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## Spiritual Direction in the Middle and Elder Years

In loving memory of and gratitude to  
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Mentor and Friend

I BEGAN WRITING THIS ARTICLE some years ago. At the time, most of the people I journeyed with in spiritual direction were in their middle years. The focus of this article will include not only the middle but the elder years as well.

When the appropriate time comes in one's life, there is an uneasy stirring, a pull from deep within that will challenge the very foundation of one's life as it is known and lived. Sickness, death, job security, family life, or any one of life's tangibles can be the source that brings home the realization that we are not the creators of our own life, that God is beyond our power to control. Iain Matthew describes a similar situation in his book *The Impact of God* when he speaks of St. John of the Cross's night as follows: "We cannot stop it, or hasten it; it just comes, and it teaches us every twenty-four hours that we are not in complete control."<sup>1</sup>

While this can be a painful and distressing time in anyone's life, it is also a grace-filled time. It is a time when an individual is invited

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by God to begin a journey that will lead to spiritual transformation and human growth. Saying "yes" to this journey of spiritual and human development, not once but over and over again, will mean opening oneself to an adventure that can be both sacred and profane. It is sacred in one's pursuit of growth in the spirit. It is profane if one consistently refuses to embrace the here and now of one's journey and risks any possibility for growth. Through a process of letting go, self-knowledge, detachment, surrender, and conversion, a person is led to transformation in wholeness. As Carl Jung says, in his book *Stages of Life*:

We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning, for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.<sup>2</sup>

Because life is in constant motion, it is good to remember that growth will happen differently for each person. If the person can remain in the process, allowing God to do God's work in them, growth will be happening in them even though they don't perceive it. Engaging the advice and companionship of a prayerful spiritual director can be helpful to a person journeying toward spiritual and human maturity. May the following pages be helpful to those journeying in their middle and elder years.

Suffering is a sure-footed animal that can take us in the shortest possible time towards the greatest possible perfection.<sup>3</sup>

THESE PROFOUND WORDS of Meister Eckhart bring me to the subject of this article. Most of the men and women who have shared their spiritual journeys with me have been in their middle and elder years. They have been settled in their marriages, homes, and religious lives for some time. All have had and are in a prayerful relationship with God. All, at the particular time that I saw them, were in some kind of crisis that precipitated a move toward the possibility of a spiritual direction relationship. A crisis, at any time in one's life, is hard and painful. In the middle

years, however, a crisis becomes the call to encounter the desert of oneself. In the later years, a crisis is God's call to refine and redress personal experiences of life as one encounters one's own mortality. In each visitation, God's special touch is shaped especially for where an individual is in his or her life journey. One directee, a woman religious in her middle years, said:

It's a time of dryness in prayer, a time when so many questions about myself and about God surface; it's an unsettling time where everything seems to be out of sorts—nothing seems to make sense anymore.

Another directee stated:

Life seems so empty and meaningless; no one seems to care about me and what I am going through—not even God. Why is God so silent, why so distant?

### Time of Crisis and Its Challenges

In journeying with people in the middle and elder years, I have come to see crises as that in-between time in one's life of faith and searching. These times are cloaked in many colors. Individuals are faced with situations of impasse where life is at a standstill. They may feel bound, abandoned by God, imprisoned without hope of freedom or the possibility of moving beyond their own experience. A prayerful director, in touch with God on a deep level, will recognize the call to conversion in these kinds of experiences. Midlife is the time to prune away, to test and discern what is still possible and what is not. It is a time to evaluate, restore, and refresh worn out patterns and values that no longer call forth growth. It is a time when the heart aches for healing and wholeness.

When we come to such a point within ourselves, God, who is patient and loving, invites us into a personal process of conversion, of metanoia. Like Peter in Luke's Gospel (5:1–11), we must leave the secure and known and risk journeying into the unknown. God looks deep into our hearts and invites us to move beyond ourselves and become what we are called to be. It is an invitation both to accept one's self and to change.

