

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND COUNSELLING/ THERAPY

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We decided to write this article together because we feel that we ourselves enjoy meeting creatively at the interface of spiritual direction and psychotherapy. We come to this place of collaboration from two different starting points:—the one as a psychotherapist and the other as a theologian and lecturer in spirituality. Both are also engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction.

‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive:
fullness of life is the vision of God’ (Irenaeus).

THIS ARTICLE BEGINS BY EXPLORING whether it is possible and useful to distinguish the ministry of spiritual direction from counselling and therapy, and if so how this might be done; we then look briefly at what insights of the ‘psychological therapies’ are teaching us about ministry to individuals, its demands on the minister and how to handle them.

From a purely practical viewpoint, not every spiritual director is trained or seeking to be a psychological counsellor and certainly many therapists would have neither the desire nor the competence to engage in spiritual direction. Nevertheless, in our actual day-to-day presence to another human being there may be times when it would be difficult to put a label on where the one begins and the other ends. Yet we believe that the one is not the other and that to blur the boundaries until they are indistinguishable is to do ourselves and others a disservice.

Wilbur, in his Spectrum of Consciousness model, describes what he sees as the major bands or levels of consciousness where one level’s reality is illusion from the perspective of the next and what is ordinary in one is extraordinary in the other. Each level has its own operating rules—a unique paradigm or set of assumptions, shaping perception of self, others and the world. He points out that:

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consciousness is pluridimensional, or apparently composed of many levels; that each major school of psychology, psychotherapy and religion is addressing a different level; that these different levels are therefore not contradictory but complementary, each approach being more or less correct and valid when addressing its own level.¹

According to this model, human development can be viewed as a series of expansions of identity moving from persona/shadow level into the ego/body, towards total organism/environment and through to the transpersonal bands, in this way consciously reclaiming our unity and interconnectedness with the whole of reality. Put simply, this means that differentiation is necessary to the process of becoming a person; the process is only complete when we consciously return to our original unity.

Looking at Wilbur's siting of the major schools of therapy at the levels of the spectrum which he sees them as addressing, we see a qualitative shift when we reach the transpersonal bands or levels where he places Jung's analytical psychology, psychosynthesis and the work of Maslow and Proff.

Psychological approaches such as these, which include a spiritual dimension of the human person, inevitably touch both the scientific and the metaphysical. They hold that the human person is a soul and has a personality and, with Keats, would call this world 'the vale of soul-making'. This seems like home-ground for anyone steeped in the Christian tradition. Modern man has a self but at a price: the alienating split that severs from the healing whole.

It seems that the wheel is turning full circle and that a Christian medieval world-view with its inter-related hierarchy of spheres is once again relevant to our new understanding of the spectrum of being.

At the further reaches of this spectrum lies unity consciousness, the ultimate in the evolutionary process. This is recognized as being the level of reality to which the major world religions 'point the finger'. Each expresses its own accumulated wisdom embodied in traditional beliefs and praxis, mediated through some particular experience and key figures.

As we range over the spectrum of being, we surrender successive boundaries of what we include as self and exclude as not-self, thus embracing more and more of reality. At the deepest level—in our case the Christian one—we are opening ourselves to that vision of God which is fullness of life.

This is one among many possible overarching models useful to both spiritual director and therapist in reaching some understanding of the levels where a person's human development may be blocked or impeded. This can be very helpful in pinpointing the need or advisability of referral to a therapist for work in some specific area. Sometimes it is clear that a therapist skilled in working within a certain band of the spectrum might help a person to greater freedom and accelerated growth. Conversely, at times a therapist may come to recognize that a client's issues are moving, or being moved, at levels of the spectrum where a spiritual director is the appropriate guide. Each of us needs to find or, better still, evolve our own maps and models as time goes on and in the light of our own experience.

Gerald May, describing a variety of psychiatric considerations encountered in spiritual direction, speaks of our having to straddle the boundaries between theology and the behavioural sciences:

I believe that these boundaries do exist, primarily because psychology as it evolved in our culture does not—and perhaps cannot—really deal with the transcendent and divine realities of life. The people who practise the behavioural sciences certainly can deal with these realities in their own hearts, but the disciplines almost invariably fail to break free of their anthropocentric focus. It does no good, I think, to blur the boundaries that exist between theology and psychology, in the name of wholeness or integration. It is better to walk their rugged interfaces.²

The transpersonal psychologies address this interface, including, as they do, both the spiritual and psychological aspects of the human person and many of us are finding support and challenge in co-operation and exchange of ideas and modes of working.

