

## Black and Gifted: Our Ministry to Spiritual Direction

By Sister Barbara Jean La Rochester, O.C.D.

I have been asked to address the topic of Spiritual Direction from the Black perspective—to give some guidelines and helps for its incorporation into black spirituality, ministry and personal prayer.

I will reflect this focus in two parts—the first giving a general overview of spiritual direction. Some of the guidelines you may or may not find in books; other helps I have found beneficial for myself over the years. I share these with you because in each direction relationship there will be some of the same guidelines that all of us will follow to a point and then depart from because of the unique way in which the Spirit will be working in the directee's life.

The second half of the article will reflect our giftedness as Black religious women and men and how we share specifically this gift of Blackness in the ministry of spiritual direction.

I am aware that my reflections on the subject of Spiritual Direction are not the last word, nor do I hope to answer any theological questions. I offer you my reflections, my lived experiences, seen through my prism, with the hope that, as you listen, your own vision may be expanded and renewed.

The concept of Christian Spiritual Direction involves journeying with another in the realm of mystery and depth of each other's life. Spiritual direction has grown out of a history of the Church's spiritual and

---

*The author is a community member of Baltimore Carmel. This text was addressed to the Joint National Conference of Black Sisters, Priests and Seminarians in August 1983 at Jackson State University.*

mystical traditions which date as far back as the fourth century. In the desert places of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, Christians were known to seek out the hermit for one purpose only—to learn *how* to live more generously and completely for God. From that time until the present day, each generation has had its spiritual fathers/mothers, mentors who were especially grounded in prayer and sensitive to the longings of the human heart for intimacy and union with God. So, we can look to St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Francis de Sales and many others, as spiritual masters of prayer and the ministry of spiritual direction.

In his book, *Spiritual Direction: Contemporary Readings*, Kevin Culligan, O.C.D. defines spiritual direction as, "a counseling ministry in the church which helps Christians draw closer to God, especially through prayer." (p. 9) From this definition, we can see that spiritual direction is "other-centered," "other-directed," under the guidance of the Spirit. Spiritual direction involves the mystery of the human person and the working of God in human life. It is a relationship where one grows to union with God. Because the spiritual life is a journey made in faith, those who travel this road will at some point in the journey need an experienced, spiritual guide, companion or friend who is able and willing to walk with them.

In spiritual direction, the source of guidance and light is the Holy Spirit who uses the instrumentality of the spiritual director in bringing someone (directee) further along in his/her spiritual/life journey. It becomes important then for the director to remember that he/she is only an intermediary for the Spirit and Scripture, and the director should pray often, "He must increase and I must decrease." (Jn.3:30)

While spiritual direction is a career choice, it is also the charism within the person which prompts him/her toward this career choice. When a person has freely chosen to be a director for another he/she must be prepared to face solitude and in this solitude, wrestle with the demons of his/her own false self. Solitude will help the director to discover *who* and *what* he/she is as person (true self). When this happens, the director can truly give of his/her substance (essence) to another. We cannot give what we do not have. In spiritual direction it is the director who is always "letting go," always "surrendering" to an "Other-centeredness" rather than building up his/her own self-ego. In Ephesians 3:16 we read, "may God strengthen you inwardly through the working of his Spirit." We shall only be strengthened by his Spirit when we know our weakness and need. Self-knowledge then, is very important in the direction relationship. Without it, the direction of others will not only suffer but the director's own personal discernment becomes questionable. Growth in self-knowledge means awareness of the movements within one's own heart and the subsequent handling of these movements.

Spiritual direction is not a relationship of dependency; it is not a relationship where one is superior to or subordinate to another; rather spiritual direction is a partnership of equality where the aim of the director is to develop a trusting relationship in which the other person can speak freely and openly. It is entering into the mystery of another's life experience, and in the process improving the bond between the directee and the Father, Spirit, Scripture, Eucharist, etc. Direction will help to throw light on all that is keeping a person from solid spiritual growth.

