

MYSTICAL EMPOWERMENT:
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS POTENTIAL IN THE CONTEXT OF DISABILITY

Introduction

In a world dominated by the scientific mode of thinking, empowering a life often negated the spiritual, or at best tacked it on only as a matter of compromise. Such was a strange imbalance as most of human history has treated the spiritual approach as *the* primary concern. Nelson Thayer defines “spiritual” as “conscious of, and relat[ing] to a dimension of power and meaning transcendent to the world of sensory reality.”¹ Individuals with disability, and their families, are in need of such “transcendent power and meaning,” so as to live on a level that is beyond, and yet intricately tied to, this world. This is a difficult task, for “there is no single model for living with a disability, no single way of ‘handling’ or perceiving it.”² There is no jell-o mold or rubber stamp intervention. Each person, and each family, is unique, and all disabilities are not of the same magnitude. Spiritual direction offers an approach to meeting unique spiritual need. Spiritual direction is a channel through which to find unique eternal meaning and personal divine encounter, so as to enter one’s prominent spiritual calling, if not merely to survive.

Though spiritual direction is relevant for both those with and without disability, the angle of this article embraces the family of an individual with disability as a spiritual

¹ Nelson Thayer, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 55, in “Spirituality and Systems Therapy: Partners in Clinical Practice,” Douglas A. Anderson, in *Religion and the Family: When God Helps*, ed. Laurel Arthur Burton (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1992), 89.

² Helen Betenbaugh and Marjorie Proctor-Smith, “Disabling the Lie: Prayers of Truth and Transformation,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1998), 287.

entity. Being that everyone is part of a family, and disability impacts each family member, the ideal is to consider spiritual direction not just with the individual but with the family system as well. Another reason for copious mention of family stems from the author's context of experience as the father of a child with disability (profound deafness).

Spiritual direction is not just deemed a positive approach for offering hope to a family, or individual, and bettering their life, spiritual direction is a means to a much higher calling. This article will introduce themes of spiritual direction, namely; prayer, wholeness, listening, finding God, the dark nights, calm, new meaning, and transformation as means for surviving the challenges of disability, connecting spiritually, and elevating the meaning of life to the God intended level. These themes are not viewed as of secondary importance, but the central themes of life, and particularly potent themes for disability.

Description of Spiritual Direction

The term “spiritual direction” has often induced feelings of animosity, as it seems to infer the authoritarian control that many have experienced in spiritually abusive environments. The mere mention of this term easily calls to memory spiritually oppressive leaders and systems that have brutalized the vulnerable, and those suffering with disability are obviously often very vulnerable. Without a doubt, some of the greatest spiritual abuses occur when a mortal aims to usurp the influence of God in another's life. However, spiritual direction is far from this, rather it is “nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey our real Director—the Holy Spirit, hidden in the depths of our soul.”³ This coincides with the idea of spiritual empowerment—helping others help

³ Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, *The Way of Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1985), 84.

themselves be helped by God, that they might be emancipated pilgrims instead of emaciated patients.

Occasionally, spiritual direction is likened to discipleship. However, while both fulfill important roles, the focus of each is principally different. While discipleship focuses on knowing and doing the will of God, following in his footsteps, so to speak, spiritual direction focuses on how one can be more present to and with God.⁴ Thus, while discipleship generally emphasizes character and service, direction concentrates on sensitivity to God and entering into His life.

Central to the practice of true spiritual direction is the belief that the director does not actually give direction, but is involved in discerning the Direction that already exists within the directee. Thus the director, with a small “d”, must be careful to follow the Director—speaking only what, how much, and when, he is led. It is in this setting that the director can help the individual “bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul.”⁵ What makes direction different from most counseling is the surrender of human control. For “the agenda of spiritual direction is to have no agenda except to be open to God.”⁶

Specifically detailing the characteristics of spiritual direction can be challenging. Each director has a special gift and slant, and thus the direction of each is unique, though graced by the same Spirit. Joel Giallanza observes that “principles for spiritual direction can be as many and varied as there are writers and speakers and directors to present them.

⁴ John R. Throop, “Becoming a Spiritual Director,” *The Clergy Journal* 76, no.8 (July 2000), 6.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, n.d.), 16.

⁶ Carol Stream, “Making Space for God,” *Christianity Today Magazine*, 23 April 2001, 89.

Most directors however, would likely agree that each directee is moving toward union with the Lord in a unique way.”⁷

History: Pre-Modern Roots

The tradition of spiritual direction has its roots in the monastic setting of the Desert Fathers and Mothers who lived as hermits, or in cloisters, in the wastelands of Palestine, Egypt, and Samaria. These ascetics sought a lifestyle that made a statement against the societies from which they had withdrawn. Strangely, those with disability may have been chosen for a similar calling. Despite the physical distance of the desert sages, they still made ample contact with souls still living in the average world and reminded them of what really mattered most, and such has also been the case with many in the desert of disability.⁸

Over the years spiritual direction developed and became more refined in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions through such radiant figures as St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. Ignatius, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. Later, other significant figures emerged, such as, St. Francis de Sales, Jean Pierre de Caussade, and Jean N. Grou, and more recent figures like Benedictine Dom Columba Marmion and Joseph de Guibert.⁹ Various noteworthy figures inhabit other Christian traditions. Reginald Somerset was from the Anglican Church. Martin Bucer, who authored *On the True Cure of Souls*, was a Lutheran. Renowned Quaker, George Fox, was well known for spiritual guidance. Others in the Protestant tradition who incorporated of confession and guidance characteristic of

⁷ Joel Giallanza, “Integration in Spiritual Direction,” *Contemplative Review* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 31.

⁸ The term “desert of disability” seeks to recognize the similarity of the traditional spiritual view of desert with that of disability. Deserts are lonely places of desolation, places of potential destruction as well as enlightenment.

