

MELTING THE ICEBERG: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR MEN

By Donald Bisson, FMS

Frozen ice caps, rivers covered with ice, snow in Los Angeles, snowdrifts to the roof, frozen landscapes surrounded by springs – these are all images men have shared with me from their dreams when they began spiritual direction. Most men begin with layers of frozen emotions deeply longing for springtime to emerge. They seek God in order to be reconnected to life, body, relationships, and authentic passion; in other words they yearn for a meaningful and heartfelt life. God has stirred up this hunger, sometimes causing men to reach out for spiritual direction. Unfortunately, after a period of time many men drop out of direction feeling failure or abandonment in the process.

As a man, a spiritual director, a trainer of directors, a supervisor, and consultant, I am concerned about the lack of understanding, by both women and men, of men's spiritual journeys. The vast majority of trainers and directors are women. This ministry has been enthusiastically embraced by women and has been renewed and given new life through a feminist model. This has obvious meaning and power for rejuvenation of an old model based on patriarchal structures. There is a growing body of literature on women's experience and language for articulating religious experience. There is an unspoken assumption that men find more meaning and relationship to the traditional patriarchal structures. From my experience, this is not true. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette illustrate in their now classic work, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* (p.xvii), that the roots of oppressive patriarchy is boy psychology and not man psychology. They state: "We focused as these men sought their own structures through meditation, prayer, and active imagination, that as they got more and more in touch with the inner archetypes of mature masculinity, they were increasingly able to let go of their patriarchal self – and other wounding thought, feeling, and behavior patterns and become more genuinely strong centered and generative towards themselves and others – both women and men."

When a searching man seeks this transformative space, he must let go of both the patriarchal system and a feminine model, which may not speak to his experience. This is God asking him to go more deeply into his masculine self to find his truth. The should work of spiritual direction may be one way to assist a man to face himself before God with a truth and honesty which can be transformative.

There is a growing consciousness that men and women enter into experiences with differing agendas, histories, expectations, and prejudices. This insight needs to be more developed by spiritual directors. The masculine modality for spiritual direction looks and feels different than the feminine mode. This came to me more clearly as I worked with two directees on a monthly basis at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California. He had a two o'clock and she a three o'clock appointment on Sunday afternoon. He would begin the session sharing with me the many new insights he had read and journaled about during the month. He would be enthused and desired conversation on these topics with me. I would hear his insights, probing with questions and asking why these insights had such heart and meaning. I would ask him to personalize the insights into his present life struggles, fears, relationships, causing him to move slowly to the center of his passion. At some point the conversation would slow down and he would have an "ah-ah" experience with a parallel release of emotion. He reconnected his insight into an emotional stance where he felt more whole. He would apologize for his emotional release, which is very common for men, and saw with time that God had been with him through both the

insights that had heart and meaning and the vulnerability with me as it came together in emotional release.

The following hour was spent with an educated professional with a PhD. Within minutes she would be in tears. She would be frustrated because she felt very unclear as to the undifferentiated emotions that would be immediately released in the safe container of the direction room. I would remain with her, probing the levels of emotions which she presented, going more deeply into what had heart and meaning in her experience. In time she would gather her composure with an insight, then experience and “ah-ah” moment, linking her emotional vulnerability with that place in her life which God was touching. She would leave with a sense of empowerment resulting from the process.

These two mature people were visible models of differing methods leading to the same holistic end. I then recognized that undifferentiated feeling is no closer to God than undifferentiated thinking. I have heard too often from men and women that “he’s stuck in his head” because he does not have a presenting emotion. It is violating to a woman to move her out of her emotional state because of the director’s discomfort or imposed insight. It is also violating to dismiss a man’s insight, because he is presenting the keys to interior life; those elements which lead to the inner quest. It is also violating to place too much pressure by asking him to melt the frozen landscape prematurely. Spring thaw takes time and patience, otherwise there is a destructive flood. Men know quickly when they are “not doing it right,” through subtle frustration of the director, which serves to prevent them from entering the emotional level prematurely. The directee may not return if he has felt invisible, non-engaged, and frightened by the prospects of releasing too much emotion at one time. A truly holistic approach, combining both masculine and feminine models, needs to be open, leading to the revelation of how God is working in our lives. I have also noticed a percentage of women doing the masculine process with similar frustrations. A percentage of men also may feel more comfortable in a feminine methodology. The director must be adaptable, non-judgmental, and flexible for either process in order to truly show up for the directee.

