

## **No Time Like the Present: The ways we enable and hinder the encounter with God within the Spiritual Direction session with Nick Helm**

Spiritual Direction can easily drift in to talking *about* God. This is worthy conversation, as we explore what may be happening in the life and prayer of a directee. However, we may be missing something vital. After all talking about God is not the same as encountering God. In this day we will look at where as Spiritual Directors we put our focus, and the ways we enable and hinder the encounter with God within the Spiritual Direction session.

### **Welcome, introductions, housekeeping**

#### ***Opening prayer/reflection***

Invitation to bring to mind a moment of drawing closer to God – let yourself be there – noticing how it feels for you to be there – greet God with the name that seems appropriate – receive God’s greeting of you by name.

Bring to mind what has drawn you to be part of today. What hopes, needs, desires have brought you here. Take time to speak of these to God – invite God to share God’s desire for you in this time. Take a couple of minutes to be together.

Invite you to bring your awareness to the screen and all the people gathered – those you can see, those you can’t see.

Invite you to imaginatively step into this space where we are all present – to each other, to God – the this day – and show your greeting.

Take a minute to note for yourself anything significant that has emerged.

#### **Introduction:**

Grateful for this opportunity – I come as a practitioner continually stretched and challenged by the ministry of SD – with the need to be grounded in my practice in my developing and at times failing understanding of what Spiritual Direction is.

Preparing brings new insights and awarenesses,  
presenting sharpens and deepens them  
engaging with others enriches and opens up more!

A word about my use of the term ‘God’ today. Words for God are as inadequate as there are many. I endeavour to avoid gendering God with pronouns such as him or her. When I use the term, I know actually God is bigger than that which is in my mind, or in your minds, I know God is more intimately part of my flesh and bones, my thoughts and feelings than I realise and most likely to be encountered in some mystical inner way than in some dramatic external manifestation. I also have in mind the extraordinary mystery that is the three in one and one in three of the trinity, creative life, incarnate life and breath of life – ground of our being, companion on the way, divine spark...

## Session 1: Enabling Encounter – On the Threshold

Begin with a personal experience:

Few weeks ago, part of ongoing training for spiritual accompaniers – in a zoom triad I was accompanying, let's call her Jane, I found myself listening to a load of stuff that seemed to need a counsellor rather than a spiritual director. I was somewhat bored, somewhat irritated as she expounded her angst that was directed at what was wrong with her adult daughter's life.

Within myself I was praying - God, how do I bring awareness of you here, when all her attention is on herself and her daughter.

Found myself asking '*can I invite you to picture your daughter and her life as it is – and see where and how God is for her*'

Immediately I was wondering if I'd put the focus in the wrong place. It wasn't a disastrous intervention, and the conversation changed - and ended up in a really different place. Jane, without any prompting from me, recognised that she was facing a challenge - **to trust God's care of her daughter.**

When we did our feedback review of this encounter, I articulated my uncertainty about what I had done. What was so helpful was to hear both Jane and the observer describing the effect that that question had had. They described a palpable shift in the feel of the conversation – and of a deep sense of encounter of Jane with God.

I'm sure each of you can describe similar experiences. I share it – to draw us into the focus on this real issue.

I could very easily have responded to Jane in different ways. Some of which would have avoided direct engagement with God's presence in the moment, in the situation...

(SLIDE)

These are threshold moments. Points where we could as it were dive in and go closer to God, or step back.

Barry and Connolly write:

*If spiritual directors do not focus on the religious experience of their directees, then this most intimate and challenging area of experience will ordinarily be skirted in their conversations. Other areas of life experience, and especially problem areas, will take up the time. Directees may get help with these areas, but they may not develop a deeper personal relationship with the Lord.'*

Rob Marsh sj who writes some of the most helpful and challenging pieces in *The Way*, picks this up in his 2014 article '*Teaching Spiritual Direction as if God were real*'. Tells his own story of moving across this threshold several years into his own giving spiritual direction

*I found though that my directees often initially balked, as I had, at believing God might be real and really available in their own experience and prayer.*

There's a threshold here for both director and directee which I believe is fundamental aspect of the human condition.

Sieger Koder, the catholic priest artist who died a few years back articulates this threshold in depicting Peter's encounters with Jesus – with the position of Peter's hands. In 'The washing of the feet' we see this brilliantly – his right hand open – pushing Jesus away – you will never wash my feet, his left hand on Jesus' shoulder pulling him closer – wash all of me. There are many scriptural examples of this sort of dynamic – encounter that has both draw to and draw way.

This is the threshold we human beings stand on – raising the question 'what are the conditions that help the lowering of the hand pushing God away, and what conditions enable the drawing of the shoulder of Jesus closer?'

I am on this threshold every time I come to pray, sit in spiritual direction, go on retreat, every time I am listening to someone in spiritual direction as well as all sorts of moments in everyday life. Sometimes its easy to draw close – sometime not!

As a Spiritual Director I sit with the privilege and challenge to be one who doesn't collude with the pushing of God away, gently holding open the opportunity to for Jesus to draw closer

Model:

One of the ways I find helpful to keep mindful of the nature of spiritual direction is my reworking of the triangular model of the relationships in spiritual direction.