⁹ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 67-75. Leech gives one of the best brief overviews of the history of direction.

spiritual direction include Max Thurian, Deitrich Bonhoeffer, and Neville Ward.¹⁰ Many elements of spiritual direction can also be found in certain Protestant discipleship programs, as well as in Pentecostal practices like “listening prayer.” The history of spiritual direction is rich and diverse, but one wonders why, that in over 1500 years of it’s history, so little has been related to the unique struggle of those suffering disability, or for that matter, families suffering disability.

Assessment/Approach

Determining a family’s spiritual health is a daunting, if not impossible, task, and it is generally ignored in families adjusting to life with a child having disability, because so many other “urgent” issues scream for attention. As one attempts to get a handle on the situation, there should be caution, as no to simply classify or categorize a person/family according to case, for each is unique. God’s working is unique. The Divine manifestation is unique. God loves each personally and intimately, and the experience of this love is unparalleled. However, herein lies a paradox of direction; one must simultaneously embrace mystery as well as make some definitions. Thus, in beginning to define where an individual or family system is spiritually, it is helpful to have a framework from which the director can recognize the brushstrokes of spiritual maturity. The evaluation of spiritual life poses a challenge. Through more than two thousand years of history, the elasticity of Christianity has helped it accommodate changing times and cultures. However, this often causes challenges in identifying the image of a mature Christian.

According to William Bouwsma, maturity entails childlikeness, that is, an openness and propensity for radical growth and change, as opposed to childishness that

¹⁰ Ibid., 84-88.

rejects growth.¹¹ One psychologist offers this interesting proposition: whereas “Socrates encouraged his young followers to develop towards maturity; Jesus tried to reduce his to the level of children.”¹² Childhood not only entails growth, but welcomes the years with fearless interest and trust, poses simple but profound questions, and lavishly expresses wonder and astonishment. Perhaps this was Søren Kierkegaard’s insight when he wrote, “Therefore one does not begin by being a child and then becoming progressively more intimate (with God) as he grows older; no, one becomes more and more a child.”¹³ Such statements recognize the special value of the childlike spirituality of many living with mental disabilities. Frequently, those with disability exhibit that the strangle-hold of false identities and twisted attitudes in the spiritual life is not an issue, and identity as a child of God is a given. The sad truth is that these strengths are often regarded as weaknesses. Families with disability are often expected to behave as families without disability, and rarely will they survive such spiritual and emotional manipulation.

Prayer

The key criterion for evaluating the spiritual life in spiritual direction is in the prayer life of the individual. The characteristics of prayer in a life indicate spiritual depth, struggle, and intimacy. Beatrice Bruteau suggests that ideal prayer “involves all our faculties, directed toward the whole of Reality and the *totality* of meaning: all of me toward and in all of It.”¹⁴ Of course, the “all of It” and the “all of me” cannot be fully encountered in the sense that “It”, or God, is infinite, and mankind may never fully

¹¹ William J. Bouwsma, “Christian Adulthood,” in *Adulthood*, ed. Erik Erikson (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 91.

¹² Margaret Knight, *Honest to Man* (London: 1974), 41-42, in Bouwsma, “Christian Adulthood,” 83.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, 1967), 122, in Bouwsma, “Christian Adulthood,” 91.

¹⁴ Beatrice Bruteau, “Insight and Manifestation: A Way of Prayer in a Christian Context,” *Contemplative Review* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 18.

understand himself truly and completely. However, perhaps this definition of prayer can be simplified to “all that I know of me, directed toward all that I know of Him.” The path to knowing and joining oneself to God is also found through prayer. On this path, one discovers that true prayer begets true prayer, and consequently, the approach to, and result of, prayer, is transformed.

Bruteau explains that in the developed stages of prayer there is a sense that Christ and self are moving together as a single unit. Prayer is no longer an event, nor is it an action at a particular time; prayer is living, and living is prayer. Bruteau writes, “Where is the individual self now? There is no way to answer, because the question no longer makes sense.”¹⁵ As lofty as this prayer may seem, there is another prayer beyond this— the “prayer of coincidence.”¹⁶ In this prayer, one begins experiencing the consciousness of Jesus Himself. St. John of the Cross captures this thought, “your beauty will be my beauty; and therefore we shall behold each other in your beauty.”¹⁷ In “intimacy” there is a blur in the distinction of persons, in “coincidence” the blur is complete, there seems to be a confusion of identity that is sourced in the insufficiency of language to express the experience.

The journey in prayer is tough and often filled with obstacles and distractions. Some of the more basic obstacles to life, spirit, and prayer must be resolved in order to mature through these steps of prayer. One obstacle is a refusal to forgive self or others. Another obstacle is a refusal to be reconciled; this continually stirs the waters of resentment and bitterness. Yet another obstacle involves anger, not just at others but also at self or at God. The experience of disability easily stimulates the development of any

¹⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 36, in Bruteau, “Insight,” 26.

such obstacles and these in turn quench the Spirit, propagating, in the words of Kenneth Leech, a condition of “anti-prayer.”¹⁸

The inner noise of self-talk is often the greatest distraction of all. One may give little attention to the rhythms and patterns in his/her life, and ignore them in prayer, as well. People are often ignorant of their incapacity for prayer. In the words of Monica Furlong, “We have the audacity to suppose that prayer is something we ought to be able to do.”¹⁹ Yet, true prayer can be nothing other than a gift of grace and a movement of God upon the being. Grace is what determines experience of God, not mental capacity, for that matter, as Wolf Wolfensberger mused, mind activity may be our grandest obstacle. So could it be that less mental capacity could actually be a spiritual enhancement?

