

Spiritual Direction: Holy Listening

by Marilyn Wray (excerpted from Anglican Montreal March 2021)

Through holy listening the flower opens.

Mrs. Marilyn Wray is the Chair of the Spiritual Direction Group and lay reader/parishioner at The Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Pierrefonds.

I was introduced to Spiritual Direction about fifteen years ago when our priest thought that I might be interested and recommended a spiritual director for me to call. He said that it was for people who wanted a closer walk with God. The thought of having a closer walk with God was inviting to me, and so I called the spiritual director and we soon were meeting in her office every two weeks. She taught me how to select an uninterrupted time for daily prayer, how to sit in a comfortable and supportive chair, how to use my Bible for prayer and how to write about my prayer time in a journal.

Meeting with my spiritual director was a warm inviting experience that I looked forward to. Each time we met I brought my Bible and journal to review my prayer time with her.

Spiritual direction prayer is receptive, listening prayer or meditation. It involves being still and receiving God's grace that we cannot obtain by our own efforts. I prayed with passages of scripture assigned by my spiritual director. I remember the first grace was the "knowledge of my Father's care for me" from a book by John Wickham, SJ. At home in my quiet time I meditated on Isaiah 43: 1-7, "You are precious in my eyes..." As I reread it several times I sensed God speaking to me. What a powerful experience receiving the blessings of God's grace.

Later I was introduced to gospel contemplation which involved the use of my imagination. The Gospel narratives provide wonderful opportunities to enter into the events of Jesus' life. You can role-play as one of the characters or be yourself as bystander. I remember praying with the Gospel reading from Mark 4: 35-41, the calming of the storm. Using my imagination I placed myself in the boat with the disciples on that rough sea. In the stillness of this gospel contemplation God revealed my own worries and fears together with the terrified disciples. I also heard Jesus rebuke the waves. As I sat with this image, I gradually saw Jesus calming the storms in my life. I loved the walk as my relationship with God deepened.

Praying with scripture has been called "lectio divina" after the Benedictine tradition that means "a slow reading of divinely inspired texts. A key event occurs when words, originally spoken by God or to God in the Bible many centuries ago, are expressed or heard now between the Lord and this praying person." (Wickham, J. SJ, Prayer Companion's Handbook)

A few years later, when my spiritual direction meetings took a pause, I took a course in contemplative retreat which I did while taking nature walks or sitting on my deck and watching the birds. The principles of meditation were the same: be still; do not engage in any other

activity or destructive thinking and receive the grace. I kept a journal of my prayer reflections and any graces I received. During the course I met weekly with two other people who were doing the same thing as well as a spiritual director, and we talked about our experiences. We find God in all things and that can include being still with music and art. (Barry, W. SJ, Finding God in all Things).

Who was doing the directing in my spiritual direction? In our meetings there were three present: me, the director and the Holy Spirit. My director was involved in holy listening, listening for the work of the Holy Spirit and gently giving me non-judgemental feedback as I reviewed my prayer time. In my own prayer time at home the Holy Spirit was alive in the meditation helping me go deeper and blessing me with God's graces. My spiritual director was a woman who had received her instruction from the Ignatian Spirituality Center of Montreal, a program that takes a minimum of four years to complete. There are centers across Canada that offer instruction in spiritual direction.

Who can be a candidate for spiritual direction? Spiritual direction is intended for any Christian who has a sound faith and attends church regularly. It was never intended to be a way to teach people the story of Jesus or an alternative to church worship. That being said, today we are meeting people who are seekers of God in their lives even though they have never experienced church and wonder if spiritual direction would help them. We interview them, being honest about who we are, and determine if and how it is possible. We then prayerfully match them with a spiritual director who would best accommodate them as we do with all new candidates for spiritual direction.

Spiritual direction is not a substitute for psychotherapy. It is not a program to heal relationships or substance abuse. It is not pastoral care although, by its very nature, it is pastoral. However, it is normal in the course of one's life that there will be periods of stress or joy over normal events, even COVID19! Remember the storms on the Sea of Galilee? The normal things of life come into our prayer time.

The Anglican Spiritual Direction Group of the Diocese of Montreal consists of people who are active in spiritual direction and meet regularly to share in a time of meditation, to share in the news of events for us to consider and to plan meditation events. Many recent informative events have been in the form of webinars carried by Zoom. We have hosted two Quiet Days in recent years for people and guests of the Diocese: one when we organized a day of meditations, and another when we focussed on Centering Prayer. We have also taken part in the Revive Program organized by Rev. Dr. Neil Mancor that makes use of many of the same principles of spiritual direction to support and strengthen the spiritual life in our churches. All active spiritual directors are licensed by our Diocesan bishop every three years. Stay tuned for news of future events once we have said goodbye to COVID, and check out our new page on the Diocesan website. www.montreal.anglican.ca/spiritualdirection

If you are interested in finding out more about Spiritual Direction, we can be reached at spiritualdirection@montreal.anglican.ca.

