



From Tourists to Pilgrims: Using Group Spiritual Direction to Change Your Journey

Anne Grizzle

I write this sitting in the convent retreat house at the Mount of the Beatitudes in Galilee. This morning at breakfast, we celebrated a sense of global communion with the Italian nuns on retreat by clapping after prayers for their country's win of the World Cup. An icon on my desk of the Last Supper, from St. Catherine's in the Sinai, is filling in for the many people with whom I am trying to have a conversation by way of writing an article. The disciples seem real enough as one is leaning over to sniff the wine; another, his face leaning

on one hand, appears bored, while others look up, perhaps to see angels who appear to have gathered over the scene. I am trusting in the larger communion of saints over miles and years and denominations to make a conversation come alive in this space. Although I had intended to write this article earlier, I have discovered that trying to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the midst of Gaza warfare (and, days later, full-scale war) offers a great vantage point from which to share the gem of group spiritual direction. The same pro-

cess I have used in groups back home works wonderfully well with travelers who want to make holy connections during a journey together.

As a family therapist pursuing spiritual companionship, I have focused on a form of spiritual direction that fosters not only relationship with God but also community: group spiritual direction. I learned it from Shalem Institute's training program as detailed in Rose Mary Dougherty's book, *Group Spiritual Direction*. Not only does the group offer a rich, wide

source of spiritual companionship for each participant, but the very process of learning to listen to God on behalf of others also trains participants in a most crucial spiritual task: listening to God in the midst of life. My use of group spiritual direction with traveling groups has helped me in a lifelong dream of turning from tourist to pilgrim.

Group Spiritual Direction Basics

Group spiritual direction involves meeting monthly with a group of usually four members, along with a group director or facilitator. Like individual direction, those who come must have the intention of seeking God and a willingness to share their lives with God. But they must also have a willingness to be a prayerful listener to the others in the group. The facilitator's role is primarily to hold the silent space that keeps everyone attentive to the real spiritual source in this process: God. In groups in which all members have learned to listen well, the role of facilitator can rotate, or ongoing groups often fall into a rhythm of everyone's bearing responsibility for keeping the sacred space.

Groups begin with 20 minutes of silence, centering each person in listening for God. Out of the silence, one member shares a question, a struggle, or a joy in his or her life. Although the thing shared may concern any aspect of life, it relates to relationship with God. During the sharing, other members of the group are prayerfully listening to the person and to God on behalf of the person. Once the sharing is complete (perhaps 5 minutes), all return to silence, asking,

"God, what is your prayer for this person?" Listeners have to learn to stifle the quick reassurance, easy identification, or telling of a similar story. Silence invites them to go to God for a response, slowly savoring the taste of divine flavoring for whatever is on the plate. At first this can be awkward, unfamiliar territory. The facilitator must hush chatting, immediate reacting, or easy reassuring and invite deep listening. After approximately 2 minutes of this deep, prayerful listening, members speak any word, image, question, or simple thanks that rise from this time. Although there may be a few questions and reflections back and forth, generally there is little cross talk. Rather, listeners offer simple gifts of what is heard from God to the speaker. The speaker takes in the offerings from the group with the freedom to sift and discern as he or she senses God's wisdom.

After the first speaker has spoken and prayerful listening by the group is complete, a few minutes of silence punctuate the time before another member speaks out of the silence. Again, after the speaking, the members take time to listen to God on behalf of the speaker and offer what comes forth. This process is repeated until everyone in the group has had a chance to speak. The group concludes with a short time to reflect on the prayerfulness of the group. This is a way to assess and shift the group's tone and to grow into a prayerful listening community. A concluding prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, may be used to conclude the group's time together.

What this process teaches is the keeping of both the greater and the lesser silence of the monastery. In the actual silence,

we truly speak nothing. In our sharing times, we speak only words from the spiritual heart.

Listen in with me to the process of one such meeting. After we have sat together in silence for 20 minutes around a single candle flame, Carol slowly begins sharing. She talks of her family's renovating their house,

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of the terrible stresses and frustrations. No one responds with easy identification, quick sympathy, or lighthearted joking. All remain quiet, listening, and prayerful. And so she goes on, this competent attorney, speaking of her helplessness, her inability to keep the finances organized or the house straight.