Wholeness and Integration

One of the common themes people hope to achieve through their efforts to attain the ideal spiritual life, particularly in more recent times, is wholeness or integration. This has been a longstanding theme of spiritual direction also. The supernatural result of a deepening prayer life is a deepening self-awareness. Thomas Merton boldly defined prayer as merely “awareness of one’s inner self.”²⁰ Perhaps his assumption is that only a person of prayer is aware of self, and the self-aware person must, of necessity, be a person of prayer. The two are inseparable. In prayer, one moves within oneself, and there encounters the darkness and the monsters. The inner being becomes life’s greatest battlefield. Annie Dillard describes this journey:

¹⁸ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 169.

¹⁹ Monica Furlong, *Christian Uncertainties*, (1975), 75, in Leech, *Soul Friend*, 168.

²⁰ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 170.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together here.²¹

After descending and discovering the frightening reality of self, one must go deeper still, to the most inner core. Merton, a Trappist monk well acquainted with this journey, writes:

If you descend into the depths of your own spirit...and arrive somewhere near the center of what you are, you are confronted with the inescapable truth that at the very root of your existence, you are in constant and immediate and inescapable contact with the infinite power of God.²²

This is the stage where wholeness or integration begins. The false parts, the true parts, and the Divine presence are recognized. It is here that the world's standards of evaluation (title, accomplishment, possession) don't compute. This was the discovery of Henri Nouwen in his move from prolific educator teaching in institutions such as Harvard and Yale, to living in a community of mental disability. It was this new family, who hadn't a clue what a Harvard was, that welcomed him with open arms like anyone else. For Nouwen, the healing, and the melding, and the transformation had begun, and it knocked him off his feet for nearly a year and half, and took not just one, but two spiritual directors to help him in the journey.²³

To pray is to begin finding oneself, to pray may be the definition of being truly human; through prayer, one begins the journey into the Eden walk, where God and naked

²¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 94-95, in *The Active Life*, Parker J. Palmer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 30.

²² Thomas Merton, in *Dublin Review* 223 (1949): 28, in Leech, *Soul Friend*, 170.

²³ Deirdre LaNoue, *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 44.

humankind commune. Becoming human means becoming whole, or finding resolution to the problem wherein “sin diminish[es] and distort[s] one’s humanity.”²⁴

Listening

The place to start in prayer, in assessing life, and in spiritual direction, then, is listening. True listening, however, is excruciatingly difficult, particularly in the fast paced and cluttered world where people are constantly inundated with irrelevant advertisements and boisterous mobile phone conversations, and living in a turned-off mode where sensitivities have been cauterized. Listening is even more difficult for those who are just trying to survive in such a world and possess the added challenge of severe disability. Barry and Connolly explain that the two fundamental tasks of a director are, first, to help the directee pay attention to God, and second, to help the directee recognize God’s actions.²⁵ This poses a challenge, as distracted people must now be encouraged to listen to someone who is invisible and mysterious. Once again, one is reminded that the simple act of listening is ultimately dependent upon an act of grace, for even a person physically incapacitated in every way but hearing, may still be forgetting to really listen.

True listening also involves employing the wholeness of one’s being. The entire person must find practical ways to enter stillness, because “prayer is not an activity of the mind, for God is not in the head. It is an activity of the whole person, and God is in the wholeness.”²⁶ Large portions of time in sessions for spiritual direction may be spent in silence. Silence may be the most productive time, for it encourages and trains one into a spirit of listening. There is a great temptation on the part of both novice director and directee to avoid this silence and to run from the sense of helplessness, poverty, and

²⁴ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 172.

²⁵ William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper, 1982), 46.

²⁶ Leech, *Soul Friend*, 173.

dependence it gives. But it is only in surrendering to silence that listening can actually begin. Francis Nemeck and Marie Combs encourage the following mode of operation, “When nothing is forthcoming we are to rest in nothing (*nada*): doing nothing, saying nothing.”²⁷

By listening, the directee may be entering into a totally new way of living, a life transforming consciousness. Spiritual attentiveness is of prime importance. Nemeck emphasizes “fostering in directees maximum receptivity to God’s transforming and purifying love” to “assist directees to discern the obstacles which block the growth of Christ in them.”²⁸ To accomplish this, the director must also abide in the same spirit of listening, releasing the mentality of speculation in order to hear the Spirit revealing his/her needs. In listening, both director and directee enter into an opening, as opposed to an analyzing, a self-abandon, as opposed to a self-absorption.

Finding God

The Triple Way

History

As spiritual direction has developed over the centuries, it has been shaped by the systems of classical spiritual thought. Perhaps the premier system is “The Triple Way” or “The Mystical Way.” Though The Triple Way has Neoplatonistic roots, Pseudo-Dionysius christianized the system. Later Hugh of St. Victor centralized the love theme,

²⁷ Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, *The Way of Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1985), 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

and Bonaventure masterfully refined the system to include all themes of Western mysticism.²⁹

The influence of The Triple Way impacts not only much spiritual thinking and writing, but also the philosophy of spiritual direction. Contemporary theological discussions of The Triple Way include: Adolphe Tanquerey in *The Spiritual Life*,³⁰ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange in *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life*,³¹ and Louis Bouyer in *Introduction to Spirituality*.³² Writers that give The Triple Way attention from a psychological viewpoint include: Evelyn Underhill in her classic *Mysticism*,³³ Adrian van Kaam in *The Dynamics of Spiritual Self-Direction*,³⁴ Gerald May in *Care of Mind Care of Spirit*,³⁵ and Benedict Groeschel in *Spiritual Passages*.³⁶ Others have even redefined The Three Ways with new terms, like Donald Hands and Wayne Fehr's use of "uncovery," "discovery," and "recovery."³⁷

Despite the fact that The Triple Way is not primarily based on theological considerations or restricted to Christianity, it has provided a framework for the spiritual journey that is difficult to explain otherwise. Each of the three stages, Purgation, Illumination, and Union, are like hooks on which solid, scriptural truths can be hung.

²⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 93.

³⁰ Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, trans. Herman Branderis (Tournai, Belgium: Desclee, 1932).

³¹ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1950).

³² Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, trans. Mary Perkins Ryan (New York: Desclee, 1961).

³³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999).

³⁴ Adrian van Kaam, *Dynamics of Spiritual Self-Direction* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1976).

³⁵ Gerald May, *Care of Mind / Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

³⁶ Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

³⁷ Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: A New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self and Others* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban, 1993), 15.

The First Way: Purgation

The first stage in The Triple Way is the way of purgation. Although there are two other progressive stages, a certain amount of overlap and interplay occurs among the three. Purgation is the process through which an individual is cleansed and freed of the impediments that block the soul's intimate union with God. *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes the beginning condition of mankind; every person is occupied with the "foul and fetid lump of himself," and this is what must be overcome.³⁸ *The Cloud* also describes the wretched condition of a person entering purgation, "...if a man would be God's perfect disciple and taught by him on the mountain of perfection, he is nearly out of his mind with sorrow, so much so that he weeps and wails, strives with himself, denounces and heaps curses upon himself."³⁹

At the turning point between the purgative way and the illuminative way there is an experience which St. John of the Cross describes as the "dark night of the senses."⁴⁰ Though the dark nights are intensely painful, they lead to inevitable joy. In the following excerpt from *The Living Flame of Love*, both the pain and the joy coexist:

O living flame of love
That tenderly wounding my soul
In its deepest center...
O sweet cautery
O delightful wound
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
That tastes of eternal life
And pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.⁴¹

³⁸ Anonymous classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981), 204.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁰ Williams Rowan in *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

⁴¹ John of the Cross, *John of the Cross*, 293-294. (you already gave all the other info) ed. Kieran Kavanaugh. New York, Paulist Press, 1987), 293-294.

Sometimes the struggle with disability is compared to the stage of purgation, however, they are not the same. Yet, the stripping of a life struggling with disability can lead very easily to a God-focus. The surrendering of stuff can naturally create space and place for God. Here we can be encouraged by understanding the redemptive power of entering nothingness. In the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2 we see the Son setting aside Divine privilege—God Almighty constricted, Infinite Creator becoming finite creation, “All in All”⁴² rendered “nothing”—without question the ultimate multiple-handicap—and the result was salvation for the human race.

The Second Way: Illumination

The stage of illumination is characterized by uncommon appreciation of God. Bonaventure explains that “this heavenly light must first illumine all of our forgiven sins; then it must spread out to cover the gifts that God has given us; lastly, it must reflect on the rewards that He has promised us.”⁴³ To enter illumination is to bask in the immensity of God’s gracious goodness and reality.⁴⁴ In this light, the sense of guilt and inadequacy carried by those with disability, or their parents and siblings can begin to melt. In this light their view changes, it must change, for as Wayne Teasdale reasons to try to know God is like a five-year-old trying to understand relativity; what is needed is an interior explosion of consciousness at the center of one’s being in God.⁴⁵

Many writers deal with the struggle to be illuminated in terms of an ineffable God. Perhaps a large part of illumination is attained through dismantling all we thought God to be. Dionysius himself explains the compromised position to be held:

⁴² [Ephesians 1:23, Colossians 3:11](#)

⁴³ Bonaventure, *Triple Way*, 13.

⁴⁴ Wayne Teasdale, “The Mystical Approach to Life,” *Studia Mystica* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

But as for now, what happens is this. We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one. (Then) we leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our mind's and, to the extent that is proper we approach the ray which transcends being.⁴⁶

In purgation, the lens of how one sees reality has been significantly cleansed.

Finally, there is room to receive the Divine sketches, many of which are dark and unclear.

Though life may be filled with suffering and darkness, there are also bright times. The

theme throughout *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the darkness and ineffability of God;

however, it also speaks of the rays that pierce through the cloud:

Then perhaps it will be his will to send out a ray of spiritual light, piercing this cloud of unknowing between you and him, and he will show you some of his secrets, of which many may not or cannot speak. Then you shall feel your affection all aflame with the fire of his love, for more than I know how to tell...⁴⁷

The Final Way: Union

Of the three ways, union is by far the most probed and fondled. Something about union with the Almighty seems to irresistibly draw mankind. It is just as Meister

Eckhart's quote of St. Bernard of Clairvaux goes, that "God, despite himself, is ever

hanging over us some bait to lure us into him."⁴⁸ Union is the ultimate goal of The Triple

Way, and of mysticism. Union can be defined as the ecstatic experience through which

the soul is radically transformed in God and mysteriously radiates His presence.

Bonaventure says union is highly mysterious and beyond description:

All intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God. This, however, is mystical and

⁴⁶ Rorem, Paul, ed. *Pseudo-Dionysius in Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 210.

⁴⁷ Anonymous classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981), 174-175.