There are some basic myths about the reasons why people seek direction, of which directors must be aware so that the person may be re-directed if necessary. Some of the more common myths about incorrect motivation include the following:

- I want to start praying again so I need spiritual direction . . .
- I think I'm going to leave religious life so I need spiritual direction . . .
- I'd like to get to know Father so and so . . .
- Life seems so dull—I should be more devotional . . .
- I'm not getting enough out of prayer . . .
- Everyone has a spiritual director so I'd better get one . . .
- I'm grappling with deep personal problems . . .
- I'm too active—no spiritual affinity . . .

*Some attitudes necessary for the spiritual director in his/her personal life include:*

- in-depth *adult relationships*—the director must have relationships outside of the counseling field so that he/she will not use the directee to fill their own personal needs.
- the director must have a *mature spiritual world*, i.e. he/she must be convinced that his/her own growth depends on *grace* and *docility* to the spirit rather than self-actualization.
- the director must bring to the relationship of direction his/her *lived experience* (there is no substitute for this). We bring to any situation the gift of ourselves—what we are, what we have, what we can become, by the grace of the spirit.
- the director must have *interior freedom*—this is especially important where issues of sex are concerned. Directors must be at home in their own bodies; if they are not free people, sexuality could frequently interfere.
- the director must have a heightened sensitivity—the ability for compassion must flow from his/her inner conversion & healing.
- the director must show *gentleness*—directors who are gentle usually communicate a sense of peace and serenity about themselves; this is directly opposite from someone who is aggressive, harsh or even rough. (It has been my experience that people who come for direction usually appreciate someone who is gentle, yet firm.)

*Other areas include intellectual and spiritual training and preparation:*

- directors must have an *awareness* of scripture, general psychology, areas of theology.
- directors must be *engaged now* in an active, personal prayer life; they must set aside time not only for personal prayer but for yearly retreats as well.
- directors may find *directing with supervision* or *with a team* where there is feedback helpful. This is especially important in the beginning stages of direction.
- directors should *have their own spiritual director*—it keeps them not only humble but dependent before the Lord.
- directors should continually *see the social dimension in our world in light of scripture*—this will keep from placing too much value on non-essentials. For example, “what is the Lord saying in this particular situation/how would the Lord act given this particular situation?”

*Guidelines for Initial Meeting of Director with Directee:*

- directors should *clarify the expectations of the directee*—set up a dialogue and ask: what is the person looking for; why is he/she coming; what is he/she asking for?
- the director should clarify to the directee *his* meaning of clarifications explaining the difference between the kinds of direction available, i.e. prayer counseling, psychological counseling, confession.
- the director should establish a regular schedule for visits, i.e. weekly, monthly. Directors should also tell the directee of his option for frequency of visit and why.
- directors should discover the expectations of a directee—i.e. why have they come to you for direction? why have they changed if previously going to someone else?
- directors at some point in the direction relationship should obtain a spiritual autobiography from the directee. This will help him to gain a general awareness of what is going on in the directee's spiritual journey.
- directors should disclose themselves at some point, but not to the same degree as the directee. Self-disclosure on the part of the director will often put the directee at ease to be free with painful experiences.
- directors should explore deeply into the life of prayer with the directee. For example, to whom does the directee pray?—Father, Jesus, Mary; what is his/her image of God; is the directee inclined to continue or drop prayer during periods of dryness?

*Conclusion of Initial Meeting:*

- the director or directee may decide to say *no* after the initial session.
- one or both may decide to engage in spiritual direction—if they do,

both should re-evaluate in two or three months whether direction has been/is profitable for the directee at this point in his/her life.

*Termination of Direction Relationship:*

—termination should always be made in the context of re-negotiation of the contract, i.e., “do you think this is something we should continue at another time?”

