

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS IMAGINATION

from: *EXPLORING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

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One of the most wonderful gifts we receive from a spiritual director or a friend of the soul is that of a new perspective. He or she is able to stir up our imagination so that we not only view the past differently, but also allow the future to be pregnant with new and exciting possibilities. Sometimes all it takes to bring about the miracle of new hope is a tiny shift of perspective, like a painter seeing a whole new landscape merely by changing the position of his easel. A spiritual friend can do that for us. A word from a friend, in causing a small shift in perspective, can sometimes get us off the treadmill of fatalism and despair where nothing new ever happens. But it must be said that the reverse is also true. Words are like barbs and can wound if aimed directly at a tender spot. An unkind word can stir up in us a host of negative images. A slight shift in perspective can also set us *on* a treadmill. There is, therefore, a struggle for true perspective in each one of us: a battle of images. What kind of images want to take possession of my imagination? They might be images of hopelessness, nastiness, and despair. How are they to be resisted? Indeed, can they be resisted? The most intense part of spiritual combat, for me, is with the many images that struggle to possess me.

I am, for example, often dissatisfied with the kind of person I am. I have a low self-image. The dissatisfaction comes when I see the gap between what I believe about the world and the sort of person I really am. Too often my behavior flatly denies my beliefs. When I am unloving, consumed with dark thoughts, angry and resentful with friends and family, I am falling short of the image of myself which my beliefs demand of me. There is then a struggle between two images: between the person I am meant to be and the person I am. It is often an act of simple and unaffected friendship which rescues me from myself. I tend to get lost in my imagination.

What exactly is imagination anyway? Shouldn't I try to repress it? Won't an active imagination encourage me to live completely in a fantasy world of my own making? Didn't the early Desert Fathers give repeated warnings about the unreliability of the imagination (*phantasia*)? My imagination, however, will not be repressed, no matter how hard I try. My only way through is to find ways in which it can be channeled to good purpose.

David Baily Harned gives a helpful definition of what is meant by imagination when it is thus channeled. It is

the sum of all the resources within us that we employ to form accurate images of the self and its world. The imagination is concerned with the discovery of potentiality and new possibilities, with what is not yet, but only because it is oriented first of all toward actuality.¹

Imagination, therefore, in the sense that we are using it, is the means by which we form *accurate* images of ourselves and our world. In this verse, it is the opposite of fantasy as popularly understood. In order for me to form such accurate images, I need a circle of friends, a nurturing community with whom I can continually test my vision. I need companions. Someone occasionally has to help me adjust my easel, to alter my perspective so that I can see a fresh landscape. I am continually prey to the inaccuracy of my images. The more stubbornly embedded I become in my own point of view, the more inaccurate my view of reality is.

The Christian promise of salvation inevitably brings me into conflict with myself because Christ offers me an image of who I essentially am. This true image reveals itself when I accept the fact that I am loved. There is spiritual combat between the self I am in practice and the self I am called to be. Christ invites me to wrestle with my own character. Indeed, one of the most arresting of the biblical images is Jacob wrestling with the angel:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen

God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32:24-31)

Jacob receives a blessing and a new name (a new way of imaging and understanding himself and his destiny) but he is wounded in the encounter and leaves the place limping. Jacob had to wrestle with who he was and who he was becoming. The wonderful thing was that in the struggle, and only in the struggle, did Jacob begin to understand himself and his vocation. This passage of scripture speaks directly to me of Christian companionship which is characterized by a rhythm of wounding and blessing.

Jacob did his own struggling, and out of his wrestling came a new image of himself. This is the way of creative struggle with images. Images are destructive when they are forced upon us by society as socially useful or acceptable. Jacob, however, was a match for the angel of God who wrestled with him. His new understanding of himself was not forced upon him from outside, but came from within. Unless the new understanding is allowed to form us from within, it becomes restrictive and demoralizing. When who we are and who we are becoming is imposed on us from outside we are no longer free. Children often suffer because of the images parents force upon them. A father, for example, can easily use a son to live out many of the unrealized selves the older man harbors within himself. In such a situation the boy is unable to live from his own unique imagination, but is forced, for a while, to live out of his father's. The boy feels trapped because he has become a victim of his father's imagination. Part of the painful process of growing up will be his realization that he is not a victim after all. He is not a victim because he, like his father, also has an imagination.