⁴⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, quoted in Meister Eckhart, "Sermon on St. Benedict's Day," quoted in David Mueller, "The Mystical Union in the Sermons of Meister Eckhart," *Science, Faith, and Revelation*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1979), 79.

most secret, which no one knows except him who receives it, no one receives except him who desires it, and no one desires except him who is inflamed in his very marrow by the fire of the Holy Spirit...⁴⁹

In the state of union, the rules of this world do not apply, and the seemingly eccentric descriptions may alarm certain people. Jan van Ruusbroec's eloquent description of union as a wanton and unrestrained experience is sure to bring discomfort to many:

Nevertheless, all loving spirits are one enjoyment and one beatitude with God, without difference, for that blessed state of being, which is the enjoyment of God and of all his beloved is so simple and undifferentiated that there is within it neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit as regards the distinction of Persons, nor is there any creature either. Rather, all enlightened spirits are there raised above themselves into a modeless state of blissful enjoyment which overflows whatever fullness any creature has ever received or ever could receive. There all exalted spirits are, in their superessential being, one enjoyment and one beatitude with God, without difference. This beatitude is so simple and undifferentiated that no distinction could ever enter within it.⁵⁰

One wonders if such an experience could be had this side of Heaven, where all who are broken are healed (not necessarily cured), and are not all broken in some way, where all who were excluded, whether adorned with wheelchair, or cane, or hearing aid, are brought together in one undifferentiated enjoyment in the Spirit. Could families, churches, communities begin to enter such a life?

Certainly the issue of union has been debated throughout history. Is the union a mere union of wills? Is it an essential union where self is absorbed into God? Dealing with the paradox involving union has become a point of contention for many. The description of union became a dilemma for Meister Eckhart, who was eventually

⁴⁹ Bonaventure, *Bonaventure*, in *Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. Ewert Cousins, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 113.

⁵⁰ Ruusbroec, John, *John Ruusbroec*, in *Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. James A. Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 226.

condemned by the Catholic Church the early 14th century as a heretic.⁵¹ His writings, though the source of great controversy, continue to have great influence today. Still there are statements, such as this quoting of Dionysius, that concern many people, “Thus Dionysius says: This race is precisely the flight from creature to union with the uncreated. When the soul achieves this, it loses its identity, it absorbs God and is reduced to nothing, as the dawn at the rising of the sun.”⁵²

One of Eckhart’s disciples, John Tauler, though more cautious than Eckhart, has also made statements that endorse absorption, “In this absorption all like and unlike is lost. In this abyss the spirit loses itself and knows neither God nor itself, neither like nor unlike. It knows nothing, for it is engulfed in the oneness of God and has lost all differences.”⁵³ Others, however, seek to erase the ambiguity and clarify that union does not mean absorption. In this vein, Ruusbroec says, “I just said that we are one with God, something to which Scripture bears witness. I now wish to say that we must forever remain different from God, which is also taught us by Scripture. We must understand and experience both these points if we are to be on the right path.”⁵⁴

Whatever the case, it seems a formidable task to try describing the mystical paradox of the union experience. Teasdale recognizes that the language from each tradition is drawn from the “common experience, from ordinary life: it is not equipped to

⁵¹ Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, trans. and ed., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, in *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 11-13.

⁵² Meister Eckhart, quoted in Raymond B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper, 1941), 89, in “The Mystical Union in the Sermons of Meister Eckhart,” David L Mueller, in *Science, Faith, and Revelation*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1979), 76.

⁵³ John Tauler, Sermon 28, *Homo Spiritualis*, trans. Steven Ozment, 38, in *Ordinary Mysticism*, Dennis Tamburello (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 117.

⁵⁴ Ruusbroec, *John Ruusbroec*, 174.

adequately describe mystical awareness at its zenith.”⁵⁵ Long ago, St. John of the Cross gave poetic support for the inadequacy of descriptive language:

Deep-celled is the cavern
Of my hearts love, I drank of him alive;
Now, stumbling from the tavern,
No thoughts of mine survive,
And I have lost the flock I used to drive.⁵⁶

The Dark Nights

Night of the Soul

As a person begins to pass from illumination to union, St. John of the Cross describes another phenomenon known as the “dark night of the soul [or sense].”⁵⁷ After the soul has been unencumbered through purgation, and now enlightened regarding the beauty of God through illumination, the intense longing for God is accompanied by His stark absence. Note St. John’s agony in *The Dark Night*:

Poor, abandoned, and unsupported by any of the apprehensions of my soul (in the darkness of my intellect, the distress of my will, in the affliction and anguish of my memory) left to darkness in pure faith, which is a dark night for these natural faculties, and with only my will touched by the sorrows, afflictions, and longings of love of God, I went out from myself. That is, I departed from my low manner of understanding, and my feeble way of loving, and my poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God.⁵⁸

Though there are not direct references to these nights in Scripture, inferences of such spiritual states can be found particularly in books like Job or the Psalms.⁵⁹ Typical symptoms of the dark night include a sense of the absence of God, dryness in prayer,

⁵⁵ Teasdale, “Mystical Approach,” 56.

⁵⁶ John of the Cross, *Poems of St. John of the Cross*, ed. Roy Campbell (New York: Pantheon, 1951).

⁵⁷ St. John’s use of the term “dark night” is rooted in literal experience. Caught up in the turmoil of Teresa’s reform, he was imprisoned for nine months in a six-by-ten-foot cell. The only source of light was a two-inch window. While imprisoned, he wrote the majority of his poems, including the first 31 verses of *Spiritual Canticle*.

⁵⁸ John of the Cross, Kavanaugh, 200.

⁵⁹ For example: Job chapter 3 and Psalm 22:1-2.

disillusionment with one's understanding of the Christian life, and a spiritual loss of control.⁶⁰ These conditions can also easily be symptoms of negative conditions, such as depression, illness, or sin. With contemporary general familiarity with Sanjuanist⁶¹ writings, it has also become popular for people to say they are going through a dark night when they experience grief, stress, or even some trivial problem. The dark night of the soul, though it may include these problems, is much more; it is a complete spiritual reorientation. One is reminded here of the felt absence of God while struggling with disability, a place of silent suffering and isolation where people have come to the end of their rope, then dangled there for years. Where people have exhausted all their resources and still hang on, continuing to face the onslaught, as shared by Helen Betenbaugh wrestling with the angel⁶² of disability:

I prayed. Over and over, I prayed, "God, please give me the grace to withstand this." And my other prayer, long night after long night, was "God, I know you never give a person a greater burden than they can bear. Your math is wrong here: I've had all I can take. I've searched the deepest pockets of my soul, and then of my entire being, and I've found wellspring after wellspring that I never knew was there. But now I'm all out. It's time for a break. Are you listening?"⁶³

The potential fruit of such an experience is to see self and God as never before. Foster explains that, through the dark night, one gains "a profound and holy distrust of all superficial drives and human strivings. We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self deception."⁶⁴ In spite of the spiritual suffering, there comes a sense that something is very right, albeit terrible, and when the suffering finally bears the

⁶⁰ Nancy Pfaff, "Spiritual Direction and the Dark Night of the Soul," *Presence* 4, no. 2 (May 1998): 34.

