

Pointing the way home.

A brush with death last year whilst in the middle of a lecture tour in Australia left me with a lot of inner uncertainty and much to integrate. It's taken a little while for my body to recover, whilst a glimpse into the abyss has brought a lot of grist for the mill for my soul. I returned from Oz ready for some silence and solitude to help me make sense of what had gone on. By chance, if chance it be, a good friend and Benedictine monk had previously arranged for me to experience some retreat time at his abbey. I'm used to going on retreat with or without a guide, its part of my regular spiritual. I'm not a Catholic, but that week at Worth Abbey where I was so gently held by the monks and the rhythm of the Benedictine rule, proved the ideal space for me to integrate and deepen my understanding of what had gone on. The emotional and physiological impacts of my illness were easy peasy to deal with, the biggest challenge was to find the meaning and purpose that lay behind it. One patient said to me recently, "My cancer *is* my spiritual journey" – understanding where an illness fits into our way of being in the world, how we make sense of it, how it fits with our relationship to others, our beliefs, to God, to the Absolute whatever we perceive that to be – this is the very stuff of spirituality.

Taking time out in retreat is now readily available in the spiritual supermarket. These can vary from times of solitude to being with groups and either with or without someone to direct you. Solitude and silence can be relaxing and beneficial to some, especially if you have a spiritual discipline such as meditation or prayer which supports inner work – otherwise it can be a chaotic time of random thoughts, confusion and anxiety. The quality of retreats can also be very variable – see some of my suggestions below for checking out the best ones.

This series is about in-sight, and my week at Worth Abbey emphasised two key elements - having time and space out of the ordinary rhythm of life to pay more focused attention to the inner life and, second, having a skilled guide or mentor to make sense of it safely. This is not safe territory alone, and this is the landscape of the spiritual director.

The spiritual director (nowadays often called spiritual counsellor) is found in all belief systems, from the 18 year apprenticeship of the novice druid to his or her master, the *murshid* (one who guides aright) in Sufism, the Socratic *iatros tes psuches* (soul healer), the *startez* of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the hindu *guru*, the roles of rabbis and priests – in many forms the essential elements of the soul friend, the Celtic *anam cara*, are found. I prefer the term director, even though the concept of "direction" is often unwelcome in our western individualised culture. I look at it this way - if you get lost on the way home and you stop and ask for help, do you expect to be counselled or directed!

Margaret Guenther (2002) likens spiritual direction to midwifery – helping the directee to give birth to truth. She also notes the relationship between director and directed is fundamentally hierarchical, "not because the director is somehow "better" or "holier" than the directee, but because, in this covenanted relationship, the director has agreed to put himself aside so that his total attention can be focussed on the person sitting in the other chair..... Yet it is "a hierarchy which is a gentle and perhaps transitory one." A great deal has been written about spiritual direction across many traditions, and there has been something of a revival of interest in it in recent years especially in the Christian tradition – further suggested reading is listed below for those who seek more detail on this art. It is as old as the hills, one of the earliest British texts being that of Aelred of Rievaulx in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and much earlier texts emerged in the middle and far east.

Most spiritual directors belong to a particular faith which influences their guidance while others seek to work in non-denominational ways. A lot of hostility and misunderstanding has emerged around spiritual direction as it had in many quarters been reduced to enforcing and reiterating dogma and doctrines rather than personal awakening. The

best of spiritual directors of any background can hold a safe and loving space where we can explore our spirituality and all that has meaning and purpose for us in life and they are good at helping us get past our illusions and delusions. One of the risks of the search is that we can turn interest in the self into self-interest. My first spiritual director was indeed a loving guide, but he was also fiercely so – not taking any prisoners when I fell into spiritual bullshit (I dare you to print this Charlotte!!!). The modern spiritual supermarket can some times make it too easy to indulge in spiritual director-hopping simply because we don't like the tough stuff, yet it may be that hanging in there is exactly what we need to do when it gets difficult- I've suggested a "tests" below which may help.

