



167: Spiritual Direction for Beginners

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 167. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

Today, I'm going to be talking about spiritual direction for beginners, but before we jump in, I want to share a word about this episode sponsor, KiwiCo. We all have memories and experiences from childhood that shaped who we are today, like learning to bake with my mom or playing Barbies for hours with my sister and our neighbors. Now, KiwiCo is on a mission to help us make unforgettable moments like those with our own children, no matter their age or interest. Our latest Maker Crate just landed on our doorstep, and we were all so excited to see what this month's project would be. Turns out it's perfect for February, which always brings jury weather in our hometown. Y'all, it's a make-your-own knitted hat complete with a loom and faux fur pom-poms I'm obsessed. It's a perfect project to introduce to my teenagers to decompress from a day of distance learning. It's great to have something to make with our hands that we can use in day-to-day life. It's hard to find new creative ways to keep kids engaged while stretching their brains especially now.

KiwiCo does the legwork for you so you can spend more quality time tackling projects together. Plus, there are different Crate lines for kids of all ages and zero commitment. So you can explore different lines or cancel your subscription anytime. KiwiCo is redefining learning with hands-on projects that build confidence, creativity, and critical thinking skills. There's something for every kid or kid at heart at KiwiCo. Get 30% off your first month plus free shipping on any Crate line with code "nextrightthing" at kiwico.com. That's 30% off your first month at K-I-W-I-C-O.com with promo, nextrightthing.

Now onto today's episode. Listen in.

Ruth Haley Barton writes this, "There are a few places where the soul is truly safe, where the knowing the questions, the longings of the soul are welcomed, received, and listened to rather than evaluated, judged, or beaten out of us." Seven years ago on the first day of lent, I'm looking for a place where my soul will feel truly safe, and I visit a spiritual director for the first time. Lent is a time for preparation, for turning for repentance and reflection. I didn't plan to schedule my meeting with her on that day on purpose, but

looking back on it now, the timing is serendipitous. The circumstances that compelled me to seek her out in the first place weren't extreme or dramatic. Instead, I was living in the echo of transition, six months after John had left full-time ministry. That had a lot of implications for him, for his career, his calling and vocation. In the process of that transition, I had been focused mostly on his experience leading up to it.

Now, six months later in the late winter of 2014, what started to rise to the surface for me was a sense of untethering of coming to terms with the reality that leaving his job also meant the loss of our church home, of questioning my place in the church as a whole now that I was no longer a pastor's wife, or was I since he will always have the heart and posture of a pastor, or was I not since he was no longer on staff at a church. Quietly carrying my own losses, I wondered if I was able to look them in the face, not knowing how to do that well, or even if it was safe to do it at all. This was before I wrote my fourth book, *Simply Tuesday*, or my fifth book, *The Next Right Thing*. I was a bit over four years into my official writing career, and the newness of it had long since worn off.

As I observed myself during that season of my life, I could see I was becoming more private, less comfortable around strangers, more suspicious of people in general, less inclined to move toward long-time friends. I was less aware of God's presence and more skeptical of God's love. All of those mores and lesses began to terrify me. I had been to Christian counseling before, but this felt like a different kind of need. I didn't have a presenting problem exactly. I wasn't in a particular crisis. I wasn't looking for solutions, coping strategies, accountability or advice. Although I will say I'm a huge fan of counseling and of counselors and have been seeing a counselor and will continue to see a counselor, but at this time I was looking for companionship, and so I found my way to a spiritual director. A woman recommended to me by a trusted long-time friend, who himself is a spiritual director. "She will hold space for you," he said. When I emailed her, she said that too.

In its simplest form, a spiritual director is a person who holds prayerful space for someone else. The task of the spiritual director is not to literally direct a person, which is often a misconception about spiritual direction, but to remain attentive to the spirit of God on behalf of someone else. God is the director, and the process of spiritual direction is a practice of helping people become aware of what God is up to in their lives.

When I mentioned on Instagram last week that I would be doing this episode on spiritual direction for beginners, I received literally hundreds of questions. I read all of them and I quickly saw a pattern emerge, not all, but nearly all of the questions submitted could fit into one of these three categories of questions. Number one, what is spiritual direction? Number two, how is it different from or the same as fill in the blank? So people asked, how is it different from pastoral counseling, Christian counseling, discipleship, therapy, coaching, mentoring, soul care, friendship, or Bible study? And then the third and final category of question was some version of, how can I find one? Well, since this is an episode for beginners, I'm going to work real hard to keep things as simple and introductory as possible. But I do this recognizing that this is a topic that could fill and has filled countless volumes of books, articles, experiences, workshops, degree programs, not to mention one that has spanned centuries going as far back as the earliest days of the church.

If you want to know more specifically about the history of spiritual direction, you might begin with our Catholic friends from whom we have much to learn about spiritual direction. suffice it to say for now that spiritual direction is not new, though many have never heard of it. While it's becoming a bit more

mainstream among Protestants, it's certainly not a regular part of most Protestant traditions, including my own. It's not only for one religion or denomination, and in fact could be helpful for anyone who is seeking God, but does not associate with any particular faith tradition.