Men’s Issues in Spiritual Direction

As discussed, many men enter the direction conversation in their own masculine style. This way of entering religious experience needs to be respected and transformed into a holistic conclusion of both insight and emotional integration.

There are many issues which impact a man’s approach to God, others, and his own life. I will introduce a number of the most common issues I have noticed in doing spiritual direction with men.

Grieving as Spiritual Practice

I have never encountered a man who began the inner journey without coming face to face with forgotten or repressed grief. Men are rarely given permission to appropriately let go of bottled-up emotions and sorrow from their earliest losses. They have been trained and told to move on, bottle up, do it alone, don’t embarrass yourself, be in control. To be human is to experience loss both in tragic and ordinary ways. Parents die, children move out of the house, divorces occur, jobs are lost and men wither freeze or explode. Recently, we witnessed the tragic violence done by young white men across the country. Boys who were dumped, shamed, or abused then exploded in murder or suicide. Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace* (p. 65) once said, “The false

God changes suffering into violence. The True God changes violence into suffering.” This is particularly apt for men who must suffer their grieving consciously to end cycles of rage and violence towards self or others. The True God calls men to this suffering.

Robert Miller’s book, *Grief Quest* (p. 76), suggests the importance of grief work during the entire inner journey. To grieve as men allows for the acceptance of an inner emotional world, the need for relationships, God, and spiritual journey with personal honesty and integrity. Without an appropriate connection to the grief process men are nearly condemned to expand the frozen tundra.

Detoxifying Shame

In spiritual direction, men need to slowly tell their stories with all of their ambivalence and incompleteness intact. There is no perfect way to become whole, only authentic risk-taking, struggle, and discernment. Patriarchy imposes a powerful dose of shame on men (and women). Shame means I must cover who I am because I will never be adequate. Men are shamed through homophobic fear of seeming or feeling feminine. Most fear ambivalence towards relatedness and any expression of neediness. Weakness is abhorred. The end result is a coldness, which creates the environment for frozen emotions. When men begin to be present to themselves and to another, they will go through a period of intense vulnerability. They must face the lies of a false self, which attacks the very fragile beauty of the human soul.

Philip Culbertson in *Counseling Men* (p. 28-29), suggests that there is a terrible price men pay for their held shame. He suggests four main costs to keep the false front up. They are as follows:

1. Being on guard.
2. A falling silence except for external areas of success.
3. Protecting one’s turf to protect oneself.
4. Feeling stressed and unavailable.

The direction relationship invites the man to be present as he really is before God, a freeing yet terrifying invitation.

Recovering from Trauma and Abuse

Women have done a great deal in this area to develop support systems and wrestle with the spiritual issues. Men are gradually emerging and sharing their stories. There are a large percentage of men who also have been sexually abused. These are the last great taboos of the culture. These are the last great taboos of the culture. I have journeyed with many men who were sexually abused by alcoholic mothers, single mothers, both parents, neighbors, clergy, older women, and friends of the family. The secrets are deep. Like women they must confront the reality of evil, the silent God, the dark side of their images of family, parents, and church. These are the places that overwhelm. Spiritual directors need to work with a good therapist to help men renegotiate their images of God in the face of abuse and neglect.

Robert Grant in his book, *healing the Soul of the Church*, looks at the impact on the churches due to unresolved trauma held onto by clergy. So much rigidity and fear theologically and spiritually are a result of unresolved trauma.

As a result of war, millions of men still carry the scars of trauma only a memory away. When a man comes to spiritual direction, he brings his entire history, which may still haunt his dreams and feelings.

Seasons of Life

There are particular seasons when men seem to need spiritual direction. Levinson's classic '70s book, *Seasons of a Man's Life*, may be of help to deal with the developmental aspects of a man's life. I notice three main times when men seek spiritual assistance. They usually occur during the thirties transitions, midlife, and retirement. During the thirties transition, the young adult needs to acquire a committed outer and inner reality. This is where, in our culture, the young man seems to have a sense of urgency in bringing adolescence to a close, thus creating a structure for outer life which also renews and deepens relationships. They come to spiritual direction in an atmosphere of discernment.

During midlife, the man renegotiates his life structure in order to find greater meaning depth. This is an invitation to interiority and intimacy. Jung stated that he never knew a patient in the second half of life that did not need a new religious outlook. This outlook implies a connection to inner life.

The older man who retires and leaves the work force will need to wrestle with limits, aging, and death of spouse or friends. His relationship with God needs a final re-evaluation and commitment.

