



## Spiritual Direction: Facilitating an Adult Relationship with God

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In *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* William Connolly and I defined *spiritual direction* as "help given by one [believer] to another that enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship"<sup>1</sup> (8). In this definition we expressed our belief that God communicates personally with people and that some individuals could facilitate the relationship that God wants. Those of us who take this definition to heart need to ask ourselves: Do we, in reality, act as though we believe this? That is, do we focus on the personal experience of those who come to us, their experience of encountering God or of wanting to encounter God? And do we keep this focus most of the time when we are with those who come to us?



Lynne Hughes

### The Relationship God Seeks

All my life as a spiritual director and as a writer has been preoccupied with the kind of relationship God wants with us human beings. Recently I have come to believe that what God wants with adults is a relationship that matches their maturity. That is, God wants a friendship that accords with whatever level of friendship a person is capable of. As a person continues to nurture his or her relationship with God, the relationship matures with the maturing of the person. I even venture to say that God saves the world by offering us human beings friendship.

The Bible can be read as revealing that God creates human beings in God's own image for friendship with the Divine and with one another. Let's use the analogy of friendship in ordinary terms. Who are our friends? Think about that question for a few moments. Write their names down. Now ask yourself what it is about

them that makes you say that they are your friends. You like them, right? You like to be with them. But there is more to it, isn't there? You trust them. You tell your friends things about yourself that you would not tell a stranger or even an acquaintance whom you do not trust in the same way. You trust these friends because you know that they will not abuse what you tell them. They will not tell others what you share as something

of a secret, for instance. They will not, you presume, hold what you tell them against you or over your head as a threat. At the deepest level, you trust that they will remain your friends even when they know some of the less savory aspects of your past life and of your character. You thus trust that they will stick with you through thick and thin, through the good times when all goes well, and through the tough times when life is dark.

They are not "fair-weather friends." In addition, with such close friends we might engage in some cooperative venture together because we share so many values and such trust. Some of these characteristics, at least, will be true of the friendship God wants with us.

### The Dynamics of Friendship

Now let's reflect on how we grew to be friends with the men and women you have just remembered. First of all, something attracted you to these friends, and something in you attracted them. We do not make friends, ordinarily, with people whom we find unattractive. Now, attractiveness comes in a variety of packages. We can be attracted by looks, by intelligence, by wit, by charm and warmth, by character, by public stances, by courage. Sometimes even people we initially find unattractive become attractive because we see them in a different light.



Given this mutual shared attraction, what happens next? You spend time with the potential friend in order to get to know one another. At first the conversation will be rather superficial as you feel each other out. You will speak of jobs, schools, places, and so on. But if the friendship is going to grow, you will move to deeper and deeper levels of mutual self-revelation. You will speak not only of your jobs or schools but also about what you like about the job or school and what you dislike. You will talk about how you got along with different family members. You will, in other words, begin to speak of matters of the heart, of what matters most to you. Eventually, of course, each of you will want to know of your effect on one another; whether asked openly or more covertly, we want to know whether the other likes us, enjoys our company, and wants to know us even better. This initial period of exploration can be likened to a honeymoon period. The newfound friendship can be engrossing; both parties want to spend a good deal of time together to cement the friendship.

No friendship, of course, remains in this "honeymoon" period forever. Friendship is always endangered because all of us are bedeviled by fears and self-doubt and all of us have a past that has some unsavory, shameful parts to it. Questions arise: "Will Joe still be my friend if he knows that I cheated to get into a better college?" "What if I tell Ann about the way I failed a good friend three years ago?" "Mary seems to talk a lot about her friend Jim. Does she like him more than me? And what will she think of such feelings of jealousy?" "Can I tell John about my bouts of drinking and my need to go to AA meetings?" Moreover, as the "honeymoon" period winds down, I may begin to notice things about my new friend that I don't like. I get angry at her at times and notice that she gets upset with me. Can the friendship weather the storms of disappointment, of anger, of jealousy, of human pettiness? Even more, can it weather the violent storms of real failure to understand one another and to stand by one another? Any deep friendship will have to withstand the

ups and downs that come with the territory of being human, frail, and fearful. But if it does, it can last a lifetime. The two friends have accomplished the stage that Erik Erikson calls the stage of intimacy.