Before we go further, it could be helpful for you to know that I am a White woman who grew up in an evangelical context, and I did not know anything about spiritual direction until well into adulthood. I share my stories and loose definitions as a Christian and I have done some training in spiritual direction with Dr. Larry Crabb many years ago. I've been seeing my own spiritual director for seven years now. And I have my master's degree in Christian spiritual formation and leadership from Friends University, which is a Christian university of Quaker heritage. One of my many jobs is I serve at Friends four times a year as a residency lecturer in the spiritual formation master's degree program, which is one of my favorite things that I do in my work right now.

I do not personally offer spiritual direction these days, but if you know much about the practice, I think you'll recognize that nearly everything I do from my books to this podcast, I do with some kind of spiritual direction posture. It's in my bones. I can't get away from it. I love this practice and what it has to teach us. A brief disclaimer, the downside of this medium is the finality of it. Once I released the episode, I can't change it. And the truth is definitions, at least as I will speak of them, aren't so much final declarations here as they are in process. So keep that in mind, but let's go ahead and define our terms.

Rather than start with spiritual direction, let's narrow it down to the word, spiritual or spirituality. It covers a lot, and like most words it, of course, has the ability to be misused and misunderstood, or at least it can be used in many contexts to mean many different things for many different people just like the word Christian for example. For our purposes, we'll use a definition by my friend, James Bryan Smith, who says spirituality at its most basic level is simply lived life. We are, all of us, spiritual beings.

If our lives were a pie chart, we might be able to divide them up in categories of work, play, relationships, personal development, exercise, even church, but we cannot put our spirituality in a slice on the chart any more than we can put our physical bodies in only one slice. We cannot go anywhere or do anything without our body, and we cannot go anywhere or do anything without our spirit. So body and spirit don't go on the pie chart, body and spirit are the pie chart. Like the old days of overhead transparencies, you draw a pie chart of your life, rhythm and our activities on one, and then you take another one and you lay on top of that, maybe some of my generation is with me in that example. I hope you see it. Okay. Let's move on.

Spiritual formation is the process by which our spirit is formed. Dallas Willard compares spiritual formation to an education. Everyone gets one but the question is, what kind? You get an education even when you never go to school, is this a good education, a whole hearted or full one? Probably not, but it's still an education. Same goes for spiritual formation. We all, every single human on earth who was, is or will be, everyone gets a spiritual formation. The question is, is your spirit being integrated in wholeness or disintegrated, which we might call malformation?

When I, Emily P. Freeman, here on this podcast, talk about spiritual formation, I'm mostly going to be referring to Christian spiritual formation. This is the process by which our spirits are formed into the likeness of Christ. With that in mind, Pastor Tim Keel says, "Spirituality is about the development of practices that integrate us over time into the fullness of who God has created us to be as humans created

in his image.” Richard Foster and Emily Griffin say, “Spiritual formation, or maybe more precisely, the spiritual disciplines, are a series of concrete actions that will gently move us to transformation in Christ. It’s worth noting that the disciplines themselves, whether personal or communal like prayer, Bible readings, silence, solitude, even spiritual direction, these are not transformative alone. Rather, these are practices that put us in a position to see, hear, and pay attention to what God is up to in us and in the world.”

This is the of what Gary Moon and David Benner say in their book called *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, they say, “At the heart of spiritual formation is becoming aware that God is everywhere and learning to practice his presence and yield to his transforming grace.” They also say, I’ll continue to quote, “To be alive is to be in relationship with God. And in the process of spiritual formation, each is unavoidable, given breath and consciousness, but all formation is not good formation and all relationships do not lead to transforming friendship.” That’s something to think about. With that in mind, here are a few specific definitions of a spiritual director.

This first one comes from Thomas Martin who says, “A spiritual director is one who helps another to recognize and to follow the inspirations of grace in his life in order to arrive at the end to which God is leading him.” Another firm writer, Barbara L. Peacock in her book, *Soul Care in African-American Practice*, she says, “Spiritual direction is the practice of discerning the activity of God in the life of another.” One of my favorite definitions comes from Margaret Gunther who says, “Spiritual direction is Holy listening. Not that the listener herself is Holy, but that the listening is.

So that hopefully answers or at least begins to answer what is spiritual direction, but many might be wondering, “Okay, but how does this differ from things I already know about pastoral counseling, Christian counseling, discipleship, coaching, mentoring therapy, friendship, Bible studies, so many things?” There’s a reason you’re asking this question. It’s because each of these roles while distinct, share a common thread, all can fall under the umbrella of what we would call soul care. And all of these practitioners, whether professionally trained or personally called, probably share some common characteristics. Coaches, pastors, counselors, disciplers, mentors, therapists, friends, teachers, and spiritual directors have many characteristics in common, namely compassion, excellent listening skills and a genuine care for the wellbeing and health of people.