Because spiritual direction is a special kind of relationship, as with all relationships, friendship included, there is a need for a certain degree of asceticism. By asceticism I mean the sacrificing of one's ego while trusting the wisdom of the director. For example, there will be times when the director will ask of the directee something that will go against the emotional and psychological grain so that the directee may wince with emotional pain or may even be heard to say, “you really go for the jugular!” Spiritual direction assumes a level of deep but not rational clarity; it assumes a person of desire, one who wants to grow more in freedom and service, so there will be times of ascetical practice within the direction relationship.

When a person approaches us for spiritual direction what is generally at the bottom of all their queries is the question—how can I get my head, heart and being together? As directors, we must encourage them to pray for what they really desire. (We know that this isn't always easy.) We must encourage them to look at their false desires, their fickle feelings, their false expectations and own them. In sorting these out, the directee will come to know what he/she really desires and much more. Directors must *listen* for the spirit of God in the movements of the directee's experiences and then, paraphrasing them, question, encourage and instruct. Getting head, heart, being together is not spontaneously generated; it has to be worked for. Only the grace of patience and openness to the spirit will produce the unity and peace that one seeks.

We know that spiritual direction is not an end in itself but is a means that is concerned with the spiritual growth of others through deep personal prayer. It is the *faith* quality of the heart that is actively seen in the apostolate. Direction rests ultimately and finally in the faith concerned with the growth of the person.

One of the fundamental needs of any spiritual director which cannot be stressed enough is the active involvement in the life of prayer, and scripture reflection. This is basic and of utmost importance because it forms the foundation for all of our faith experiences and responses.

When a person has been faithful in their love relationship to the Lord, in their call to live life, to live commitment, God draws them deeper into himself. This drawing or movement into the unknown, into the insecure ways of life and the spirit, will bring with it not only fear, tension and frustration, but also, a good bit of doubt—so much doubt sometimes, that one is not exactly sure of his/her own experience. It is

at this point, that an experienced, prayer-filled director will be an invaluable asset and aid to this aspect of one's journey.

However, before you and I can reach out in faith to assist, or guide someone else in their journey, we must examine ourselves and our own rootedness. Are we deeply rooted in prayer? Are we committed to the values of ongoing growth? Does our life reflect genuine gospel living? If we *cannot affirm* these questions in our lived experience we are fooling ourselves, we are cheating our sisters and brothers, and the people who come to us. You and I have freely chosen to say “yes” to the invitation of Christ. We, therefore, must be prepared to participate actively in the life-giving mission of Jesus. This will mean a sharing in His redemptive mission. Because we have chosen to be like Him, we, too, shall be broken and raised to newness of life to live, to grow, to give, to be spent, to become food for one another. We will give to our people in and through this ministry of spiritual direction the only gift that we can—the gift of ourselves, which has been purified and made whole through the process of healing. This healing and wholeness will be reflected in our personality.

The preceding discussion has universal application to the experience of spiritual direction, but what do we, as Black women and men, have that is unique to bring to this ministry? Being black, gifted, redeemed, and committed will mean nothing if we have not first touched and reconciled in compassion and gentleness the sister or brother in need of healing within ourselves. Being black, gifted, redeemed, and committed is no guarantee that we can give love and compassionate support to others if we have not first *allowed* ourselves the *time* and *space* to experience, (not just talk about it) but really experience in our own gut, the inner growth, love and healing which comes when we touch the inner mystery of God. Make no mistake about it, there is a death to be undergone and Jesus states this law of death/life very clearly when he says, “anyone who holds on to life will lose it; but anyone who lets go for my sake will save it.” (Phil. 3:13)