At such times, the challenge to directors as well as directees is to stand empty, naked, and poor before themselves and God. This simple standing, as we really are, is most painful. It requires courage and strength to risk the breaking of our image of God and of self and the stripping away of layers of unreality that have gradually, over time, become a part of ourselves. In walking with my directees, I have found that sharing my own story of conversion—especially my false/unreal images of God and how I thought God “should” act/be in my life—has helped them face the same questions in their own lives. Remembering and stressing God's fidelity over time allow them to see how God's love has impacted their lives. It also helps bring them to the point of accepting God's love and forgiveness in the here and now.

In chapters 1–8 of *The Dark Night*, St. John of the Cross speaks at length of the transformation and growth that takes place through the experience of limitation. As human beings, we find it hard to face ourselves. We want people to believe us to be what we are not. If, as St. John says, “transformation and growth come about through the weaning away of pleasures and delights in spiritual and human experiences,”<sup>4</sup> then my directees and I will embrace this time of crisis and the knowledge of our limitations with hope. We will know that whether we sense God's presence with us or not, faith and trust in God's love and care will be with us in spite of the chaos in our personal lives.

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As a director, I rely on God's grace to look for moments of emptiness within the directees' experiences, moments of potential clarity that are missed because of preoccupation with pain. One of my directees, after going through months of dryness in prayer, was suddenly able to embrace his pain and recommit himself to God. He saw himself in a better frame of mind. No matter how angry he got or how hard he tried, he still experienced dryness from time to time.

Still, he was able to accept the fact that he could no longer control his relationship with God. In the midst of anguish and unclarity, he was able to utter a faltering “yes” to God and really mean it. Walking with him through this sensitive time has strengthened my own sense of God’s presence and the Lord’s unique way of being present to me. It also reminds me that I, too, cannot program my relationship with God but must remain open and waiting to receive God’s mercy and love.

People in crisis react to their situation in one of two ways. They either accept the challenge to growth and conversion by going through the darkness, confusion, and risk in the midst of their pain, or they deny and refuse to accept the challenge of further growth and risk the loss of genuine transformation, which integrates the human and spiritual. Seen in the context of the elder years, acceptance of crisis in the middle years becomes even more important and crucial.

In journeying with others, it is important for directors to realize the power of the Spirit at work in the individuals who come to them and to encourage them in the practice of habitual prayer. Habitual prayer and good guidance help maintain a deeper sense of connectedness through an experience of fragmentation. Prayer also enables a person to accept rather than deny the call to silence, reflection, and patient waiting.

The willingness to walk through a midlife crisis is an authentic response to the call to growth in the spirit and true personhood—“growth into the likeness of Christ” (Eph 4:22–23). Affirming growth in individuals, especially in the middle years, helps them to more readily accept the power of God at work in their lives. It not only leads them to an act of surrender but to a *choice for life* (Dt 30:19), a choice to live life more authentically in the second half of their journey.

**Teresa of Avila**

St. Teresa of Avila, a woman of the sixteenth century, came to terms with her own personhood in her spiritual/human growth during her middle years. Teresa is a good example of someone who denied

and refused, for a time, the call to inner conversion, growth, and freedom. Prior to her transformation, Teresa, gifted with a high degree of prayer, lived her life divided between God and the world. This is evidenced by her life at the monastery of the Incarnation in Avila. For more than two decades, Teresa ran from the pain of her own emptiness. Like us, she was anxious to please, anxious to love. Her journey in the middle years reflects the universal pattern we all follow. The games she played, her lack of self-knowledge, and her lack of maturity in relationships are certainly a part of my own life. Teresa not only denied the fact that her spiritual life was “going nowhere” but failed to do anything about it until the death of her father. It was this deep sense of loss that brought Teresa back to prayer, healing, and wholeness (cf. *Life* 7:14–17).

Like Teresa, we also make and shape for ourselves a world of unreality and expend enormous amounts of energy trying to maintain it. We too are “caught off guard” when faced with the unreality and illusions of power, wealth, and appearance that blind, over a long period of time, our vision of God and the genuine service of our neighbor. Once Teresa’s eyes were opened, however, she embarked upon the longest journey of her life—the journey inward. This journey led into the interior castle of her soul where, like Elijah, she heard that “still small voice” calling her to a new beginning, to greater maturity, to wholeness and integration, and to holiness as a person.