Friends who have gone through the turbulence of the "post-honeymoon" period may now begin to think of doing things together. One obvious example is a couple who decides to marry and have a family. But others also come to mind. Two friends may decide to work together on a political campaign, start a business together, work on fixing a vacation site for both their families, or begin a car pool to bring their children and others to school. Their friendship has begun to become generative, to look beyond itself. They now want to work together to make the world or some small part of it a better place.

Finally, friendship has to face the inevitability of sickness and death. One of the friends will die before the other. In Erikson's stage theory, they face the crisis of moving toward integrity or despair. Their friendship will deepen during times of illness, or it will regress, depending on whether they are willing to continue the process of self-revelation or not. It is difficult to continue. Friendship into final sickness and death cannot be practiced, and there are few models to follow. The one

who is suffering can hold back on revealing pain, fear, or anger because he or she does not want to burden the other; the other can hold back for the same reasons. But there are rewards for continuing to share the burdens and joys of life even unto death with those we love. And the mourning after death is easier for those who have done so. At the least, the survivor can come to rejoice that he or she was trusted with all or at least most of what the friend went through. For believers in the resurrection of Jesus, the survivor may experience the ongoing presence of the friend with Jesus.

### Stages in the Growth of Friendship

God wants a friendship that is analogous with this description of a developing human friendship. Let me outline these stages and apply it to spiritual direction.

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**Initial attraction.** Spiritual directors often have to spend a great deal of time with people to help them to realize how strongly they are attracted to God. Some people have a terrible image of God based on very poor parenting or early teaching about God. Such an image is usually coupled with a bad self-image. Spiritual directors help such people to realize that they do have experiences of desiring "I know not what," experiences that are accompanied by a feeling of great well-being and joy.<sup>2</sup> Such experiences reveal how attracted they are to God.

**Honeymoon period.** When people find themselves attracted to God, they want to spend time in God's presence. Prayer seems effortless and enjoyable for some time.

**Period of turbulence.** This is brought on by thoughts of how unworthy one is of this friendship because of past sins and addictions or "inordinate attachments" or by a realization of how human beings have fouled the world God creates. "How could I believe that God wants friendship with the likes of me?" The period of turbulence can also be brought on by the realization that remaining in this relationship will have costs. We have a good example in the rich young man of Mark's Gospel (Mk 10:17-22). He breaks off the budding relationship with Jesus because he is addicted to his possessions; he walks away "grieving." All that was needed to continue the relationship was to carry on the conversation. He could have told Jesus, for example, "I can't give up my possessions. Can I still be your friend?" Or, "Will you help me with my addiction?" If one does remain in the conversation with God, one finds that God loves us "warts and all" and has not given up on us in spite of the horrors we have done to one

another and to our world. This period ends with the firm establishment of an intimate friendship with God.

**Joining God's dream.** With this firm foundation, a person realizes that God has a dream for our world and may want to join in helping God to bring about this dream. For Christians this means becoming friends of Jesus and continuing his mission. This is the stage that the rich young man missed out on because he walked away from Jesus. During this stage one can learn what it means to be an adult friend of God and the cost of discipleship. It requires a great deal of honesty with God and with oneself and is perhaps the stage in which spiritual direction is most needed in order to discern how to be "friends of God, and prophets" (Ws 7:27). As Ignatius of Loyola knew, at this stage the temptations are more subtle and thus careful discernment needs more care.<sup>3</sup>

**Facing suffering and death and loss.** In the case of Christians, this means asking to accompany Jesus to the cross, asking to continue to know him more intimately and lovingly and to grow in compassion for him. Those who want to be with Jesus as he goes the way of the cross will find themselves buffeted by conflicting emotions; they want to be with him but may find themselves horrified, even terrified, by the seeming absence of God, or they may find themselves close to despair that God seems powerless to do anything about Jesus' suffering. Spiritual directors help them to express all their emotions and thoughts to God and to Jesus and to ask for help to remain with this suffering Messiah.

**Experiencing the joy of the resurrection.** In order to experience the joy of Jesus' resurrection, people must first experience the horror of the crucifixion. The resur-

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rection does not undo this horror; Jesus still bears the marks of the crucifixion. Directees may find it difficult to face this reality and find themselves strangely distant from Jesus while contemplating the resurrection stories. Spiritual directors help them to look at their resistance and to ask God's help to face the reality that resurrection does not undo what happened but brings an unexpected joy nonetheless. No matter what happens, no matter how cruel life can be, one comes to a deep trust that "all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well," as Julian of Norwich put it. Spiritual directors need to be able to help people to navigate all these stages.