But the question of images raises a deeper issue. How do we judge between the different and often disparate images which we have of ourselves and our world? Images are not of equal value. Many of them are destructive. What makes a particular image authentic? What is the nature of the authority of images? After all, we live in a supermarket of the imagination. So many options are open to us that we can put on a new "character" almost overnight. It might not go very deep, but our culture provides a multitude of costumes for a whole cast of characters. I express one or the other of this inner cast by the way I dress and behave. The wardrobes of the affluent are little more than a collection of costumes for vari-

ous roles. "What shall I wear today?" disguises the question, "Who am I, really?" This is why theology is very important, because theology is concerned with the way we answer that basic question, "Who am I, really?", and with the ways in which we determine the authority of the images in the light of our answer. If, for example, my answer to the question, "Who am I?" is "I am a person of no consequence. Nobody cares about me and I don't give a damn!", I will understand myself and my world in a way which will best correspond to my basic image of myself and, of course, I will behave accordingly. If, on the other hand, I claim that "I am a child of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit," I will respond to myself and the world in the light of that basic image. Even here we can be led astray. To see ourselves as the temple of the Holy Spirit could lead us to embrace images which would fill us with self-importance. This is why spiritual guidance is important in our battle with the images. Even the good images can feed our self-deception.

Spiritual direction is an art, a creative process by which, together, we dare to imagine wild and exciting new possibilities for ourselves and for God's world. It is a dangerous business because it involves the transgression of limits and our entering into the unknown and unfamiliar. We can do and be far more than we know and it is often our lack of imagination that holds us back, keeps us tied down, and insists on our staying on the treadmill. It is very easy for us to see and feel what we are expected to see and feel simply because everybody else does. It took a small child who knew what he saw to cry out, "The emperor has no clothes!" Everyone else "saw" them clearly enough. I have had many a spiritual companion who has been willing to play the role of that small child.

Spiritual direction is concerned with the creative use of the imagination to enable us to see what is really there. It requires the recovery of astonishment, and the revitalization of our withered imaginations. It means resisting the tendency to edit our experiences so that they will fit into everyone else's perspective. Children are our teachers in this respect. A three-year-old at play has not yet really developed the capacity to edit his experiences. He or she can turn a piece of wood into a horse or make a castle out of a cardboard box. It is fantasy to be sure, but it is creative fantasy because it is an imaginative process by which the child is introduced to an ever-increasing circle of possibilities.

Just as the child needs the nurturing and loving environment of a family

(especially when he or she imagines a monster in the fold of a blanket or in the dark recesses of an open closet), so adults need a supportive community and a series of loving, nurturing relationships in order to negotiate the dark and threatening images that inevitably come to them. There is something wild, dark, and passionate within us, and the host of images that do battle inside us remind us that we are divided souls often torn inside by warring forces. We therefore need friends, fellow warriors. We also need an authoritative word from outside us which will give us a true image of ourselves.

The central issue is faith. Faith is our commitment to a key image by which the whole of reality is interpreted. For Christians, this interpretive key is a person, Jesus Christ. For some people, quite another key operates, and so inevitably there are warring views with regard to what is really real.

In William Golding's arresting novel *Darkness Visible*, for example, there is a dark and terrible character whose interpretive key is a kind of demonic alter ego inside her – a terrible thing without a name:

Sometimes she wondered why nothing mattered and why she felt she could let her life trickle out of her hands if she wanted to, but most often she did not even wonder. The thing at the mouth of her tunnel brandished a pretty girl who smiled and flirted and even sounded earnest now and then – “Yes I *do* see what you mean! We’re destroying the world!” But the thing at the mouth of the tunnel said without sound *as if I cared!*”²

Once our imagination becomes possessed of such an image it is hard to shake it off. We know people whose whole view of reality is jaundiced By an interpretive key that fosters a resentful, depressive, or even vengeful attitude. The key makes all the difference. A thick, unpolished, dirty lens seriously restricts one's view. We rarely see what is there simply because the organ of sight is defective or largely unused.

Consider a cat sitting in the sun. The novelist Walker Percy takes an ordinary cat and uses it to make us feel uneasy and uncomfortable with regard to our view of ourselves. Will Barrett, the hero of *The Second Coming*, contemplates a lazy cat sitting in the sun and gains a new vision of himself:

As he sat gazing at the cat, he saw all at once what had gone wrong, wrong with people, with him, not with the cat – saw it with the smiling certitude with which Einstein is said to have hit upon his famous theory in the act of boarding a streetcar in Zurich. . . . Sitting there in the sun with its needs satisfied, . . . the cat was exactly a hundred percent cat, no more no less. As for Will Barrett, as for people nowadays – they were never a hundred percent themselves. They occupied a place uneasily more or less successfully. More likely they were forty-seven percent themselves, or rarely, as in the case of Einstein on the streetcar, three hundred percent. All too often these days they were two percent, spectators, who hardly occupies a place at all.³

The sight of an ordinary house cat can excite deep questions and stimulate the imagination if one has eyes to see.

