regard the older men and women as fathers and mothers, and the younger men and women as brothers and sisters (1 Timothy 5:1-2). Healthy familial bonding is the best model for intimate cross-gender relationships. The pure, nurturing, supporting, holy love of grandparents, parents, and siblings is the kind of love that God intends for us to experience across the gender lines.

Speaking of the sexually transcendent nature of spiritual friendship, Tilden Edwards writes:

God after all is not only male and female in Christian symbolism, but infinitely beyond male and

femaleness...It therefore would be misleading to speak of any essentially crippling or guaranteeing quality either in an intra or intersexual spiritual friendship. Moreover the primary relationship in spiritual friendship is between God and the friend, not between the friends themselves.<sup>58</sup>

Tilden Edwards, along with many Christian feminists, argues that sexual complementarity can be a significant boon to group spiritual formation, with leadership being shared by male and female co-leaders.<sup>59</sup> Regarding one-on-one direction he encourages cross-gender relationships when there is a choice between two people (male and female) of equal capability and with whom one is equally at ease. Based on Jung's theories of animus/anima integration, projection, and transference, Edwards believes that mature cross-gender spiritual friendship helps us to get in touch with qualities of the Divine that are lacking in our own consciousness. We are also less likely to be subtly competitive in cross-gender friendships.<sup>60</sup>

Having understood all these things we still must realistically face a fallen world and our own fallen natures. Sexual attraction is a force to be reckoned with any time we cross the gender line. (Sexual attraction can also be a problem in same-sex relationships. For the purpose of the discus-

sion at hand, however, I limit my focus to cross-gender relationships.)

Our sexuality cannot be divorced from the rest of who we are. One of the best preventives to sexual immorality is to embrace one's sexuality, one's gendered identity, as a gift. Christian feminist Anne Borrowdale speaks insightfully concerning sexuality in the context of cross-gender friendships:

It is, paradoxically, the ability to be fully sexual beings which liberates us from sexual sin. Those who are afraid of their sexuality, or see it as a loathsome appetite which must be kept under control at all costs, magnify the sexual element in all relationships way out of proportion. Those who are happy with their sexuality find it enhances their relationships without leading to inappropriate physical expression.<sup>61</sup>

Kenneth Leech wisely urges those involved in spiritual direction ministries to study contemporary insights into human sexuality, and to honestly face their own sexuality and sexual needs.<sup>62</sup> In order to guard against inappropriate sexual behavior we need to be firmly in touch with our inner world, including our sexuality.

In this area as others, healthy boundaries need to be maintained in the relationship to prevent the growth of sexual intimacy. Honest accountability to at least one trusted person outside the friendship is important. (Once again we are reminded of the necessity for those giving spiritual guidance to be under guidance themselves.)

When erotic impulses surface, as they do from time to time, it is best to honestly own them, bring them to God, and pray about them with the trusted "accountability" person. Fearful and shameful denial of these feelings only increases their power. At such times it is important to take inventory of the relationship, asking if either or both persons are saying or doing things that subtly build sexual intimacy. Both friends in the relationship need to be prepared to honestly confront inappropriate sexual behavior at any time.

For those who are married, a spouse's input can be valuable regarding appropriate or inappropriate behavior. This assumes, however, that the spouse is mature and secure, and the marriage is strong. I know of several couples in which one partner is able to maintain healthy cross-gender relationships but the spouse is emotionally entangled. Exclusivity and fear prevent the spouse from seeing things as they truly are. There are no easy solutions in this situation, but both partners need to work toward honesty, trust, and disentanglement.



The root issue of emotional entanglement needs to be addressed, usually with the help of a marriage counselor.

There are times when same-sex spiritual friendships are preferable. Tilden Edwards believes that the ability and willingness to redirect sexual feelings is not possible for most people until they are past the "mid-life hurdle," past thinking that sexual intercourse is the most important experience in life. Same-sex friendships are best for "genitally very driven" persons and for those who struggle with powerful gender-related anger or fear, since too much energy is drained into keeping a distance.<sup>63</sup>

Loving boldly across the gender line is a tall order, one of the toughest we shall ever face as redeemed women and men living in a broken world. In order to build strong, healthy cross-gender friendships we need to understand the biblical basis of transcendence, to embrace the biblical model of familial love that is both intimate and chaste, and to maintain clear boundaries that prevent inappropriate sexual involvement.