**The Journey Inward**

The journey inward requires surrender, detachment, and purification. As the Book of Ecclesiastes says:

There is an appointed time for everything,  
.....  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance. (3:1–4)

There is a fine line between the “too much” of pleasure and the “not enough” of pain. We need discernment and wisdom to respond to God’s movements. This is especially important for directors as our directees relearn the difficult and demanding art of self-discipline.

In this process of transformation, *prayerful waiting* is of the utmost importance. In walking with directees, whether in midlife or the elder years, I have found that prayerful waiting and patient acceptance of the “now” moment in their lives demand a specific kind of listening, as God calls forth in them a different way of acting, a different way of being with him and others in service. This becomes especially important when a person does not perceive any growth taking place:

In the measure of the degree of love to which God wishes to raise a soul, He humbles it with greater or less intensity, or for a longer or shorter period of time.<sup>5</sup>

Since maturity comes in its own time, there can be no forcing of the process, only openness and a willingness to be led. This process involves interior purification and the weaning away of all that is false in their lives. It enables a person to grow and is key to all spiritual growth and self-renewal.

When I walk with adults in their elder years, I am aware that the process of purification begun in the middle years is revisited. Elder adults, having lived through their middle years with some degree of personhood, now have to deal with the aging process, as well as the loss of friends, family, jobs, and their own mortality. The process of going deeper into God and embracing these final years with hope and dignity brings the elder adult, in humility, to deeper self-knowledge, surrender, and a poverty that is selfless and life-giving. Surrendering to this process again and again will bring the elder adults to greater simplicity and integration within themselves. Spiritual direction at this juncture of life is both the affirmation of God’s love and fidelity to the person over a lifetime and the promise of God’s continued care, love, and concern in the remaining time that will follow.

### The Arms of God

As a contemplative, I find the phrase “leaning into the arms of God” one that not only sets parameters within which to move but also points to God as the source and provider of healing and holiness,

that is, wholeness. This phrase is grounded in an experience of faith that asks nothing less than taking the risk that God is really present in our personal histories, and that we know our lives will turn out all right. We all know the story of Mary Magdalen, who was caught in the act of adultery and rescued when death by stoning was imminent. We also know of the love and compassion with which Jesus confronted the evil within her and those who accused her. Jesus’ words to her were of forgiveness, encouragement, and an invitation to move beyond where she was (cf. Jn. 8:7–11). As later chapters in John’s Gospel affirm, Mary went and did as Jesus had asked. Her experience is an example of God’s activity in our personal histories. If I, as a director, take to heart the meaning of “leaning into the arms of God,” then my experience may be similar to that of Mary Magdalen. I will:

- be aware of taking God’s Word more seriously and allow the Word to change my own heart;
- be aware that growth in the spirit can happen regardless of my own experience;
- be aware that growth in the Spirit can happen in spite of my directees’ experience;
- be aware of the behavior that follows the Word. How a person lives life after an experience is more important than the experience itself. This helps to guard against spiritual direction making an idol out of any experience or situation that happens.

“Leaning into the arms of God” means that, like Abraham, my faith is rooted more in the Word of God (2 Tim 2:9) than in specific experiences and that I approach God at all times with an attitude of humble openness.

Matthew Fox comments on Meister Eckhart’s theme of “letting go” and “birthing” in his book *Breakthrough*. Speaking of the spiritual journey, Fox compares Eckhart’s “letting go” and “birthing” with John 15:1–8, seeing them as a profound way of being both in the

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world and in God, of not merely “receiving” from God but bringing to “birth” as well.<sup>6</sup> This says something about persons emerging from crisis in the middle years. Contrary to earlier feelings, they now have a deeper sense of themselves as loved by God and are learning to be comfortable with who they really are. Having peeled away some of the false layers of self-understanding, they now have a more genuine experience of who God is and how God is working in their lives.