Spiritual direction is an art rooted in a deep appreciation of tradition and authority where the images are rich and varied. Richard Sennett in his book *Authority* answers the question, “Who is an authority?” by using the example of the great orchestral conductor Pierre Monteux. This musician was no flamboyant showman. There was no coercion or threat in his manner of conducting, but he was someone who had the power to stimulate the imagination by showing it a broader vision and by summoning it to a higher allegiance: “He had the strength to see through you, to refuse what your peers accepted. It made you anxious and kept you on your toes.”⁴

A true spiritual authority challenges us with our own potential, our own vision, our own promise of glory. A true spiritual authority leaves us busy thinking our own thoughts rather than merely mouthing his. The one sure way to spot false authority in spiritual matters is the suggestion that your troubles are over and that you have arrived, that the work of your imagination is complete. A true spiritual authority leaves us with our own work to do. There is no final ending.

We do not, therefore, want an authority who will do our imagining for us, but a person (or better, a fellowship of persons) who will place us within an interpretive framework that will help us face our own images crea-

tively. Still less do we want to reject all authority and go get lost in a private, often infantile world. Withdrawal into the tiny world of ourselves might save us in the short term, but without the stimulation of images from without we wither and die. We want to be free, but we don't want to be alone.

To whom should I surrender? There are demagogues who invite submission. There are ideologies which offer the interpretive key to the meaning of life for which I long. Which way shall I turn? Deeper into the dark recesses of the self? Or toward surrender to the authority of another? The question remains. Who or what, in the end, determines my picture of reality? The success of political and spiritual totalitarianism in our age shows that many prefer submission to external authority. One Stalinist journal proclaimed in 1948: "The socialist regime liquidated the tragedy of loneliness from which men of the capitalist world suffer."⁵ Is that the choice then? Totalitarianism or loneliness?

The Christian believes passionately in a third way. It is true that it is a way of submission and obedience, but the object of such self-abandonment is nothing less than God. Such self-abandonment takes a lifetime because there are always lesser loves, minor allegiances, which demand our attention and obedience. Idolatry is still rampant in the world and our battle is to be continually waged with the idols which threaten our primary allegiance. This fundamental commitment to God as our highest allegiance makes all other allegiances, however important, penultimate. Those who believe in the Christian gospel claim that their God is One whom "to serve is to reign" (or, as it is usually translated, "whose service is perfect freedom"). The Christian places his whole being in the hands of God and thus avails himself of the widest of all possible interpretive keys for his own self-understanding. It is, of course, not limitless in the sense that evil images are allowed to dominate (although they sometimes serve an important function). It is limitless, however, in the sense of the infinite creative possibilities for good which are daily opened up for us when we place ourselves in God's hands.

We should, however, never forget that images and metaphors can narrow as well as widen our view of ourselves. The metaphor can lie as well as tell the truth. Hitler often described the Jews as insects,⁶ so that the word *Jew* stood for something small, crawling, and repulsive. Hitler did not have in mind gorgeous butterflies when he spoke of the Jews. Calling Jews "insects" or calling black people "vermin" brutalizes both the name-caller

as well as the ones thus vilified. It is no wonder that we fear those who can stir mobs to acts of violence. The spoken word can destroy as well as create, and a gifted demagogue can capture the imagination of a mob with a metaphor such as black people are a disease or Jews an infection.

This brings us to another important function of the spiritual guide or friend. He or she can encourage a healthy skepticism in us with regard to the destructive images and metaphors we inevitably carry around in the attics and basements of our psyches. A friend of the soul will, at times, need to encourage us to *disbelieve* in some of the images we have of ourselves and of the world.

Michael Foucault in his *Discipline and Punishment* claims that "when one wishes to individualize the healthy, normal, and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he had dreamt of committing."⁷ This has startling implications for the vital role of spiritual direction in the formation of persons in community today. The environment set by the Holy Spirit allows our childishness/childlikeness, our madness (both creative and destructive), and our criminality (in both its daring and damaging aspects) to be given voice in an atmosphere that is both open and reverent. We need occasions (in confession or in spiritual direction) when we are permitted to share anything and everything within us without fear of rejection or condemnation. A good spiritual guide will enable the person seeking direction to sift through the images, rejecting some and responding to others. In other words, the spiritual guide offers strategic advice about the battles ahead. The two dominant metaphors which give shape to the battle within us concern images of freedom and of slavery. Are we lords or are we slaves? Lords over whom? Slaves of what?