Returning to the earlier statement that not every spiritual director is a psychologist and vice versa, it sometimes seems that the Christian ministry of spiritual direction at the present time is in danger of suffering the same fate as did much of pastoral counselling in the 60s and 70s, especially in the U.S.A.: namely that of becoming increasingly 'psychologized'. Many such counsellors went for further training in the field of psychotherapy without, at the same time, deepening their capacity to address the spiritual issues of those they served. Gradually they dropped the specific ministerial focus which was their unique contribution. Alongside this possible danger for spiritual directors today—and this is not to deny the

need for spiritual directors to acquire a good basic understanding of psychology to underpin their work—are many very positive moves. Much is being done to re-claim the old traditions of spiritual guidance and to integrate these with fresh approaches and new ways of understanding and responding to those engaged in a spiritual quest in today's world. Here psychology has much light to shed and important insights to share with those engaged in spiritual direction. It is, ironically, frequently through psychology—especially the transpersonal approach—that some of the old traditions and practices of East and West are now being re-found and re-introduced to Christianity.

We are becoming increasingly opened up to a variety of holistic approaches to prayer and worship which draw upon the potential of body, mind and spirit as well as active imagination. To give but a few examples: breathing, unifying in itself, is both a symbol and enactment; meditation is reflection upon the word of scripture and can involve using a mantra whose repetition allows the word to descend from the mind into the heart. Then there is the contemplation of the ikon which both sees and penetrates through the image, as well as that contemplation which makes us present to the mysteries of Christ in our life. We have, too, all the variations on the extended use of imagery which include myth, and the remembering and re-living of our own story in the light of the whole story.

In the context of the need for theological, spiritual and psychological formation for spiritual directors, May poses what is for us the central question regarding the distinction and relationship between therapy and spiritual direction: how much of spiritual guidance can really be taught? Is it not in fact a charism, a gift of the Spirit?³ If we accept that this is indeed so, then spiritual direction in a Christian context is a ministry to which one is called by the Spirit, rather than an avocation which one decides to pursue as one might choose one profession in preference to another. It has long been held, and is nowadays very often a prerequisite for acceptance into any formal training programme for spiritual direction, that a confirmation of one's call to this ministry is that fellow-Christians are already seeking one out and coming for ongoing spiritual direction. In most cases, this presupposes that the one so sought has been engaged on the spiritual journey and receiving spiritual direction for a number of years and is recognized as having qualities of mind and heart which enable people to open

up and enter into a relationship of trust as they seek to explore and develop their own relationship with God. Already we are speaking of a faith context: spiritual direction as a ministry within the Church, a charism, a God-given gift and a call to share this gift in the service of others. As Laplace points out: we might prefer it to be an art that we could master and the first thing to recognize is that it is not, the master being the Holy Spirit. This does not mean passivity on our part, since God expects us to make ourselves ready for his gifts but always in dependence on the Spirit's leading both in ourselves and in the other.

The one coming for direction is a fellow Christian also experiencing a call from God and seeking to explore and develop the God-relationship with its impact, effect and demands on life as it is lived. Faith itself is the gift of God who reveals himself. Both share this gift and are consciously choosing to respond to this self-revelation of God within a specific religious tradition. This creates the common bond and common ground, the context and the ambience within which the dialogue takes place. It is for this that the director comes. It is primarily for the greater glory of God that the person is seeking this fullness of life in the Spirit, knowing that this is a response to the divine initiative: it is not that we stalk the vision, but that the vision is stalking us, as the North American Indian proverb has it. Hence the long tradition which recognizes that it is the Holy Spirit who is the true director, directing both human beings in this unique three-way dialogue. The role of the human director is to accompany the other and to listen and respond to the drawing of the Spirit along the unique and hitherto untravelled path that is this person's journey. The map is not the terrain, yet others, including the director, have passed along the way, scaled the heights and plumbed the depths, known the monotony of the level places and maybe missed the path at times and struggled in darkness where the way seemed lost. Chief among these others is Jesus, himself the Way, the Truth and the Life into whose Paschal Mystery our own lives are caught up and thereby transformed.

What is the difference between the foregoing scenario and that of two human beings who come together in the context of a psychotherapy relationship? The motivation for seeking therapy is usually very different, which is not to say that within the presenting problem or seeming symptoms there may not unconsciously be faint, or not-so-faint, stirrings of the repressed sublime. The one

seeking therapy is often experiencing acute pain and even disarray in life—in some cases to the extent of impaired ability to function. Usually the person feels to some extent locked into a situation. Such a person experiences a lack of inner freedom and strong dissatisfaction with how life is being lived or, in some cases, simply undergone.