Many are available to help us with the insight we can accrue through spiritual direction, and lots of places are available which can offer retreat facilities either for quiet time alone or in groups and with or without access to a director. Likewise a spiritual director can be seen on a regular basis without going away on retreat – once you have found one make sure you check out clearly what background he/she has, what style of working, costs and other arrangements – with the caveats I have listed below. Sorting out the wheat from the chaff, the flaky from the serious, the safe from the maybe even dangerous itself draws us into the spiritual practice of discernment. As yet there is no nationally recognised training or registration system for spiritual directors and there are strong arguments against this within the field through fears of "professionalizing" what is an essential human skill and calling.

How to test out the good from the bad? Check out the person and or the setting and avoid those who:-

Do not walk their talk – preaching brotherly love then damning to hell individuals and groups who differ from them.  
Ask you to abandon all critical thought and follow them blindly.  
Say that their knowledge is secret and only be given to an elect few who have been initiated to their standards (can you imagine Jesus or Mohammed or the Buddha saying that their wisdom was secret?)  
Demand all your money, possessions, body.  
Instruct you to get rid of all your relationships and activities not connected to the "faith".  
Run an organisation that is really a big business rather than a service.  
Tell you your lack of enlightenment is all your fault because you're not giving enough money, obedience, sex etc.  
Use bodyguards or minders to keep followers remote, indeed have troops of followers at all.  
Have no tradition or field of expertise to draw upon.  
Have no ongoing direction/challenge themselves.  
Are part of an organisation with pressure groups to make you conform rather than encouraging faith and trust.  
Demand that you remain in their sphere of influence, and not take what you need from them and move on.

The intention in spiritual direction is to help the person find their "home" by inner exploration and guiding the directee through the minefield of spiritual awakening. It incorporates deep listening, acceptance and spiritual practices (such as meditation, guided visualisations and prayer) within the framework of each person's beliefs. It helps people of any faith or none, to access the clarity needed to resolve inner conflicts and lead a joyous, meaningful life. It is specifically concerned with God, a Source, an Absolute and working out what our relationship is to that source and how we might live lives of wellbeing and fulfilment as a result.

Spiritual direction draws upon our resources (spiritual) that counselling and psychotherapy arguably to some degree steer clear of. It often involves spiritual practices as suggested, which might normally lie outside the counselling role. Nor is spiritual direction about maintaining a professional distance, but a fluid merging of boundaries, a mutual participation in a unitary process, perhaps a high risk strategy from some perspectives. Yet spiritual direction in being different from counselling and psychotherapy also has an ally in them for as Guenther (2002) observes, it is "not psychotherapy yet the fields are compatible and frequently share raw material". I've noticed in my own work as a spiritual director, that many people deepen their spiritual search after a period of counselling or psychotherapy. It is almost as if these approaches first help by clearing the ground of old problems, wounds and disappointments or

false projections onto God based on early experiences of authority, that then frees the soul to take flight on its search for home. Jones (1982) echoes this when he writes "The therapist, the counsellor, the psychiatrist can help us on our way. They can rescue us from a particular block, get us back on our feet, can teach us to accept ourselves so that we can be on the move. But they cannot answer for us (nor would the best of them want to) those burning questions concerning the purpose and meaning for which we long. The spiritual guide cannot answer them either, but there is within the world of spiritual direction a conscious commitment to faith in God." Other authors like Liebert (1992), Ball (2003) and Empereur (2004) illuminate the complexity and richness of the relationship between director and directee. A new form of unique spiritual friendship emerges where there is an explicit covenant to expand our awareness, to heal and to sensitize us to God however that is perceived for us, so that we can live in the world and serve more aware of ourselves, more whole, more joyfully,

Why might nurses seek spiritual direction, a soul friend, as an insight option? I explored in the first paper in this series that hunger in all of us to deeply know ourselves and our place in the scheme of things, to be happy, to love, and that journey into knowing is not one to be undertaken lightly or alone. Knowing ourselves more deeply and our connection to that which is both part of and yet beyond the self, informs who we are in the world, what work nourishes us and how we should relate to others. Nursing is after all profoundly rooted in the concept of service to humanity, to the relief of suffering and it was the deeply religious Christian Nightingale who forged modern nursing in this image. Spiritual direction is one of the ways we can come to know and heal ourselves more deeply and as such it is a pathway for nurses to become more integrated human beings, and a more insightful, well-rounded nurse is a better nurse.

#### References and further suggestions

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