What are the gifts that black religious women and men have to offer to those who seek us out as companion, as soul friend, as directors in today's world? What do you and I bring to this ministry of spiritual direction? I believe the answer to this question, as well as the focus of this conference, “Who Do You Say That I Am?” lies within the hearts of each of us. As our personalities unfold, as we grow more and more aware of who we are as persons, i.e., the gifts that we are as black women and men, the use of these gifts among our people takes on new significance. Our whole identification as black religious today must look at the gifts we have freely been given, our talents, our time, our rich heritage. There is so much scope and possibility among us because we bring to each situation, to each circumstance, each experience, a deep sense of honesty and realism of ourselves as black folks. We also

return to God through the ministry of spiritual direction the enrichment of these gifts that we receive from others. And so, like the three kings in the gospels, we open our coffers and offer to the people of God, our brothers and sisters, the gift that we are; for, "who can be born black and not sing the wonders of it, the joy, the challenge? Who can be born black and not exult?" (Mari Evans, *I Am A Black Woman*, p. 93)

We bring to the ministry of spiritual direction, our example of *love and concern for self and family*—a love that has been grounded in the sweat, blood and tears of our ancestors, a love which we share as part of our heritage. This deep love, which is the fruit of oppression, made of our ancestors "surrogate" aunts and uncles who were able to extend love and concern beyond their immediate family to friends and neighbors. This legacy of love and concern has come down through the generations, and the reality of the "extended family" is still a *gift* to many of our sisters and brothers who would otherwise be left desolate.

Our innate *empathy and sympathy* is another gift we bring to the ministry of spiritual direction. Embodied in our cherished gospel songs and hymns are the soul-full stories of pain and anguish experienced in the human heart. There are songs that tell of hope that refused to die, songs that speak of freedom, of liberation from bondage; songs that dream of peace and equality. And, we today gain new impetus to continue on in the struggle when we sing, "O Freedom," or "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." We can trust our "Precious Lord" and know that even in our struggles we too can say, "I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me." As black religious women and men, we *can* empathize with and show genuine concern for others because of the deep pain we, as a people, *still continue to experience*. This is our gift, and we should be proud to share it.

If there is one gift which stands out more than any other in the journey of black folks, it is the gift of *patient endurance*. (This is a gift I might add quite foreign to western culture). The history of societal atrocities and domination of the past are still with us today, and black people in their suffering continue to be pushed to the point of despair. "We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope." (Rm. 5:13b) Like Job in the Old Testament, we too are put to the test daily; and though paradoxically we seem to die, to despair, there is implanted deep within each of us that mustard seed of faith and hope which refuses to die. The dimension of God-ness, that inner reality of power that is so much bigger than ourselves is strengthened and intensified in the process of our own Dark Night, and we can take courage in the words of Paul to the Corinthians, "My grace is enough for you, for in weakness, power reaches perfection." (2Cor. 12:9) In the ministry of spiritual direction, we will give to our directees the genuineness of our gift—this gift

which transforms endurance to the transparency of deepened faith is more than just "Staying Alive"!

We bring to our ministry of spiritual direction the gift of *compassion and healing* which we come by quite naturally not only because of the circumstances in our lived experience, but more importantly because of the deep faith we have in Jesus who is our constant companion and friend. When the human spirit is overburdened and our hearts are heavy within, the Lord will use this experience of turmoil to purify and sensitize us. In this process, we are healed and strengthened and can then reach out to another because we *understand* and we *know* in our hearts, their experience of pain. In other words, pain is not foreign to us. There is a calling on our lives when we have experienced personally the love and mercy of God because we have, to paraphrase Henri Nouwen, become *Wounded Healers*. I am reminded of the character Celie in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*. Celie's life from a very tender age was one of pain and mere survival. She considered herself a nobody and this was reenforced by her husband who used and abused her. It was not until Celie met Shug, her husband's lover, that she was able to transcend the imprisonment of her own self. The relationship between Shug and Celie provided the atmosphere for healing and liberation. Because of Shug, Celie came to see the gift she was and even to notice all the things God had made. "There is a Balm in Gilead" to heal the sin-sick soul, to make the wounded whole again. "There is a Balm in Gilead" and *we all possess* this balm as instruments of the spirit.