It is hard to be specific as to where therapist and client would go from there, for as we said earlier, different therapists would view what is being presented from different levels and according to their own particular school of therapy. All would be forming some kind of diagnosis or assessment of the person in their situation. In psychological parlance, different 'symptoms' originate from different levels in terms of where we put the self/not-self boundary. The individual looking for help when ways of coping and relating appear too restricting for present life needs and demands is faced with such a bewildering variety of psychological systems that it is hard to know where to begin or whom to believe. A study of the major schools of psychology and religion would give the impression that they definitely contradict one another.

For example, in Zen Buddhism one is told to forget, or transcend or see through one's ego; but in psycho-analysis one is helped to strengthen, fortify and entrench one's ego. This is a very real problem, for the interested layman as well as for the professional therapist. So many different and conflicting schools, all aimed at understanding the very same person, or are they?⁴

Wilbur goes on to ask what if all these different approaches are all aimed at different levels of a person's self, and that far from being conflicting or contradictory they actually reflect the very real differences in the various levels of the spectrum of consciousness and are all more or less correct when working with their own major level. The different schools can then be seen as representing complementary approaches to different levels of the individual. For example, put in oversimplified form, he would see the aim of psychoanalysis and most forms of conventional psychotherapy as being to heal the radical split between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche so that a person is put in touch with 'all of his mind'. Those therapies aim at reuniting the persona and shadow so as to create a strong and healthy ego, which is to say an accurate and acceptable self-image. In other words, they are all

oriented towards the ego level. They seek to help an individual living as persona to re-identify his soul as ego. Beyond this the aim of most so-called humanistic therapies is to heal the split between the ego itself and the body, thus reuniting psyche and soma so as to reveal the total organism. From here we begin to walk May's 'rugged interface'; theology and spirituality on the one side, psychology and psychotherapy on the other. Here both touch the transpersonal dimension of life. Here intuition receives intimations of the mystery that is Other. It is tempting at this point, as we try to express these truths in psycho-spiritual language, to explore the relationship between the kataphatic and apophatic ways familiar to traditional Christian spirituality. But space does not permit.

The comparison between a person coming for spiritual direction and one seeking therapy may remind us that in both situations one is setting up a contract with another human being who is coming to us for a specific purpose. The person coming may be clear, less clear or unclear as to what precisely this entails and, as in ourselves, both conscious and unconscious motivations will be at work. If the person comes seeking spiritual direction, then the contract is not that I engage in therapy, and the same holds for someone seeking therapy. Sometimes the person coming may not be sure and time may be needed to discern what is appropriate.

Because those who come may be unclear just what it is they are seeking or letting themselves in for, it seems wise for the director to explore this at the outset so as to make as clear and conscious as possible what we see ourselves contracting to do together and what not, in terms of context, content, approach and focus. It is also as well to negotiate such issues as frequency of meetings and length of sessions. Why is this important? This clarity, at least in broad outline, assists in freeing both parties to work together in the most effective way for the person's declared purpose in coming.

The transfer to another director, or even a period without a director, might prove painful and involve bereavement for the directee such as any good, ongoing relationship would, but this would rarely be seen as detrimental to the ongoing spiritual growth of the person, and therefore counter-indicated. Rather it could be very positively construed, for example, in terms of a call to increased trust in the ongoing guidance of the Spirit without any denial of the process of letting go and the feelings this invokes. In counselling or therapy, the professional relationship between client

and therapist is the cutting edge or catalyst for growth, movement and change which it is hoped will lead to insight, healing and new directions. In spiritual direction, the person's relationship with God in terms of call and response is the context. The director's role is rather that of witness, facilitator and guide-companion on the way. Such a one needs to be versed in the ways of the Spirit working in human hearts and lives, able to listen attentively to what the Spirit is communicating here and now to this unique human person. In 'this solitary work which we cannot do alone', both director and directee are seeking direction from the Spirit; it is a contemplative process that presupposes a relationship with God. Each is listening not only to the other, but also to the Spirit speaking in and through the other. The direct aim in the spiritual direction relationship is not to make the person more independent and free in himself, as might well be the aim in the therapy situation, but rather to enable the person to live with increasing sensitivity in surrender to the liberating guidance of the Spirit. However, as English points out, we are engaged with the whole person at all levels, so that in the actual living situation things may not be as clear-cut as the foregoing might suggest. Although it may be helpful for the director to distinguish between psychological and spiritual levels, these realities are not distinct within the person with whom we are relating and our concern must be with the whole person rather than with, for example, isolated aspects such as his soul or emotions or intellect. In practice, however, at each level of the spectrum, we do recognize a point of differentiation precisely because the directee is unable to hear, or having heard is unable to respond to the Spirit. Transcending the present level becomes impossible because of a blockage which is psychological. Human freedom to respond is in some way impaired. Such a person is like the gospel woman, 'bent and bound', her vision on the ground. What she needs is a psychic release of soul-energy, enabling her to look up and see beyond. This can happen through the direct action of the Holy Spirit contained within the context of the spiritual direction relationship, but something in the nature of psychotherapy may be more appropriate:

As you cannot put a spiritual band-aid on a psychological disorder, neither can you put a psychological band-aid on a biological disorder . . . but the biological and emotional reactions may be indications of other deeper disorders, first on the psychological level and then on the spiritual level.⁵

Let us suppose a person is unable to relate to God as Father. The block is not to do with God, but rather with the relationship with the human father. It is not impossible that over the long-term, healing might take place through life-experience. For example, more satisfactory relationships analogous to that with a human father might eventually enable the person to withdraw the projection. Nevertheless the director may recognize the advantages of psychological help at this stage in order to enable greater freedom at both the spiritual and human level. Projection is taking place, we could even say a form of transference; God is seen through the filters of a negative human father-image and related to accordingly. It becomes evident to both parties that there is a blockage and the director sees it as more appropriately dealt with alongside rather than within the context of spiritual direction as such. This opens up the possibility of a referral to a psychotherapist or, more rarely, a willingness on the part of the director to change roles for a time and deal directly with the psychological blockage, thus providing the necessary containment within which the person's energies can be focussed directly on that level of being where the problem originates. Only after some measure of healing has taken place will the psychic energy of the person be able to be re-focussed at the level on which it is God with whom the person more consciously comes into relationship, rather than the previous negative projection. A spiritual director accompanying such a one in therapy would have an important role in stressing God's continuing relationship with the person, blockage included. It is the desire for God which has initiated and provided the motivation for seeking healing. This is a graced place within our story where we may recognize the vision stalking us even as we are stalking the vision.

In a case where the spiritual director rather than God becomes the object of transference, while not ruling out the possibility of referral, another kind of containment may be required. Here, the director, rather than being the objective observer, is now on the receiving end of projection or transference and will have his own conscious and unconscious reactions as well as those of the directee to cope with. This provides us with a good example of the necessity for supervision in the ministry of spiritual direction as in that of psychotherapy.

The popular view of supervision is that it is only for the trainee spiritual director. However, just as ongoing supervision is a professional requirement for the psychotherapist, so too should it

be for the spiritual director. Analysis of the word itself might help us to greater appreciation of this role of supervisor. Supervision means seeing as from above, implying distance and objectivity and the capacity to widen horizons and envisage more of the whole. We resolve the tension of irreconcilable opposites by transcending the limited viewpoint of the level on which we experience them, so that a new and hitherto unimagined synthesis can be effected. A supervisor can render this kind of service by giving the spiritual director space to explore his own feelings, difficulties and questionings in relation to the directee and to regain clarity of vision. Such an unravelling of the strands frees the director from entangling his own reactions with those of the directee, enabling the latter to begin to re-own the projections.

The focus of supervision is not on the directee as such, but on the process of the director in relationship to the process of the directee as both seek to respond to the Spirit. For example, in the case of transference on the director which we envisaged above, it would be for the director to share his awarenesses with his supervisor so that together they could evolve the kind of containment that is in the best interests both of the directee and director. The director might also need help in dealing with his own conscious and unconscious reactions. The possible ways of containment might include referral to a therapist with the possibility of continuing in the spiritual direction relationship; or temporarily discontinuing it. Or the director might choose to contain and work with the present situation with the support and guidance of the supervisor.

In real life the decision will depend on the circumstances of the actual situation. There are many impediments to spiritual growth which may arise on the psychological level. We have chosen that of transference because perhaps in no other case are we in such great need of the presence of a supervisor standing in the wings able and willing to provide objectivity, support and expertise. A better understanding of this role and function of the supervisor might dispel some of the misplaced anxiety about confidentiality which sometimes deters people from seeking the support of ongoing supervision. To affirm the value seems an appropriate way of concluding these tentative explorations. We assume that a spiritual director would be looking for a supervisor not without some knowledge and experience in both spiritual direction and psychotherapy. This statement in itself throws an interesting light on the opening questions of this article.

NOTES

¹ Wilbur, K.: *The spectrum of consciousness* (The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois, 1987), p 11.

² May, Gerald, M.D.: *Care of mind, care of spirit* (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1982), p x.

³ May, Gerald, M.D.: *op. cit.*, p 4.

⁴ Wilbur, K.: *No boundary: eastern and western approaches to personal growth* (New Science Library, Shambala, Boston and London, 1981), p 11.

⁵ English, John, S.J.: *Spiritual freedom* (Loyola House, Guelph, Ontario, 1979), p 16.