### God's Desire for Adult Friends

Christians often use the parent image for God, but that is usually the image of parent-to-young-child that we imagine and preach about. Suppose, however, that we use some of our experience of healthy adult relationships with parents, either our own experience with parents or what we have seen with others. Of course, parents remain parents even when their children become adults. Most adult children still cannot bring themselves to use their parents' first names. But as we grow into adulthood, we do become more like peers with parents. We do not expect them to tell us what to do nor to take on the burdens only we can carry. But we may want to share with them these burdens because we know that they have gone through similar things. We may have more sympathy for what they went through in raising us, for example. Our parents may share some of their struggles with us in ways they would not have done when we were children.

This kind of relationship to our parents is more like what God desires with us as we grow into adulthood. What are some of the characteristics of such an adult friendship with God?

We might find ourselves confiding our concerns to

God rather than asking for favors. As adults we have too often seen our hopes for a favorable outcome to a crisis dashed and then come to realize that God is not the ultimate "Mr. Fixit." So when disaster threatens, we may find it hard to ask God to perform a miracle. What does one do in these circumstances? What I do is tell God my concerns, hoping to sense God's presence and care for me and for those I love. Of course, I sometimes pray for a miracle, especially when someone I care about is threatened with pain and illness, but my main hope is that he or she and I will experience God's loving presence no matter what happens.

Another characteristic, as I contemplate God's presence to our world, is feeling something like sympathy for God. After all, God does not just read about the rape and abuse of children, for example, but is present, sustaining both the children and the perpetrators of the abuse. God is present to everything that happens in our world, both the good and the awful. Sometimes we may cry a real sob of compassion for what God has to endure in creating and sustaining our broken world.

As spiritual directors, we often listen to experiences of great pain and suffering in those we serve. We are moved to sympathy and compassion. If we can be so moved, how much more must God be moved, who not only hears about what has happened but is present and sustaining as the events happen?

The analogy of an adult friendship with parents has also led me to another thought: we are, by creation, invited into God's "family business." A generous reading of the Genesis accounts of creation could lead us to contemplate the garden image of chapter 2 in this fashion. God creates human beings in God's own image to cooperate in the cultivation of the garden, which is this world. God depends on our cooperation, ingenuity, and creativity in order for the dream of creation to be fulfilled. We will not




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have a sustainable environment unless we cooperate with the natural processes of our planet to make it so. We will not have peace on earth unless we human beings allow our hearts to be transformed into forgiving, caring hearts. By creating our world as it is, God becomes vulnerable; God cannot achieve the dream of a world where human beings live in harmony and friendship with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation without our cooperation, our willingness to become God's adult friends. This is the kind of mutuality God wants from adults who are capable of such mutuality.<sup>4</sup>

Ignatius of Loyola, in the last of his Spiritual Exercises, the "Contemplation to Obtain Love," makes two preliminary observations that are pertinent to our theme:

First. Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words.

Second. Love consists in a mutual communication between the two persons. That is, the one who loves gives and communicates to the beloved what he or she has, or part of what one has or can have; and the beloved in return does the same to the lover. Thus, if the one has knowledge, one gives it to the other who does not; and similarly in regard to honors or riches. Each shares with the other. (Ganss, p. 94)

In the second point, Ignatius makes a rather extraordinary claim: God desires something from us. God invites us to share ourselves and to cooperate with God. "Each shares with the other." God seeks our friendship, Ignatius seems to believe. He could not have come to this conclusion from the theological studies of his day; he had to have come to it through his experience both as a praying person himself and as a spiritual director.

What we believe about God and God's desires deter-

mines the kind of ministry we do. I hope that many of us will come to believe, through our own experience, that God desires friendship with us human beings, a friendship that corresponds with the capacity for friendship that each of us has. If we believe this, we will engage in the ministry of spiritual direction with the sure hope of facilitating such friendship. ■

#### Notes

1. In this original definition we refer to help given by "one Christian to another." I would now prefer to change *Christian* to *believer*.
2. I have described such experiences in a number of writings. See, for example, chapter 3, "The Deepest Desire of the Human Heart," in *With an Everlasting Love*, pp. 25–36.
3. See Ganss, "Rules for the Same Purpose with a More Probing Discernment of Spirits," pp. 126–128.
4. God's "family business," by the way, is as much the church as the world. Indeed, the church exists to help us to cooperate in God's family business of bringing about the kingdom of God in this world.

#### References

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