Richard Sennett describes one philosopher's theory of authority in a way that helps us to view the spiritual director as a stimulator of the imagination:

The stations of the journey are marked by crises of authority. crises of authority are constructed around the modulations in recognizing freedom and slavery in oneself, recognizing them in other human beings. Each crisis occurs through disbelieving what one previously believed. But these acts of disbelieving are not ends. They are means to new patterns of belief. During the later phases of this churning over,

when one recognizes with distress the Lord and servant within oneself, and then the Lord and servant within others, the upheavals alter the way one acts with other human beings. In the latter two phases, the old lord loses his power over the bondsman, not because the bondsmen overthrows him or takes his place but because the unhappy bondsman becomes a different human being.⁸

A spiritual guide or friend is someone with whom it is both safe and constructive to disbelieve in order that a new pattern of believing may emerge. It is in such exchanges (sometimes threatening and frightening) that we are renewed, that we become different human beings. This process of disengagement from beliefs and the authority they have over us is very important at certain stages in spiritual growth. It enables u to pose the terrible but freeing question: “Are there other ways of looking at myself and my world?” Metaphors change, images shift, and a new picture of reality emerges. It often takes a crisis to radically change our way of looking at things. Sennett goes on:

Consciousness of lordship and bondage is all: crises change the nature of a person’s consciousness. More and more the ethics of recognition – sympathy, sensitivity, modesty about oneself – should control the interpretation of power. This free recognition *is* freedom. It is an enormously idealistic, spiritual view, but anything but a naïve concept of liberty. Liberty is not happiness. It is an experience of division, it is the final acknowledgment that a tyrant and a slave live in every human being; only by acknowledging this fact can human beings ever hope to be more than duelists.⁹

The image of the duel within is very ancient. Plato’s well-known image of the soul as a charioteer trying to control wild horses springs to mind. But it is dangerously wrong to see the duel as one between flesh and spirit. It is, rather, one between lord and slave. It is a battle which is raging at the heart of Western civilization; yet the lost art of spiritual direction proclaims that human beings are much more than either duelists or dualists: duelists

in the sense of ultimately being divided and broken selves; dualists in the sense of acknowledging a division between the flesh (understood as the seat of evil) and spirit (understood as the throne of good). We are invited to pay attention to *all* we are, to be open to all life offers. But living with true openness to the Holy Spirit is very difficult because the freedom which such allegiance offers is unnerving. That is why religion has so often degenerated into a seductive kind of bondage. The freedom it offers is too much to bear. Sennett poses the dark question at the root of our spiritual longings: “How much exposure to uncertainty, to half measures, to unhappiness can humanity bear in order to be free?”¹⁰

what is so maddening about the spiritual journey is that there are so few footholds. What keeps us from falling? The Christian is one who finds his whole life held both in being and in question by a worshiping community of fellow pilgrims) which enable him to face with courage and hope the strange process of disbelieving in order to believe more deeply. Without the courage to disbelieve we would never more or grow. We tend to get set in our ways, embedded in our point of view. The spiritual companion is one who, by stimulating our imagination and challenging us with the great Christian metaphor of death and resurrection (behind which is the Savior himself), can help us emerge from our state of embeddedness.

Closely allied with this false sense of the fixity of things (“nothing can or should change”) is a sense that we are not actors in a drama, but rather acted upon. We are, in short, victims of circumstance: “It is out of my hands.” We like to think of ourselves in this way. To be a victim is to be a slave to another’s will, to the environment, to heredity, or to circumstances. Thus while we are unfree we are also (to our intense relief) not responsible. Our parents, our friends, our bosses – *they* are the ones who hurt us. Karl Marx’s word for such people is the *Lumpenproletariat* - people who are victims of fate and for whom the emergence of the new is not a possibility. For them the system works and cannot be changed. The debilitating and demoralizing power of tyranny and oppression over the consciousness of men and women cannot be overemphasized. It is, of course, not only the poor and the oppressed who are the spiritual *Lumpenproletariat* – it is also the rich and the affluent.¹¹

Spiritual direction (or better human life directed by the Holy Spirit) will not allow us the luxury of being members of the *Lumpenproletariat*, of being embedded in an unchanging view of reality, or of abandoning our

responsibilities in the comforting role of victim. Religion at its worst (like its twin, politics) promises total security in exchange for total surrender. It is a terrible exchange, for, as we have insisted, the only proper object of our surrender is God. Religion often tries to claim for itself exclusive rights in the very name of the One to whom we are to surrender. Religion in this sense, however, bears as much resemblance to God as a photograph does to a lover.