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Still no one reacts except with continued listening hearts. She pauses and goes on to say that she has become aware of her weaknesses, and in that humble place has also had a great awareness of God's love accepting her for who she is, not having to be perfect. She adds that this has forced her to lift each day to God and pray for grace to get through it. The group takes this to heart, silently welcoming her tearful sharing, as she notes that these are now tears of joy. And then she says, "That's all," and sighs, and all breathe into a space of silent prayer. Only after several minutes of quiet does one member venture to offer a few words that came in

prayer: "I created you, and I love you." Another member speaks an almost identical thought that came in an image of a father embracing his daughter with her own peculiarities and saying "I love you—you, just the way you are." Another listener talks about our never completing our houses or lives, our remodeling and learning to accept that we are always in process, and the process itself must be lived. Yet another simply gives thanks for the depth of Carol's sharing and offers a blessing. We then slip back into the silence out of which the next member shares.

Learning to Listen to God and Others

One of the best fruits of group spiritual direction is learning to listen. There is less reliance on any other person, as even the facilitator is not seen as a dispenser of any particular wisdom, but rather the one who brings the group to God. Participants not only share about their own spiritual journey; they also must listen to others. This might seem to be a watering down of spiritual focus for individual growth. What I have found is that listening to others in group spiritual direction becomes a source of great personal growth, a training ground for learning constant, attentive listening to God while loving others. While contemplative prayer courses have become a way to learn the art of listening to God, and lay counseling courses may teach the art of listening to people, the gem in group spiritual direction is the explicit commitment to listen to God while listening

to others. Group spiritual direction is time focused on actively listening with one ear to another, and one ear to God. This happens first in the time of listening to another participant's sharing. Although listeners are listening to the speaker, they are also actively listening to God. In the silent prayer afterwards, listeners are totally focused on listening to God on behalf of the speaker, with the question, "What is your prayer, God, for this person?"

As I have facilitated a spiritual direction group, I have watched a wonderful transformation occur. Members learn to still typical reactive personal responses and, instead, sit quietly with one another. Month after month, the quiet listening attitude becomes gradually more familiar, more comfortable, and eventually refreshing for members who come from a busy, multitasking, and competitive environment. Group spiritual direction, beyond offering members a forum for their own spiritual reflections, becomes schooling for a spiritual way of listening in the world. Not only the initial silence but also the pace of listening and the return to silence between words become a training ground for going out into the world with a different approach. It develops in its members an ability to be still listeners, trusting silence as an opening to go deeper and prayerful presence as more bonding than quick reacting.

A major fruit of group spiritual direction comes not in the time itself but in the peaceful listening presence it cultivates in members as they go into the world of activities and relationships. The prayerful listening attitude I have learned in group spiritual direction I take with me in all my work with people, helping me keep a heart's ear more

tuned to God. I take it as well to hospital visits, grocery shopping lines, dinner conversations and even cocktail gatherings.

An image of the juggler in the midst of the city park comes to mind. The juggler begins by juggling a couple of balls and gradually juggles more and more. The crowd is amazed, but the palpable awe comes when the juggler hops on the unicycle as he continues juggling. After learning the art of listening deeper and deeper in group spiritual direction, we all hop on the unicycle of life. As we do, we need to keep listening. If we can pedal out into our activities and relationships in life while keeping the inner balance of a heart listening to God, we will have learned how to walk as disciples in the world. For me, group spiritual direction, more than any other process, prepares me for this listening way to walk through life.

Connecting at a Deeper Level

Group spiritual direction connects us not only to God but also to others; such connection is the Christian call to community. Rare is the place where deep, honest heart sharing occurs in a safe space of loving listening. One beauty of group spiritual direction is that in a world where so few of us live in monastic communities or even attend churches with deep community, we can create a place of intimacy with one another and God.

I have been a part of a contemplative prayer group as long as my now 16-year-old son has been alive. This is my grounding place of vulnerability, my created family to whom I bring both my

agonies and my dreams. These are the companions with whom I share the tearful grief of my twin's cancer journey, whom I ask for prayerful challenge or confirmation in the questioning pull of poverty and hospitality in a call to build a family retreat home in Virginia, and to whom I bring for community discernment my powerful, quiet experience of a possible call to consider ordination. And I have listened as well to their rawness and glories, their prayerful heart journeys.

