

FINDING GOD AT THE ICE CREAM TRUCK (AN INTRODUCTION TO SPIRITUAL DIRECTION)

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“The most amazing thing happened after our last session,” my client tells me. (I will call her Beth). “Remember how I said I didn’t believe God acts in our lives. He wouldn’t throw down manna – or anything - for me if I were hungry. Well, I have to eat my words!” Beth, in her late 30’s, is sitting on the sofa in my office, where we meet once a month for an hour to talk and reflect on God, prayer, and her everyday life

Beth continues, “After our last session, I was really hungry, so I stopped at an ice cream truck in Oakland. The woman standing by the truck spoke to me in Spanish (which I don’t understand). I pointed to a popsicle picture on the side of the truck. She went to get it. I reached in my purse and discovered I didn’t have my wallet. I gestured to her to wait, ran to my car, and couldn’t find my wallet there either. I went back to the truck and tried to signal that she should forget about the popsicle. She brought it over anyway. Then, an elderly man who was hanging around nearby came up and rattled something in Spanish. She nodded, grinned at me, and handed me the popsicle. He translated, “She says, ‘It’s on the house’.”

“I couldn’t believe it! Was he the owner? Why did she do it? Neither of them looked like they had much money, and here she was giving me a free popsicle. I stood there, debating whether to accept it or not. Then I felt a strange sensation in my body and all I can say is, I felt God’s presence. I remembered my conversation with you. I felt like God was laughing, letting me know that He *does* throw manna down.”

I listen attentively as Beth shares her story, and we spend the remainder of the session exploring and experiencing the impact this incident had on her. She concludes our session saying “Maybe I should pay more attention to the good things that happen, be grateful, and notice what gifts God is giving me every day, rather than looking for a big bolt from the heavens.”

We live in a world filled with competing demands and have little time for reflection and contemplation. It helps to step back, reflect on the deeper meaning of ordinary events, and seek guidance from our inner wisdom. What I did with Beth is formally called “spiritual direction”; other names are spiritual guidance, mentoring, or companioning. I didn’t always feel comfortable talking about God in such a personal way. I was brought up in a Jewish household where we didn’t talk about such subjects. We celebrated Jewish holidays as family gatherings. It wasn’t until I was desperately ill and lost a child in pregnancy that I sought a connection with God and found solace in my Jewish roots. I joined the local synagogue and went to services, but I still felt something missing. When I discovered spiritual direction, a way opened up for me to relate with a higher power that helped create meaning and purpose in my life—so much so that I enrolled in a three-year training program and now offer this service to others.

Why would you seek a spiritual director?
You may:

- desire greater vitality in your experience of life.
- hunger for a connection beyond yourself.
- want religious worship service or prayer to be more satisfying.
- seek spiritual guidance at a crossroads in your life.
- want support in practicing your religion.

Each religious or wisdom tradition brings some form of spiritual companionship. In the Hebrew tradition, *Pirke Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers) 1:6 it is said “Provide yourself a teacher, get yourself a companion, and judge all people favorably.” Spiritual direction has its roots in the Christian monastic movement which the desert fathers and mothers began to practice in the fourth century C.E. A spiritual companion does not teach, but rather accompanies us on our life journey, helping us reflect in ways that enable us see the profound significance and meaning in our lives. Such a companion listens for and helps facilitate an experience of the sacred. As one client phrased it, “Having a spiritual director feels like having someone to walk through life with me, a guardian angel here on earth.”

Usually a client will interview two or three people before they settle on one with whom they feel in tune. In the bay area we are fortunate to have many trained spiritual directors of various faiths and orientations. There is no requirement that you have particular religious beliefs. A director usually asks open-ended questions to guide and encourage discovery of your own values and desires. We may talk about inner wisdom, Mother Nature, Di-

vine, Holy One, Creator, or Higher Self. Sometimes I help a client put words to experiences he or she is having trouble expressing. I may suggest a meditation, reading, or prayer experiment. The main focus is on contemplative listening to the still small voice within. To find out more, see the internet site <http://www.livingwealth.com> or contact me at sb@LivingWealth.com.

Shirah Bell is founder of Alameda-based *Living Wealth™*, which offers classes and private sessions in spiritual direction, Mussar, financial coaching, and life design. “Living wealth” goes beyond money to include emotional, interpersonal and spiritual resources which enable us to take care of what really matters to us, now and in the future. Shirah is certified as a spiritual director by Mercy Center’s Spiritual Director’s Institute. She earned her Ph.D. in Organization and Human Behavior and her MBA in Finance from Stanford Graduate School of Business. Shirah has a deep appreciation of many religious traditions, as well as 12 Step and emotional healing programs.