I need healing images that will challenge my view of myself as either embedded or victimized. A spiritual guide can help me change the position of my easel and bring a whole new world into view. Maybe a friend or yours will invite you to take a good look at your cat busy being one hundred percent itself. Remember Will Barrett noticing his cat basking in the sun.

I am more and more conscious, as time goes on, that my life is held together by the kindness of friends, the casual remarks of strangers, the crazy and angry talk of my fellow citizens. Like Will Barrett, I have "learned over the years that if you listen carefully you can hear the truth from the unlikeliest sources, especially from the unlikeliest sources, from an enemy, from a stranger, from children, from nuts, from overheard conversations, from stupid preachers."¹² Yet are we willing and able to listen carefully, to pay attention to what is going on in and around us? Are we willing to allow our imagination to be activated and to face whatever we are given?

The great image with which the Christian is faced, both as a sign of judgment and of hope, is the Cross. It proclaims that liberty is not identical with happiness, and that there is no fulfillment without suffering. It also provides us with a power-bearing image which enables us to live through our sufferings and, in the grace of God, even make use of them.

Suffering is sometimes a way out of "embeddedness." It reminds us of the terrible fragility of things. It undermines our faith in the permanence of existing arrangements. It weaves a vital link between freedom and limitation.¹³

Perhaps the worst suffering of all is the self-suffering itself, the two-percent self, sucking its own energy away. How am I to confront (without help, support, friends) "anxieties that seem to have neither name nor source, a strange exhilaration at the sufferings and tragedies that often people encounter, times of baseless dissatisfaction and boredom. . . a relish for hurting others, weird and malignant dreams, and a taste of ashes.

There seems to be a maelstrom in the self somewhere, luring, tugging, insatiable."¹⁴ I need friends, guides, a life-bearing tradition if I am to come through it all.

Carl Jung's criticism that Christianity often minimizes the strength of all the night creatures abroad in the self and set on its subversion is well founded. The idea that such things might be present in the committed Christian is abhorrent to many believers who claim that Christ's victory on the cross was so decisive that for the believer all is sweetness and light. Christ's victory was and is decisive, but the battle, though won, still rages. Christ not only suffers for us, but also in us and through us. "Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world," wrote Pascal, and this is a dark truth hard for Christians to swallow.

The battle, then, is a serious one and all the more insidious because we can easily fool ourselves into imagining that it is raging elsewhere. We need to cultivate an imagination for evil so that we can begin to see "our sucking two-percent self" for what it is. Only then can we join battle against the self which assumes that it is the center and measure of all things; against the self which is embedded, like a fly in amber, in our narrow interpretation of persons and events. Without the compelling power of creative if painful images we aid and abet one another in our false view of things. One has only to watch the television coverage of political conventions to see men and women willing to reinforce one another's view of the world. In self-deception and so develop explanations by which we reject all that is not nice about us. Our imagination is so shriveled and narrow that we dare not admit that we are really as capable of evil as well as good. But then the reverse is also true. Many are consumed by self-hatred, self-disgust because they cannot imagine any other possibility, any other role for themselves.

The battle becomes particularly intense when we struggle with our own darkness and own it as ours. Spiritual guidance can provide us with an ever-widening interpretation of reality which will prevent us from being forced to lie to ourselves about our own evil and darkness. The good news of the gospel saves us from the necessity of self-deception. Christian maturity involves the growing ability to negotiate creatively an ever-widening range of experience in the company of others.

How do we dare battle? We dare because of the healing perennial ex-

perience of grace. We dare because underneath the darkneses and difficulties is the Holy Spirit guiding and sustaining all things. This is a statement of faith, but it is not a glib one, because the Christian faith commits

the believer both to accepting judgment as well as to receiving forgiveness. Christian faith involves, on occasion, the embracing of an agony, the voyaging through shadows and threatening images. Spiritual direction is the process by which these images are transformed. A spiritual guide creates an environment in which the images can come to consciousness. The temptation is always to sink deeper and deeper into the unconscious and to surrender to its energies. Why? Because consciousness means an awareness of not only the good, the beautiful, and the true, but also of suffering, tragedy, and brokenness, and we need images, stories, sagas, and myths that are large enough to help us endure and in the end enjoy the truth.