One friend in this group once described to an acquaintance the deep bond of friendship she had developed with us. When asked what we did, my friend told her that we sat in silence together for much of the time. The acquaintance was puzzled at how one could become so close in silence. We, however, understand that we have shared at a deep level in that silence. The silence serves to quiet surface conversations. It requires those present to listen to the deep places of the heart and speak only words from there. It functions like the dive in a summer pond, taking you down under the hot surface water into the still cool, deeper places of refreshment. It takes on a role similar to the Sabbath in stilling body and mind from busyness to rest in a place focused on the creator.

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Although group spiritual direction is primarily designed for ongoing spiritual companionship, I have also used it as a process for community-building on retreats and trips intended for pilgrimage. In this day of global connection,

so many of us have opportunities to travel. Yet, too often, these times take on the tone of American tourism, doing as much as possible in an exhausting fashion rather than allowing space to wait and pray in sacred places. One way to set the tone as a listening, watching pilgrimage can be to plan for times of group spiritual direction. This could be simply a time at the beginning and end of the trip to allow each person to reflect on what he or she is bringing to the trip and, then, has received. Or a brief time each day might be set aside. All that is necessary is for participants to be comfortable with silence and know how to listen to God and others. If they bring this prerequisite, the process of group spiritual direction can help them view and share spiritual treasures within and without.

This is what we did on this present trip to Israel, a journey made with a small group of friends who desired to make it a pilgrimage rather than a tour. As we gathered periodically throughout the trip, we explored in stillness what we were bringing on this pilgrimage and what we were experiencing. The pro-

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cess of group spiritual direction guided us into a level of heart sharing and spiritual connection with God and one another that left us all in awed gratitude.

Although we had planned to do so, we did not manage to gather every evening for our

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direction time. Some days, our tired bodies and busy schedules left us too weary. One evening, after a full day in Bethlehem and Bethany, only three of our group of five gathered. As I listened in the initial silence, the image that arose and on which I stayed focused was an icon I had seen that day in the Church of the Nativity. A blue-cloaked, gentle-faced Mary was holding

Jesus. Both her hands and his were silver. And those hands reached out to me. Out of the group prayer, Nan had an image of Mary's other hand around me as I sat on her lap. This became for me a powerful call to relate to Mary more intimately as compassionate mother to me. This new relationship with Mary was one of my most significant gifts from this pilgrimage. It was brought to birth out of the listening space of our group spiritual direction. I wonder if we might have missed the deep spiritual connecting and the collaborative calls of God to each of us from this journey if we had not taken time for our silent listening with God and one another.

I have also occasionally used group spiritual direction on retreat. If those attending have hearts trained to listen to God and others in silence, simply setting aside the time for this powerful process can yield rich harvest. I remember a silent retreat taken together with several friends where we took time to gather for group spiritual direction at the beginning and end. This set the stage for us to be prayerful for one another throughout the time and to be able, as well, to share at the end the fruit of our time together. While most of the time was silent with God, these few hours before and after connected us deeply.

With trained leaders, even those on retreat who are unfamiliar with the process can go deeply, using the basic principles of group spiritual direction. I recall a "Strength for the Journey" retreat I offered with my sisters for women dealing with deep grief or illness. I was one of the group leaders, and our group time did not have many specific guidelines. I used

the principles of group spiritual direction, beginning with a very short time of silence for everyone to clear distractions and listen to her heart for what was stirring deeply. That setting of quiet listening allowed members to share in much more honest and vulnerable ways than generally happens in a retreat small group. I encouraged everyone simply to listen prayerfully as each person shared and, after the sharing, to pause for prayer rather than reactive response. As we did so, each one shared things she had not previously shared with others, and the Spirit wove the heart desires together. What this showed me was that, even apart from an application of the full method, its basic rhythm can inspire deeper listening to one another and to God in a small group setting.

Pilgrimage is ultimately not so much about the destination as about the way in which we walk, and with whom. We are called to be pilgrims on a journey with God every day and hour. Group spiritual direction, whether used in monthly gatherings over a long period of time or on an occasional retreat or pilgrimage, serves to train us as listeners to both God and one another. This builds not only our own faith, but also deep community connection, a fruit all too rare and, oh, so precious in this day.

About the Author:



Anne Grizzle is a psychotherapist, author, and spiritual director who lives in Houston, Texas.

She is the author of *Reminders of God* and *Going Home Grown Up*. Married and the mother of three sons, she relishes silence and finds poetry rising out of quiet spaces.