All of these roles want to help though, I would say in different kinds of ways. Therapy and counseling are often, though not always, crisis driven. Whereas someone might arrive at spiritual direction in crisis, that could be true, but generally it’s less of an outward circumstance and more of an inward desire to deepen. In fact, I know some spiritual directors who might refer you to see a counselor or a therapist, depending on what you’re talking about in direction. A counselor or therapist may spend time with a client coming up with strategies or dig deep into the story you’re believing because of your family of origin. Whereas a spiritual director might listen as you talk about these things, but I could imagine, at least in my experience, the director would do less by way of providing strategies. Spiritual direction is always about paying attention to where God is moving now or what God is up to here.

In both a therapeutic relationship and a spiritual direction one, empathy is necessary. The difference for spiritual directors is instead of being empathetic with the client, they are primarily empathetic to the spirit of God. Other roles like mentors, disciplers, and teachers also may share characteristics of a good spiritual director, but traditionally these roles tend to be more didactic in nature, more teacher-student, more, “I

have something to tell you, or I have something that you want me to hold you accountable for.” Those are needed and necessary roles, but they’re not technically spiritual directors. For what it’s worth, I see a spiritual director and I see a counselor. I also went to school for spiritual formation and learned from teachers there. And I’ve had a life and a business coach. All of those roles have been integral to my own formation and have offered a distinct benefit for me in various seasons of my life.

Spiritual direction is not really focused on content. It’s less about theology and more about experience. A spiritual director is not going to teach at least not directly. In fact, it’s quite normal for time with a spiritual director to be spent in a lot of silence. This might be uncomfortable for some people, especially in our Western culture because we’re not accustomed to holding silence for very long. It’s not natural always for some of us to be more contemplative. We’ve been conditioned to think that silence is scary or in silence, something must be wrong.

But the truth is, as Parker Palmer says, “The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting and trustworthy conditions. The soul is like a wild animal, tough, resilient savvy, self-sufficient and yet exceedingly shy.” He says, “If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we’re waiting for may well emerge.” That’s from his book, *Let Your Life Speak*.

And I’d say spiritual direction is kind of like walking quietly into the woods, and a good spiritual director is not leading the way for you, but is walking prayerfully beside you, waiting with you, as you wait for your soul to emerge. Spiritual direction is a counter cultural practice of co-listening for anyone who wants to deepen their awareness of and relationship with God. It allows space for curiosity, discovery and held silence. It’s a space where no one is the expert here where both people submit to the movement of God, where one person listens with rather than talks at.

In its purest form, I believe spiritual direction is our human way of making up for what has been lost. I believe these listening relationships are what we’re actually meant to do for each other, not special circumstances where only some people need help listening for, or paying attention to the spirits movement. No, I think that’s something we all need, but we’re not getting it. Spiritual direction is one answer again. Again, Thomas Merton says, “You don’t go to a spiritual director to take care of your spirit the way you go to a dentist to have him take care of your teeth. The spiritual director is concerned with the whole person.”

The day I meet with my spiritual director for the first time, she welcomes me into her sunroom shattered by clouds but warm with her presence. She has never heard of me or of John, good start. She introduces our time with silence and invites me to close it when I’m ready by saying, “Amen.” She bows her head, she closes her eyes, and I do the same. 10 seconds in and I’m stressed out. Am I taking too long? Am I not taking long enough? How long do most people wait before they say, Amen? The truth is I could sit in silence the entire hour. It’s probably not what most people do, or is it? Then you see the very reason I came to meet with her, shows up right away, I wanted a place free of expectation yet here I am putting all these expectations on myself. After several minutes of fumbling through the silence, I finally say, “Amen.” It wasn’t a perfect silence, but it was a start.

Years have passed since that first meeting and I no longer panic at the held silence that always begins our time together. Now I welcome it, but it’s been a learned practice. I hope this has been helpful introduction

for you into the world of spiritual direction. Here's a short reading from a book called Sacred Companions by David Benner that might help frame it up a little bit more. "Spiritual directors function like guides more than teachers. They accompanied others on the journey, not as experts but as companions. Having escorted others on similar journeys, they're sometimes in a position to offer assistance in selecting the best route. Furthermore, because they know the region where you and they are journeying, they may be able to help you put the journey in perspective to see where you are in terms of where you're going, but the way they best facilitate the learning that's important to the spiritual journey is by continually orienting themselves and you to the spirit."

Thanks for listening to episode 167 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple introduction to spiritual direction can be just one more wrong on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true this is a podcast about making decisions, the deeper truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. This one was a bit longer than our usual episodes, and we only scratch the surface. In episodes to come, I'll share more about how to find a spiritual director, what the benefits have been for me personally, and I'm happy to answer more questions that might come up as a result of this episode. The best place to ask me those questions is going to be on Instagram, where you can find me at @emilypfreeman. This week, I'll have a post to my feed where I'll ask what else you might like to know, and that will be an easy way for me to keep track of your questions. Of course, you can always find me online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also download a transcript of this and every episode.

In closing, here are a few lines from a blessing by John O'Donohue called For Beauty. "As the ocean dreams to the joy of dance, may the grace of change bring you elegance. As clay anchors a tree in light and wind, may your outer life grow from peace within. As twilight pervades the belief of night, may beauty sleep lightly within your heart." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.