In order, then, for us to make sense of the images that confront us we need an interpretive framework, a story, a gospel. The genius of evil is that it attacks the narrative thread which connects our life together. The gospel proclaims that our life does hang together and the scriptures and the Christian community provide the story that holds it all together.

My spiritual companion can help me imagine a future full of hope and promise without escaping the exigencies of the present or fantasizing from a cut-off base. He or she can help me do this because we are fellow pilgrims in a community which celebrates the enlarging images of the cross and resurrection: our two great antidotes to embeddedness and self-deception.

The imagination serves a critical function in our interpretation of the universe. Not only do images stretch and challenge our view of the world, they also provide us with the means by which we can challenge conventional and popular images in everyday life. Our view of reality will depend on the kind of questions we ask of it. Jacob Needleman writes:

Imagine that a certain man comes upon a gun. He has never before seen or heard of such a thing. Nor, we must imagine, does he have any need to kill for food or defense. He picks up the gun, turns it around, knocks it against a stone. What is this object? He takes it home and experiments with it. To his delight

he finds that when he holds it by the barrel he can crush things and break them better than with his wooden mallet. To him, the gun is a hammer. That is his idea, his theory, so to say, and his theory works. When others ask him what that strange object is, he can Prove his answer through the test of experience. Why did this man not discover the proper nature of the gun?¹⁵

The man did not have a wide enough view of reality to include the real purpose of the gun. This is the way we are most of the time and it takes a sense of a larger reality to stretch our view of things. My problem is that I do not ask the right questions about life. I am like the man with the gun who uses it as a hammer. The questions I ask life are narrowly based and spring from petty and private concerns about survival and security. A friend of the soul brings me into a larger and more generous reality.

There are those places where the serious questions and the more powerful images invade my little world – in dreams, in the times when I am disciplined enough to keep a journal, and, above all, in my regular participation in a life of prayer (particularly as it is expressed liturgically). Dreams are full of unbidden images and unasked questions and are worthy of close attention. The keeping of a journal allows me the wonderful opportunity to think thoughts which would otherwise be suppressed. Prayer and worship open me up to an ever-widening world of questions and images.

The storehouse of Christian questions and images is, of course, the Bible. Indeed it is, with the liturgy, the supreme place where nourishment is to be found. The Old Testament is the story of men and women who heard God speaking to them, sometimes in dreams, often simply in their “inquiring of the Lord.” It was a simple procedure. When you could not understand or bear what was happening in your life you went and asked God about it. This approach, for all its danger, is wonderfully direct and simple. And humanity loses a great deal when the sense of direct access to God is lost. The Elgoni, a tribe in East Africa, believed that God spoke to them and told them what to do through the dreams of their medicine men. When Jung visited them in 1925 they told him: “No, since the English came we have not had any more big dreams, for you see the District Commissioner knows what we should do.”¹⁶

Barbara Hannah comments, “We all, whether we know it or not, more and more in these rational days trust the ‘District Commissioner’ and all he stands for and have thus lost touch, for the most part completely forgotten, the superhumanly guidance that exists in the unconscious.”¹⁷

This is dangerous talk and many people have fallen into a whirlpool of madness because of it. Spiritual direction understands the danger, and for this reason spiritual growth always evolves within the context of a community that is firmly grounded in tradition. We need friends, guides, directors who will help us understand and interpret the questions and images, because deep questioning and the receiving of a wider vision of reality will mean nothing unless it overflows into everyday life and changes our patterns of behavior. It is no good if questions and images are trapped inside us and fail to bear fruit in the world.

Barbara Hannah, talking about the opportunities and dangers of the use of the imagination, writes:

There is never any guarantee, if we once start on this path, as to where it may lead us. Above all, it should never be undertaken without a firm relationship to *someone* who will understand, or at least sympathize, for it sometimes leads into such cold and inhuman depths that *human companionship is absolutely necessary* to prevent us from getting entirely frozen and lost.¹⁸

The benefits, however, from being receptive to the images that come to us are incalculable. Images widen the range of our possibilities, and our disciplined attention to that will be for “the enlarging of the heart.” It should, however, be evident that the life of the imagination, whether it comes to us through our dreams, our journal keeping, or simply unbidden as we’re walking down the street, is not to be taken lightly.