Renewing Images of God

Men have unique issues with God imagery. They also have difficulty with father imagery if their own father has been absent, abusive or emotionally numb. I find many men relate to God as they related to their father. For example, don't expect much, there is nothing to say, do what you need to do and keep out of trouble. I have worked with many priests and ministers who say the party line, but simply don't expect much from God. God is there, but really doesn't make a difference. If spiritual direction is going to assist a man to grow, he needs to reflect on his images and let go of those that are cold and distancing, in which God dwells in heaven cut off from creation. I believe men spend time reading about, prayer, but do not give enough time to pray. They enjoy the map, but don't really believe they are allowed on the journey.

Martin Pable in *A Man and His God* (p.73) dedicates a chapter to a man's quest for love as care for his spirituality. I believe this comparison is useful, but I believe a man must allow himself the actual experience of love somewhere; a love which is gratuitous and freely given by a man or woman, young or old, related or not; a love which his being witnesses and reverences as holy. He needs to learn to trust in a loving God who nudges **and loves tenderly**.

Discovery of an Inner Reality

After many years of giving spirituality seminars, I have seen many groups composed of a majority of women given the invitation to close their eyes and to within. There are always some men in the group, especially if they are new to these experiences which look at me in absolute terror. "What are you asking me to do?" "I've never gone there, what will I see? Will there be anything of value there?" "Then what?" "Unless they have a natural disposition in their typology to develop an interiority, the vast majority of men avoid inner things. This is also tragically true for

men in training for the ministry of most denominations; theology and academics are encouraged but the focus is not primarily religious experience.

I find working with dreams very helpful to men in discovering a rich inner landscape of dream symbols and a non-linear language of meaning and revelation. Through dreams they are revealing their deepest desires and God's deepest desires for them. In Hopke's book, *Men's Dreams, Men's Healing* (p.7), he explores the unique way in which the unconscious speaks to men's experience of feeling, fatherhood, sexuality, and love. Unless a man acquires a sense of interiority the spiritual direction process will remain too much on the surface of his reality and not go to the deeper human questions.

Relational Issues

Men can be lulled into an overdependency on their spouses for their emotional spiritual development. They look to the feminine in their lives for assurance and safety. When a marriage begins to fall apart, often to the surprise of the husband, his denial begins to break, not only about the relationship, but about himself, his needs and what life issues are emerging. I have noticed that divorce has become a major spiritual initiation for midlife men. There are critical dangers during this time, especially for a man not prepared for intense grief and loss. The director needs to be present to the whole spectrum of a man's losses and allow God's presence to emerge. The pain can create whole new responses to life. The man may escape to another relationship, lose himself in work, or choose an addiction. The director needs to listen to the deepest desires of the directee and not just stop with resolution from pain.

Stuart Miller in *Mean and Friendship* reflects the new tragic environment in which men create and sustain friendships in our culture. This becomes clear during periods of crisis, when a man does not have a friend to share with or be supported by. The supporting role in the direction relationship is intensified due to the lack of emotional networking, which men usually have not created earlier. The director needs good supervision during these times, in order to maintain appropriate boundaries.

Ambivalence Toward Organized Religion

Though women have suffered considerably at the hands of organized religion, they paradoxically remain the most faithful participants in most communities. Men vote with their feet and have withdrawn from active membership at a higher rate than women. Many men do not actively engage in religion until some event causes them to reconsider their position, for example the religious education of their children and the handing on of a tradition.

Men desire clarity and are more at risk from various forms of fundamentalism. I have had several men in spiritual direction who are in recovery from abusive and manipulative religious systems. In their enthusiasm and innocence, they were hurt by simplistic views of evil and negative views of human development. They surrendered their total personal authority to church leadership.

Men, as do women, desire to participate in communities of faith where they can receive as well as give support. Unfortunately, men are not treated as adults in some religious communities and this presents a difficulty. This tension can become a point of discussion with the direction experience, an ongoing discernment of continued participation in traditional religious practices.

Conclusion

More men can be invited to spiritual direction in order to process their lives with God and to become more sensitized to the internal issues which impact them. Men simply do a lot of things differently than women. It is not better or worse, less mature, more defended, more difficult, etc. All of these judgments get in the way of simply being with a person where he is at – without blame, judgment, or criticism. Men or women can be effective spiritual directors for men. Yet, the men before them must become more visible and real.

I began with dream imagery of frozen landscapes. With time, prayer and self-disclosure, those images of my directees were transformed into flowing streams, panted seeds, budding fruit trees, and rainbow. God's power can be reflected in the souls of loving men. There are unique challenges for men to become whole and spiritual, but with proper guidance to help facilitate the transformation, it can be accomplished.

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