Our gift of *genuine joy and spirited happiness* is another gift we bring to the ministry of spiritual direction. One can almost hear the glances, or see the looks of wonderment on faces which say, "how can they laugh," "how make merry," "how make do," with what they have and still make a "joyful noise"? Paul Lawrence Dunbar in his poem *We Wear The Mask* gives some insight on these same questions when he says:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
 But let the world dream otherwise,  
 We wear the mask!

As people who have worn the mask, we can see through façades to the truer self. I dare say our joy and happiness as a people comes from an inner sense of peace—a peace which says, “people are more important than things”—a peace which is the fruit of the spirit. This inner peace and joy is the gift given to those who are simple of heart—to those who trust that the Lord *can* and in fact *does* great things in us. We wear the mask and because we wear the mask, we can recognize its many faces on the face of others.

Another gift we bring to the ministry of spiritual direction is the gift of *listening*. (This another unknown in western culture.) In our history over past generations to the present day, we have listened to people tell us what we could and could not do. We have been and still are *silent* listeners in households where others tell us their woes. We listen to stories about their children, their jobs, their friends, their marriages, their sorrows, their dreams, and even their ambitions. It seems, even today, “we” are the only ones who will listen. We are perhaps better at *listening* and *doing* than anything else. Scripture says Mary the Mother of God listened to the words of Simeon, that a sword would pierce her heart, that in her Son, she would see the rise and fall of many. Scripture also says, “Mary pondered all these things in her heart.” I believe that we who continue to “listen” not only to the demands which society places on us but to the stirrings of our own inner experience in the demands of the spirit, grow into a deep and abiding trust—a trust and hope which allows for the possibility of dreams not yet born, of dreams that can be. In our ability to listen we *can* give hope and new vision to those who look to us for meaning beyond that which they can see.

Another gift we bring to the ministry of spiritual direction is that of *liberation*. Liberation implies freedom; and as I say this, I can hear many of you saying, “But, we’re not liberated, we’re not free!” For some of us, this may or may not be so. The liberation of which I speak however, involves a *willingness* to walk through the deserts of one’s own *internal fears* to liberate and free the spirit for holistic, integrated living. The words of the prophet Isaiah are the means of our liberation not only to openness but to growth and deeper incorporation into the life of God. Hear once again the words of the prophet Isaiah as he speaks to us today:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon you  
 because the Lord has anointed you;

He has sent you to bring glad tidings to the lowly,  
 to heal the brokenhearted,  
 To proclaim liberty to the captives  
 and release to the prisoners,  
 To announce a year of favor from the Lord  
 and a day of vindication by our God,  
 To comfort all who mourn. (Is. 61:1-2)

To the extent we are genuine, liberated persons, to that extent are we enabled to liberate and free others. Mari Evans in her poem, *The Silver Cell* writes of this same idea of liberation:

I have  
 never been contained  
 except I  
 made  
 the prison, nor  
 known a chain  
 except those forged  
 by me—  
 O I am slave  
 And I am master  
 Am at once  
 both bound  
 and  
 free

We cannot encourage or challenge another to grow spiritually unless we ourselves are opened to the spirit in our own lives.

We bring the gift of *life* to our ministry of spiritual direction. Because we are praying people, black women and men, we do not stand alone. We share a heritage of blackness that challenges us personally to be the people we are called to be; that forces us to redefine our values and to question our institutions for genuine, authentic living. We therefore share deeply from our lived experience not only our hopes, joys, and dreams, but also our sorrows, our frustrations and our pain. These very things become for each of us encounters for more genuine living. These encounters are the morsels of bread we offer daily at the Eucharist and in the process of this self-gift, we are strengthened, transformed and purified. God gives us back to ourselves that we may be food for one another. This is the gift that we give to others.

