

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION? *WRITTEN BY SHIRAH BELL, PH.D.*

Spiritual direction, also known as spiritual guidance, is a process of holy listening - slowing down, being quiet, and becoming more aware of the divine presence in all of life. It assists us in connecting to a deep wisdom, which some conceptualize as an “inner knowing” and others as an “external sacred voice”. Spiritual guidance can help us find meaning in our lives, make important choices, and develop self-healing practices.

Every religious and wisdom tradition has a language and practice of spiritual guidance. Spiritual direction, mentoring, and companionship are all references to the same human process. The teacher, the rabbi or minister, and the trained lay person are all examples of a Spiritual Director, whose purpose is to guide people to discover meaning, freedom, and self-transcendence in their lives. Spiritual Directors “direct” by listening and asking reflective questions, which focus attention on the sacred in life. We talk about everyday things, major life issues, and specific spiritual questions. Often this includes being silent, so we can become present and listen to the still small voice.

Today, there is a renewed interest in Spiritual Direction. In a world filled with competing demands and exterior focus it is difficult to be unattached about the events of our lives and remain open to the interior movements of the Spirit and to hear our deepest longings. We can benefit from a guide, a companion, someone who can act as a mirror to reflect back the events of our lives and enable us to see their deeper significance and meaning.

....A spiritual guide is a special kind of host, creating an inviting atmosphere in which you have a sacred visit with the Source of Life.

Why meet with a spiritual director?

The reasons for wanting and seeking spiritual direction are as varied and individual as each human. You may:

- Desire greater vitality in your experience of life.
- Hunger for a positive way to hold struggles and suffering.
- Want a more satisfying religious or prayer experience.
- Seek spiritual guidance at a crossroads in your life.
- Want to improve your ability to listen compassionately to yourself and others.
- Desire guidance in finding a meaningful way to contribute to the world.

You need not have a religious belief or set of religious practices in order to engage in Spiritual Direction. In fact, you may seek direction specifically because you are confused in this area. You may have doubts there is a higher power yet yearn to know the divine exists. You may have many unanswered questions about life and have little idea where to turn for

answers. With spiritual guidance, you learn to live a more satisfying, spiritual, and loving life. The fruits may often show up in unexpected and delightful ways.

Spiritual Direction is Not ...

...**a chat with a friend over coffee** – this is a relationship of mutuality between two people. Spiritual Direction is a relationship focused upon you and your relationship with the divine.

...**psychotherapy** – this typically focuses on “problem-solving” and dealing with difficult emotions and relationships. In Spiritual Direction you may bring these same issues, but the focus will be on how they relate to the divine and discerning what God may be calling us to do. It is often beneficial to engage in both at the same time.

...**pastoral counseling** – this tends to be prescriptive and may include bible study and instructions on how to act consist with your religious doctrines. In Spiritual Direction, you are guided, mainly through gentle questions, to see the sacred as it shows up in your everyday life. You will learn “discernment,” a spiritual process of decision-making in which you listen for divine guidance from within yourself.

What is the format of Spiritual Direction?

Usually, you meet privately with your Spiritual Director for approximately one hour once or twice each month, either in person or on the telephone. Sometimes small groups gather for spiritual guidance. The subject matter may be anything that has occurred in your life that you wish to bring and examine in the light of the divine. You are the one who does most of the talking in order to share what has transpired for you. If you desire, sessions may include prayer, meditation, reading from sacred texts, and contemplative silence.

How do I find a Spiritual Director?

Typically you would seek the names of two or three different directors and enter into a contemplative process of discerning which of them is best suited to you. See www.sdiworld.org for referrals. It is a standard practice for directors to offer free initial consultations. Regular sessions are charged on a sliding-fee scale.

Ask what kind of training and experience each Spiritual Director has had. Today there are a number of programs that train and certify Directors. Ask about their style of Spiritual Direction. It is not out of place to ask if they have a Spiritual Director of their own and if they are in a supervisory relationship. When meeting with a Director, be prepared to say what you are looking for and what has brought you to seek spiritual guidance.

Allow yourself time to reflect and contemplate your interviews. Make your choice based upon whom you feel you would be able to work with. You are looking for someone you can trust, someone you feel comfortable with, and someone with whom you can share your spiritual journey. You are not looking for someone who has all the answers. You are looking for someone who can empathetically listen to you and help you to discover the answers that lie within.