⁶¹ The term "Sanjuanist" is sourced in the original Spanish to the name San Juan de la Cruz or St. John of the Cross.

⁶² [Wrestling the angel refers to Genesis 32:22-32 where Jacob wrestles the angel all night. Through the struggle he is greatly blessed, but limps for the rest of his life.](#)

⁶³ Helen Betenbaugh, "Disability: A Lived Theology," *Theology Today* 57, no.2 (July 2000): 206.

⁶⁴ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 24, in Pfaff, "Direction and the Dark Night," 41.

intended fruit, God rescues us through illuminative or unitive experiences. Benedict Groeschel says of this transition, “the cause of darkness may still remain and tears of sorrow may still flow, but in spite of it all a new soft and gentle light is rising in the inner being of the individual.”⁶⁵

Night of the Spirit

Before the experience of full union, another dark night is needed—the night of the spirit. There are two levels of psyche requiring purification. The first is the soul or sense, which has to do with interior and exterior senses such as imagination, memory, feelings, and intellect. These senses can be pleasant consolations, but also distractions. The second level of psyche that must be purified is the spirit. The night of the spirit involves a cleansing of intelligence and will (are we still seeking a cure, or does our prayer start “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.”). This night is much more painful than the former.⁶⁶

While the first night, the night of the soul, is like clipping seeds off weeds, the second night, the night of the spirit, is like ripping up the unseen roots.⁶⁷ The “night” may be mingled with depression, for the two states hold much in common:

Depression demands that we reject simplistic answers, both “religious” and “scientific,” and learn to embrace mystery, something our culture resists. Mystery surrounds every deep experience of the human heart: the deeper we go into the heart’s darkness or its light, the closer we get to the ultimate mystery of God.⁶⁸

However, night and depression do not necessarily co-exist. For someone experiencing the dark night of the spirit, life may seem fine at both work and play, but an

⁶⁵ Benedict J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 154, in Pfaff, “Direction and the Dark Night,” 41.

⁶⁶ Benedict M. Ashley, *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1995), 111-113.

⁶⁷ Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 170.

⁶⁸ Parker Palmer, “All the Way Down: Depression and the Spiritual Journey,” *Weavings* 13, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 35.

indication of night may be found in the starkness of one's prayer life. Though the spirit wants nothing but God, it experiences a loss of Him. It thus faces an "oppressive undoing," where God's love assails, strikes, disentangles, dissolves, divests, chastises, afflicts, and purifies it.⁶⁹

Trouble in the prayer life, however, is a likely indication of progress. As Marie Dyckman and Patrick Carroll explain, "difficulty in prayer often marks the beginning of real prayer... Through darkness, aridity, and emptiness we are called to a new form of prayer, a new stage of our relationship with the Lord."⁷⁰

The Three Ways and The Dark Nights are not as clear and orderly as they are often made out to be. There is significant overlap and the stages are not always linear. The path for each person is a little different from that of any other. The degrees to change in each area of the spiritual life may vary before moving to another stage. As complicated as these stages and processes may seem, great relief comes through understanding that human effort is not sovereign in spiritual progress. Grace begins the path and grace continues the path—nothing occurs without grace.

Entering the Calm

The realization that progress only comes through grace is the beginning of entering the calm. The calm is an experience far from normal in today's bustle and clutter. Many people allow their environments and their inner conditions to harass them away from "graced calm," that level of calm that comes only from God. Adrian van Kaam captures this turmoil:

⁶⁹ St. John of the Cross, quoted in Dubay, *Fire Within*, 169.

⁷⁰ Katherine Marie Dyckman and L. Patrick Carroll, *Inviting the Mystic Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 62-63.

He allows his managing, controlling ego to dominate his life, he reduces or eliminates any possibility of being open to the Spirit. Graced aspirations can no longer guide, modify and mellow the aggressive ambitions of his ego. He becomes driven by isolated ambitions that blind and overwhelm him. No room is left in the personal sphere for the gentle, stilling influence of the Spirit...⁷¹

Oddly, humankind continues to run from God. Functioning with a disability may demand such enormous attention, that time with Him seems beyond reckoning, for life is already overwhelming enough. One mother explains how having a son with multiple disability effects their home life:

It's affected just about every part of our lives, both the major and the mundane: the number of children we had, choosing the city we live in, the kind of car we drive, the public transportation we take, the recreation we do, the amount of life insurance we bought, the kind of clothes and jewelry I wear, the furniture we have, the flooring in our downstairs, where we vacation, where we attend church, the type of friends we have, how people view us, where we get seated in restaurants, the books on our bookshelves, how much and what we pack when we travel, how much laundry we do, the equipment we keep in the house (outside wheelchair, toilet/shower wheelchair, hooyer lift), how often we get up during the night, the physical toll on our bodies, what we pray for. . . There is very little that is not affected by having David in our family.⁷²

But in order to find calm, at some point one must stop, and effort must also stop.