We are as a race always questioning and examining our experience in life for growth, truth and authenticity. We choose to be people with a conscience not only in our way of life but also in our identity with the suffering poor. Each new age, each new experience, opens up new

dimensions which demand a constant reinterpretation of our relating to God and our values in terms of our life goal. We have inherited a rich heritage; we have been given sisters and brothers to accompany us in our spiritual/life journey; we have been gifted with talents to be used, with a mind to think and a heart to feel. We have been placed within His world to use all of our God-given gifts for His glory and the building up of the kingdom. This requires not only deep faith and courage but also a deep sensitivity to discern *where* and *when* we are selfishly seeking ourselves.

"Who Do You Say That I Am?" I say, we can only say who He is when we see ourselves in Him. Until such time, we are living a fragmented life; until all parts of one's life have encountered God and are brought together in a unified, meaningful whole, there is no depth of identity with God. Elizabeth Barrett Browning says:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only those who see take off their shoes,  
The rest sit 'round it and pluck blackberries.

I believe these words speak to us of the challenge that is offered daily to those whose eyes and ears are opened. They offer a challenge to those of us who refuse to get caught or entangled in the politics of self-deception, self-destruction and the game of power. We have all been purchased at a great price, and must give witness to this fact in the love and concern we have for ourselves and others.

We know that in all the hemispheres of our world today there is evidence of a mirage of chaos and complexity. In the midst of threatening total nuclear disaster, political ineptness, social, religious and racial injustice, the rape of economic fruitfulness, the dehumanization of peoples, *we* are called, ironically, as black religious women and men to be a "light shining in the darkness" of this world which is ours. Our lives must continually show that we stand with, by and for, the poor and oppressed of our world. Precisely because we are people of color, we must continue to "prick the conscience" of our world, of our institutions and of our leaders, by our own depth of faith-filled living. In our ministries, whatever they may be, we are to teach and preach *who*, and *what* we are! We are called to be instruments of love and healing which requires a depth of faith that goes far beyond the security of any pat answers or solutions to our problems.

Today, more than ever before, we are being asked to put ourselves, our values, our very life on the line. Just how we do this will be unique to each one of us. I believe the essentials of a living, active faith together with a prayer-filled, joy-filled response, of just, non-violent action in the midst of hate, oppression, suffering and injustice are the

mandate of true, genuine gospel living. We become responsible when we hear Luke's gospel on the love of our enemies.

To be instruments of love and healing in our world today requires that we be people of deep prayer and that we accept the demands of love. This will mean looking upon ourselves and others with the compassion of Christ; it will mean walking in the way of His spirit where we will touch and experience not only the suffering and pain of Gethesemane but also the glory and transformation of Tabor. In our experience of transformation we can, as Black spiritual directors with Mari Evans, *Speak The Truth To The People*, (p. 91) (the word *sister* is my addition)

Speak the truth to the people  
Talk sense to the people  
Free them with reason  
Free them with honesty  
Free the people with Love and Courage and Care for their Being  
Spare them the fantasy  
Fantasy enslaves  
A slave is enslaved  
Can be enslaved by unwisdom  
Can be enslaved by black unwisdom  
Can be re-enslaved while in flight from the enemy  
Can be enslaved by his brothers/sisters whom he loves  
His brother/sister whom he trusts  
His brother/sister with the loud voice  
And the unwisdom.

Speak the truth to the people  
It is not necessary to green the heart  
Only to identify the enemy  
It is not necessary to blow the mind  
Only to free the mind  
To identify the enemy is to free the mind  
A free mind has no need to scream  
A free mind is ready for other things

To Build black schools  
To Build black children  
To Build black minds  
To Build black love  
To Build black impregnability  
To Build a strong black nation  
To Build.

Speak the truth to the people.  
Spare them the opium of devil-hate  
They need no trips on honky-chants.  
Move them instead to BLACK ONENESS.  
A black strength which will defend its own  
A black strength which attacks the laws  
exposes the lies disassembles the structures  
and ravages the very foundation of evil.

Speak the truth to the people.  
To identify the enemy is to free the mind  
Free the mind of the people  
Speak to the mind of the people  
Speak Truth!

"Who Do *You* Say That I Am?"