### After the Crisis

The aftermath of an experience of crisis is a scary thing. St. Teresa of Avila writes of the “sixth mansion” in the *Interior Castle* that crises can also be accompanied by confidence and even joy:

There is a sense of fear in oneself at the beginning yet at the same time confidence in God’s mercy. One walks with great joy and feels called to express this joy and love to God forever. The individual soul has feared but the Lord has purified and consoled it; God has spoken and shown himself to the soul. In everything, the pain and the joy, everything makes the person desire God and the good of all even more.<sup>7</sup>

The seventh mansion of the *Interior Castle* is characterized by peace and a call to service in humility. In this mansion, there is the experience of union of God with the creature. Through the process of crisis, the individual soul has been purified in its journey to the center, and the Lord rewards it now by giving the soul back to itself—renewed and healed. In the words of John 15:5, the mystery involved in the union of God with his creature is affirmed:

I am the vine, you are the branches. They who live in me and I in them will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing.

For my directees who have come to this point, there is a pervading sense of deep peace. They have come this far by faith and continue to live in the spirit of God. They no longer want to control their lives, nor are they anxious about past experiences or the lack of them. They feel now that they can journey to the end of their life with a profound sense of realism in who and what they are as persons. The result of crisis, honestly entered into, has been the development of a

sense of reconciliation with their personal ambitions, strengths, and weaknesses. The newness of life that they now experience, with its corresponding maturity, has given them a new psychological and spiritual outlook. As one directee put it:

I not only feel at home with myself but I want to help others in any way that I can.

Another said:

I never believed that I would come through such pain and turmoil and still be sane—God is good.

Still another said,

All is gift. I used to long so much to experience the unction of God in prayer, but I’ve learned that I can still pray whether I feel God’s presence or not—yes, all is gift.

The rewards of peace, integration, and a deep spirit of prayer are the graces that have improved the quality of my directees’ lives, both in midlife and elder years. Looking at life in retrospect, they are now able to choose, with wisdom and insight, those things that they can honestly pursue. At the end of the *Interior Castle*, Saint Teresa admonishes her daughters:

It is necessary for your foundation to consist of more than prayer and contemplation; if you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always remain dwarfs. And, please God, it will only be a matter of not growing, for you already know that whoever does not increase, decreases. I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining the same.<sup>8</sup>

Adults in their middle and elder years are constantly drawn to become better than they are.

I think it safe to say that with each step of the maturing process, there is a hope that individuals will benefit from lessons learned in the past, because *grace builds on nature*. Some individuals, who have grown in spiritual and human maturity, creatively share with others what they have come to know and believe is working in their lives. Their concern for the well-being of others, often by going beyond their own interests, is a testimony to God’s gift and grace given at any point in one’s journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, journeying with others in their middle and elder years has blessed me with the grace of witnessing the Presence of Mystery as it unfolds in the life of another. My directees have called forth in me a playful sense of reality, of not taking life too seriously, and they have inspired and challenged me by their faith. Because of their dependence upon and faith in my prayer for them, I have been led into deeper prayer. When faced with the unrelenting spirit of sacrifice in their families, relationships, and job market, and in the fragility and diminishment of aging, I am called to look at the quality of life I myself live. Meeting these challenges in the ebb and flow of life as I continue to walk with others, I am aware of the need to be continually rooted in silence, solitude, and prayer. This is the path to nourishment and renewal in the spirit, the source of life. Leaning into the arms of God, I receive the fecundity of God's gracious gifts—love, patience, sensitivity, and compassion—gifts that I bring to any direction relationship.

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NOTES

- 1. Iain Matthew, The Impact of God, forward by Jean Vanier (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1995), p. 51.
2. Carl Jung, Stages of Life: The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, vol. 8 of Collected Works; quoted by Sue Monk Kidd in When the Heart Waits (San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub., 1990), p. 9.
3. Matthew Fox, Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation, intro. and commentaries by Matthew Fox (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1980), p. 240.
4. St. John of the Cross, Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979), p. 312.
5. Ibid., p. 329.
6. Breakthrough, p. 404.
7. St. Teresa of Avila, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, vol. 2, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980), p. 407.
8. Ibid, p. 446.

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A Spiritual Pilgrim's Prayer

Eager searcher into the truth of God
finds peace at last within the infinite depths
of a Divine Wisdom that alone quiets
the restlessness of my heart and mind.
Refreshed, re-energized, not for myself alone,
I return to share with others the Pearl of great price.

Mary Eileen McNamara, OCD
Baltimore Carmelite Monastery

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Who will walk in faith?

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