Gerald May explains that “any attempt to produce anything in meditation is bound to be a hindrance...meditation must ideally be a situation in which trying stops and things are allowed to settle.”⁷³ He also quotes the advice of St. John of the Cross: “In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing. In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing.”⁷⁴

Upon entering the calm, one is content to surrender, to yield, and to wait. Prayer takes on a new atmosphere. It is not seeking relief or cure. It is “inarticulate communion”

⁷¹ van Kaam, *Spiritual Self Direction*, 511.

⁷² Quote from family interview by author.

⁷³ Gerald May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1982), 57.

⁷⁴ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *Complete Works*, ed. E. Allison Peers (London: Westminster, 1953), in May, *Will and Spirit*, 57.

and “silent gazing” which may lead one to spontaneously slip into the prayer of orison. Orison, according to Evelyn Underhill, has nothing to do with petition, it has no forms, but rather, it is the mere yearning of the soul, wordless prayer.⁷⁵ All too often prayers in the family with disability are dominated by supplication, or requesting; a good diagnosis, a successful surgery, money for expenses, peace and sanity, all valid requests, but a prayer diet dominated by supplication will leave one drained and emaciated.

To begin to enter the calm is a gift of grace. Grace transforms one’s psyche and spirit, quieting “his vital drives and sensate feelings sufficiently to leave him open for the inspirations of the Spirit and the aspirations that blossom forth from them.”⁷⁶

Such stilling is far from being paralyzing. Even in the depths of contemplation, vital action occurs, because vital action includes the spirit of contemplation. In the spirit of one who is stilled, much is happening, for it is in the stilling that revelation comes. To “be still” precedes “knowing God.”⁷⁷

New Meaning

In any person’s spiritual journey, particularly when that person is dealing with immense pain, a sense of meaning is inseparable from a sense of hope, and hope is critical to survival. Each person clings to the hope that in the end, all injustice will be righted and all suffering will have been meaningful. Such a hope is captured in the lines of:

“Grace Alone”

Terrorized in the face
of her son’s Furies
she calls on a God

⁷⁵ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 323. This classic work is likely the premier evaluation of mysticism. The book expands consciousness. It also maintains intellectual stamina and is sensitive to the sciences.

⁷⁶ van Kaam, *Spiritual Self Direction*, 510.

⁷⁷ Psalm 46:10

whose name is Love
before slipping into sleep
muddied with truth
too awful to bear

While drops of pain
which cannot forget
build night by night
moon by moon
upon her heart
until, in her despair
against her will
comes wisdom
through the awful grace
of God⁷⁸

In spiritual direction meanings cannot be taught. Meaning is not systematic and is often shrouded in mystery. Meaning is intensely personal and oblique. Each individual must personally discover meanings through the new sense of openness and calm that has been established through the environment of direction.

Unavoidably, everyone must live with a certain degree of tension between mystery and meaning. All people, however, long to assign some meanings to their experiences, particularly the painful ones. Assigning meaning is critical to one's spiritual progress. Paul Tournier says of those who get stuck in life because of an inability to find meaning:

Patients who are skeptics endure a threefold suffering. They suffer from their disease, and they suffer on account of its meaninglessness for them. It is in their eyes nothing but a more or less serious vexation, the result of blind chance. They suffer again because it suspends their lives. They wait passively for their cure in order to begin living again.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, "Embracing Our Brokenness: Poems and Reflections on Disability and the Kingdom," *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health* 4, no.4 (2001): 72.

⁷⁹ Paul Tournier, *The Healing Spirit* (Westchester, Ill.: Good News, 1979), 19.

The age-old vexation for the skeptic in pain has been the entrapping line of questioning that begins, “If the suffering is from God, how can God be both powerful and good? If the suffering is not from God, how can there be meaning in it?” Such logic seems impeccable, but guarantees that either way one decides to answer, one will lose. By taking the skeptic’s attitude, the individual freezes his/her growth and stunts all relationships. There is another way, the way of faith—faith in a God who, in the words of Carlo Carretto, “annihilates himself for love, in Christ, and to save his creatures pays with his blood.”⁸⁰ It is in embracing such an image of God that we are able to step into the mystery of suffering and begin to discover meaning; it is a difficult journey, but not a meaningless one. Carretto found meaning in this way:

...it is difficult to understand how he loves, and how he shows his love by making you suffer is the secret hidden in the ages.

I died for you – he tells me on Calvary – now learn to die a little for me.

By dying you will learn the secret.

But you will only learn it if you die for love like me.⁸¹

In this struggle, one must take care to nurture and cherish hope, for often the revelations seem exceedingly rare, especially considering how long one has waited for them. Wise direction is careful not to harm the smoldering wick, but instead, to find life in the midst of death. Sandra Cronk states, “each of the people who experienced a symbolic confrontation with death had to find a symbolic experience of new life in order to enter fully into his or her way of being in actual daily living.”⁸²

Transformation

⁸⁰ Carlo Carretto, *Why O Lord? The Inner Meaning of Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: New York: Orbis, 1985), 53.

⁸¹ Carretto, *Meaning of Suffering*, 59.

⁸² Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1993), 72, in Pfaff, “Direction and the Dark Night,” 36.

Although the ultimate goal of direction is not positive results, but rather union with the Divine, positive transformational outcomes do occur, as well. Some may view these outcomes as mini-conversions in the inner life, for there are many types and levels of conversion. Such mini-conversions are what give those of the deaf community their pride of identity, having journeyed through much territory, being metamorphosed, and finding a rich life which they value.