### Love is the Aim

How can we tell whether spiritual direction, companionship, mentoring, or friendship is fulfilling its purpose? What should we look for? The answer lies on a continuum and has more to do with attitudes

than actions, with process than function. Dyckman and Carroll invite us to reflect upon the following questions: Are they becoming more loving? Are they more able to see others as valuable, lovable people? Are they laying down their lives more for others? Are they becoming a grain of wheat that dies in order to produce an eternal harvest?<sup>64</sup> Love is the task of spiritual guidance. Love is the aim.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adrian van Kaam, Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction (Denville: Dimension Books, 1976), 395.

<sup>2</sup>Evelyn Underhill, Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1914), 111.

<sup>3</sup>van Kaam, 384.

<sup>4</sup>Jerome M. Neufelder and Mary C. Coelho, eds., Writings on Spiritual Direction By Great Masters (New York: Seabury, 1982), 15.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Leech, Soul Friend (London: Sheldon, 1977), 47.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>8</sup>Alan Jones, Exploring Spiritual Direction (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 42.

<sup>9</sup>Tilden Edwards, Spiritual Friend (New York: Paulist, 1980), 52.

<sup>10</sup>Leech, 49-50.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 86-7.

<sup>13</sup>Howard Rice, Reformed Spirituality (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 135.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 67.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 43-4.

<sup>16</sup>Evelyn Underhill, The Spiritual Life (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937. Wilton Connecticut: Morehouse Barlow, Co., Inc., 1955), 54.

<sup>17</sup>2 Corinthians 2:16b.

<sup>18</sup>1 Corinthians 2:26-29.

<sup>19</sup>Jones, 74.

<sup>20</sup>Christopher Bryant, The Heart in Pilgrimage (New York: Crossroad/Seabury, 1980), 129.

<sup>21</sup>Edwards, 207.

<sup>22</sup>Morton Kelsey, Companions on the Inner Way (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 40-1.

<sup>23</sup>Jones, 108.

<sup>24</sup>Neufelder, 89.

<sup>25</sup>Jones, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Edwards, 108.

<sup>27</sup>Jones, 68-71.

<sup>28</sup>Leech, 100.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>30</sup>Dyckman, 26.

<sup>31</sup>Bryant, 130.

<sup>32</sup>Edwards, 106.

<sup>33</sup>Timothy K. Jones, Mentor and Friend (Batavia, Illinois: Lion, 1991), 98.

<sup>34</sup>Neufelder, 178-9.

<sup>35</sup>Jones, Exploring Spiritual Direction,  
4.

<sup>36</sup>Rice, 142.

<sup>37</sup>Ecclesiasticus 6:16.

<sup>38</sup>Alan Jones, Exploring Spiritual Direction, 111.

<sup>39</sup>Charles S. Denison, "Soulwork," Leadership, 8 (Spring 1992): 106.

<sup>40</sup>Neufelder, 93-4.

<sup>41</sup>Jones, Mentor and Friend, 28ff.

<sup>42</sup>Rice, 147.

<sup>43</sup>Dyckman, 22.

<sup>44</sup>Edwards, 140-1.

<sup>45</sup>Leech, 114-15.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 128-9.

<sup>47</sup>Edwards, 158.

<sup>48</sup>Dyckman, 48.

<sup>49</sup>Neufelder, 113.

<sup>50</sup>Jones, Exploring Spiritual Direction, 80.

<sup>51</sup>Evelyn Underhill, House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life (London: Methuen & Co., 1947. Minneapolis: Seabury,

nd), 107.

<sup>52</sup>van Kaam, 486.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 493.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 488.

<sup>55</sup>Neufelder, 95.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>57</sup>Kelsey, 199.

<sup>58</sup>Edwards, 110.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 192.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 108ff.

<sup>61</sup>Anne Borrowdale, Distorted Images: Misunderstandings Between Men and Women (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 132-3.

<sup>62</sup>Leech, 114.

<sup>63</sup>Edwards, 109-10.

<sup>64</sup>Dyckman, 40.

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