(SLIDE)

SD Triangle -focus and intention of SD

Focus

Intention – relationship – 'fostering intimacy with God' (B&C)

Enabling 'encounter'

Enabling 'deeper encounter'

Threshold between drawing closer and withdrawing

***Time for Questions – comments***

### **Personal Reflection:**

In your **personal journey** – your own encounters with God

Bring one instance to mind:

- What happened?
- Was there a threshold point?
- Notice the draw to encounter/intimacy,
- Impulses to withdraw from
- What fruit resulted

In your **spiritual direction** – bring an instance to mind where you witnessed / enabled encounter

- What happened?
- Was there a threshold point?
- What draw to encounter/intimacy did you notice?
- What impulses to withdraw did you notice?
- What fruit?

### **Breakout Groups**

Ground rules:

- Share what you are comfortable with sharing from your personal reflections
- Confidentiality
- Listen – honour each sharing
- In last 5 minutes – Draw out key points & put up to 3 of these on chat (as long as you all are comfortable with sharing them)

## Session 2: The Spiritual Director on the Threshold

Regathering, feedback from groups

Explore standing on the threshold, as a spiritual director and looking at ways of helping and hindering this movement towards greater intimacy with God.

For the Spiritual Director the threshold can be described as being between

- Enabling attentiveness to God and
- (Subtle) attentiveness to self as Spiritual Director

Rob Marsh puts the opportunity like this:

*'A director promotes the encounter with God by helping directees notice more and more about the experience in question, by exploring what God is like there, how God looks at them, what they are desiring and how they are drawn to respond.'*

*simple model for spiritual direction:*

1. Listen to what a person is saying.
2. Notice (and help the person notice) his or her implicit experience of God.
3. Help it become explicit experience of God.
4. Stay with it and deepen it, let it come into the present, let it develop.
5. Encourage it to become 'conversational'.

This sounds simpler than it is in practice!

And I find plenty of ways in which its really tricky to move **from 2 to 3** – and for some directees this is a step too far – it can take some journeying with them before they are ready to move from reflecting and speaking of how they are experiencing God's spirit moving / touching / affecting them and daring to take the moment to let it happen more, more deeply in the here and now!

We move from talking about God, to experiencing God. The questions move from 'How is it for you?'  
to 'How is it for God with you?'

From, 'let yourself be aware of God/Jesus/the Spirit with you'  
to 'notice how it is for God/Jesus/the Spirit to be with you. What are you seeing in their eyes, what are you feeling in their heart'

Its all about helping them gaze on God gazing on them. Its about enabling the trusting of their very bodily sensitivity to God's presence and activity.

Moving **from 3 to 4** is often simpler – for the directee – once they are in the moment with God they can stay with it (at least for a short while). It may take several sessions for the directee to be comfortable to stay in the moment as long as they need.

For the director the challenge is to keep out of the way – to be willing to wait, silently, attentively – witness to a mystery encounter.

The **move to 5** – is simply to invite personal response – conversation – intimate sharing, open heart to heart.

In all this the Spiritual Director becomes more of a facilitator – leading through the stages of a meditation than a partner in a dialogue.

**Reflection:**

I invite you to reflect for a moment or two – what of all this feels familiar / natural to you in your practice – and what of all this is stretching, challenging or inviting a looking again at your practice?

**The Challenges:**

The other side of this being on the threshold with others is how we can undermine or miss the opportunity to enable encounter.

Marsh offer's these thoughts:

*there are often lots of other things a spiritual director might be drawn into doing in a session rather than paying attention to the traces of God—for example, just listening, helping someone pray in helpful ways, helping someone cope with a major loss or transition, teaching about decision-making, teaching about discernment, engaging in a little theological reflection, dealing with special circumstances, listening to dreams, appreciating art, and so on*

Here we encounter the urges for our role to be something other than the enabler of the encounter. None of these things are in themselves inappropriate in a spiritual conversation. But the important discernment for us as Spiritual Directors is to be asking 'for whose sake' am I doing it. We all know how easy it is for us to answer this 'but of course its for their sake' as we teach a way of prayer that seems helpful for them.

But what if a few minutes in deep encounter with God enabled God to lead them naturally into a way of prayer that fits them better?

As a director I am challenged by this list and this question pretty well every time I am with someone. I'm on the threshold – can I trust that God can do what is needed here, without my wisdom, without my wonderful prayer exercise, without my deep attentive empathetic listening, without my insight on discernment...

As a Spiritual Director this is a threshold where I must be more John the Baptist than Peter. I need to decrease that God, Jesus, the Spirit may increase. I need to let Peter's left hand hold me back and as Ignatius says 'Allow the Creator to Deal with the Creature, and the Creature with their Lord and God.

**Reflection:**

How do you recognise the challenges for you on this threshold?

### ***For personal reflection:***

What opportunities in enabling encounter are you finding yourself drawn to? Where do you see them applying to your own practice?

What challenges do you recognise for yourself?

How is God gazing at you in this?

### **Breakout Groups**

#### **In Groups:**

Share and listen:

- where this is landing for you:
- what is coming to life
- what is disturbing you
- your sense of God's gaze and your response

Any insights / questions / comments to bring back - (place on the chat)

### **Plenary**

Feedback from groups, questions...

### **Closing reflection**

Remember your conversation with God at the beginning of the day - about your hopes, needs and desires, and God's desires for you.

- notice where these desires have met
- Gaze at God with this awareness
- receive God's gaze
- move into conversation...
- picture yourself in the place you offer spiritual direction
- someone there for spiritual direction
- notice your desire for how you want to be as a spiritual director
- notice/listen for God's desire for you as a spiritual director
- move into conversation
- return to awareness of everyone
- notice gratitude for being part of this community today

Bless each other with the words of the grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you always.

Amen.