Spiritual directors must also be people who have undergone significant transformation. This means the director has come to some moderate level of health through the process of integration. In the description of Elaine Korthals, “To be the perfect spiritual director means that one must reflect in one’s being the Trinitarian dynamic of self-knowledge, acceptance, and mission as a part of a responsive relationship that is centered in love and truth.”⁸³ This does not necessarily mean that the director has “arrived” or become “enlightened” in the popular sense. David Lonsdale tells of how the most effective of spiritual directors often appear to be very fragile themselves, and may seem to be in more turmoil than the average person. The French director Abbe Marie-Joseph Huvelin was an example of this. He offered direction while lying on his couch in a dark room, suffering from gout, migraines, and other afflictions. His notebooks indicate that he suffered depression and thoughts of suicide. However, he was director to great spirits like Charles de Foucauld and Baron von Hugel.⁸⁴ Perhaps this is a picture of the director who is most deeply acquainted with inner self—a soul who is truly a “wounded healer.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Elaine Korthals, “The Key to Spiritual Direction,” *Review for Religious* (November-December 1986): 908.

⁸⁴ David Longsdale, “A Paradox in Spiritual Direction,” *Review for Religious* (July-August 1986): 567.

⁸⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1990).

The central aspect of transformation in spiritual direction might be described as transcendence. This means moving away from the usual and natural life, and moving toward living life on another level, ideally on a level greater than that prior to the invasion of disability. This transcendence changes a person both inwardly and outwardly. In regard to the self, the individual is moved from an unproductive self-focus to a fruitful centering where one sees the truth of oneself. In regard to others, the individual is moved from unproductive distraction to having eyes opened to see as Christ sees, and to see God presently within oneself and others.

Thus, spiritual direction aims to aid a person or group in becoming liberated and unencumbered, that they might find themselves—their true selves—and find the true God who is speaking at the center of their beings. Such a life is an existence at a totally different level, and perhaps this is one of the divine intentions of disability.

Families with Disability and Spiritual Direction

How does spiritual direction benefit the family with disability? Spiritual direction provides a special opportunity to deal with two huge barriers. The first is related to *connection* and the second to *meaning*.

Any family confronted with disability will have to struggle with the perplexity of the existence of both suffering and an omnipotent, benevolent God. Many families get stuck in this struggle and hit a spiritual impasse. Few want to be connected to a “hateful God who causes pain” or an “irrelevant God who does not cause pain but is powerless against the forces who do.”⁸⁶ Special needs families will easily arrive at the conclusion

⁸⁶ Charles Gourgey, “Disability and Destiny,” *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 2, no. 1 (1995): 76.

that God is either punishing them (resulting in guilt), or that he is unjustly imposing on them (resulting in bitterness). They become blind to the fact that their lives are filled with many blessings, because their focus is overwhelmingly on the struggle. This results in feeling unloved, abandoned, or even rejected by God.

The great tragedy of this phenomenon is that the family with disability separates itself from God and flounders in its own strength. Amanda Shao Tan reminds us, “Christ should also be the answer for the disabled and their families.”⁸⁷ Crudely stated, God is the “metaphysical glue” that holds the family together; the source of love, joy, peace, and everything that a family needs to weather the tumult of disability.⁸⁸ Spiritual direction puts the issue of *connection* to God at the center, not as a secondary consideration, but as the most potent relationship in life.

The second barrier that spiritual direction answers is related to *meaning*. Without a sense of eternal meaning, a sense that everything is part of an ancient plan and purpose, there is little hope for the family that suffers grave loss or colossal frustration. A spiritual view opens a new horizon of meaning. Families have the opportunity to enter life on another level. Quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada says, “I think the most blessed benefit of suffering on this earth is to force us to make eternal decisions.”⁸⁹ Eternal decisions, not just day-to-day-keeping-the-head-above-water decisions, are easily postponed. Living with disability can effortlessly become the primary focus of a family. Due to the enormous amounts of attention that must be lavished on a disability, family members become distracted from connecting with God, self, and family. Spiritual direction helps

⁸⁷ Amanda Shao Tan, “The Disabled Christ,” *Transformation* 15, no. 4 (October-December 1998): 9.

⁸⁸ [Galatians 5:22-23](#)

⁸⁹ Linda Piepenbrink, “Joni Eareckson Tada’s Secret to Joy,” *Virtue* (October-November 1998): 66.

the family to hear not just words, but the Word coming out of one's "forgotten depths."⁹⁰

Through this Divine connection, a family may be able to boldly proclaim:

You don't have the slightest inclination of the depth and breadth of the grace of God that we have experienced, the intimate ways in which we have been touched by the Divine, the powerful ways in which we have encountered the *Mysterium tremendens et fascinans*.⁹¹ Like Job, we have had an experience of God that radically changed our way of looking at things. Like Jacob, we have wrestled with God, have persevered until we received God's blessing, and have received a new name.⁹²

In the Bible, the prophet Elijah goes to meet God. But first comes a terrible wind, afterward comes a mighty earthquake, and finally a raging fire. In the tumult of such horrible powers even the rocks split open. But God was not in these forces. Finally, all is calm, and in the silence the prophet hears a small voice, like a whisper—it is the voice of God. In this age there is a lot of rumbling and clattering, and one wonders, could the smallest voice be the one with the most power? Could the whimper of the suffering child, be the voice of God? Are we listening?

For over 1500 years spiritual direction has continued to offer a new level of existence for countless souls, it has been a coming Home after a long night in the cold. For those with disabilities, and their families, it is an opportunity to resolve their issues with this God who has allowed their scenario, and to come out empowered in ways that words might not express, but in ways that are more real than anything else in their lives. Hopefully, in the future, many will enter this adventure, for much spiritual terrain in the quest with disability remains yet to be discovered.

⁹⁰ Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 18.

⁹¹ This phrase describes God as a mystery that both attracts with its fascination and terrifies with its tremendous power. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12-30.

⁹² Helen Betenbaugh, "Disability: A Lived Theology," *Theology Today* 57, no. 2 (July 2000): 209-210. [Singular case "I" changed to plural case "we."](#)