



## **298: What I'm Learning as a Spiritual Director**

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 298. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family and through my work I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, in work, and in life. You are enjoying this podcast ad free because of the generous support of subscribers to the Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more and subscribe at [EmilyPFreeman.substack.com](https://EmilyPFreeman.substack.com), where we'll continue the conversation about discernment and decision-making for anyone who wants to move beyond the pro/con list. 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 discerning your next right thing.

Today's question is a continuation of a conversation we started over 100 episodes ago, all about spiritual direction. I mentioned at the beginning of every episode that I serve as a spiritual director, and maybe you've heard that and wondered what it means or what that looks like. Well, I'll answer some of those questions about that today. Listen in.

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About two and a half years ago now, I did an episode called Spiritual Direction for Beginners. I can't even believe it's been that long. It was episode 167. At that time, I had been seeing my own spiritual director for about seven years, and because I would talk about that from time to time, I received a fair amount of questions about spiritual direction. Well, in that episode from March of 2021, I attempted to answer some of the basics of spiritual direction. Of course, you can go back and listen to that episode about what it is, what it isn't, and some commonly asked questions.

But now over two years later, I thought it would be a good time to update the conversation with some things I've learned and practiced since then, mainly because back then I was not meeting one-on-one with directees, but now I am. For many years I've done most of my work from a spiritual direction posture. I talk about that a lot, primarily my writing and in this podcast, and that just means that I think about my work as a spiritual director in many ways, but it doesn't look like the traditional one-to-one spiritual direction. But for the last

year or so, I've added that practice to my body of work, including meeting one-on-one with directees in the more traditional sense of spiritual direction.

And so that of course has enriched my own view of the practice. Now, I won't repeat what I said in episode 167, at least not too much, but I'll share the basics of the basics here as well as in that episode. Ruth Haley Barton writes that "There are 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."

Well, I can relate with that, and like I said before, I met with a spiritual director for the first time nearly 10 years ago. It was in late winter of 2014. At that time, the only thing I had participated in that resembled meeting with a spiritual director was counseling, but I knew that this was different. I didn't have a presenting problem exactly, and I wasn't in crisis particularly. I wasn't looking for solutions, really, coping strategies, accountability, or advice. I was hungry for God, curious about the recent shift in my faith experience, and I wanted to talk about it with someone who wouldn't necessarily provide answers, but a space for me to say words without having to explain myself. In fact, that's probably the only thing I knew for sure. All of the other things I've just shared, I don't know that I would've articulated it then in 2014, but I did know that I wanted a space to be able to say stuff, to say stuff about my walk with God or my lack of walk with God at the time, and know that I wasn't going to have to over-explain or give reasons.

And so I found my way to a spiritual director, a woman recommended to me by a trusted longtime friend who is himself a spiritual director. "She will hold space for you," he said, and when I emailed her to ask if she would be willing to meet with me, she said that too. The common questions people ask who are new to this practice? Well, there are many, but the three that I talked about in episode 167 was number one, what is spiritual direction? Number two, how is it different from, or the same as things I'm familiar with, like pastoral counseling, discipleship counseling, discipleship itself, coaching, mentoring, soul care, therapy, friendship, Bible study, how's it different from those things? And then three, how can I find one? Well, I'm not going to thoroughly answer all of these questions because again, you can listen to episode 167. The answers haven't changed, but I will answer the first one just to give us a baseline if you're new here.

And then I want to share some reflections that I'll add to the conversation. Sometimes when people hear the term spiritual director, there's alarm and confusion because they conjure up images of either a mediator, someone standing between you and God or a fortune-teller, someone working to tell your future in some spiritual type of way. Well, spiritual directors are neither of these things. The work of the spiritual director is not to literally direct a person, but to remain attentive to the spirit of God, both on their behalf and on our own behalf as the director. In its simplest form, a spiritual director is a person who holds prayerful space for someone else. God is the director, and the process of spiritual direction is a practice of helping people become aware of what God might be up to in their lives.

Perhaps you find yourself at a threshold or a crossroads.

You're wondering, where's God? Maybe your image of God has shifted or changed. Maybe you've experienced a season of spiritual dryness or confusion or excitement. Maybe you're sensing something new on the horizon and you want to explore that in God's presence and the presence of another. No matter what may cause your curiosity about spiritual direction, maybe you're looking for some companionship to hold space for you as you consider the changing landscape of your inner life. As I've stood at various thresholds of change, spiritual direction has been one of the most transformative experiences in my own life with God. I define it as a countercultural 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 both people submit to the movement of God and where one person listens without an agenda. It's not always a serious space.

Sometimes people come in and talk about all kinds of things that you might not even imagine, but in its purest form, I believe spiritual direction is our own 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, but it's become a lost art even in well-meaning and healthy faith communities. Well, this episode is not meant to be a history of spiritual direction, but I will say it is not a new practice, though it may be new to you. In fact, it goes all the way back to the desert fathers and mothers and our Catholic friends have been practicing spiritual direction much longer than many of us who are a Protestant. While it's becoming a bit more mainstream among Protestants, it's certainly not a regular part of many Protestant traditions, but spiritual direction is ecumenical in a way that it is not only for one stream of faith or found in one denomination, and in fact, it could be helpful for anyone who is seeking God, but may not even associate with a particular faith tradition.

Well, as a woman who grew up in an evangelical context, I didn't know anything about spiritual direction until well into adulthood, but this practice both as a directee and now as a director, has served to help me learn more about the character of God and the love of God and the patience and playfulness and vastness of God. But of course, we all share our stories, including our definitions of things from our particular social locations, and I share mine as one of a white female Christian living in North Carolina, the United States. Sometimes, especially when we're talking about defining things, I think it's helpful to know where the person who is claiming definitions is coming from. And so that's why I share a little bit of where I sit. I find it's helpful to have images for things that we're trying to understand, and a most helpful image of what I think spiritual direction cultivates for us comes from Parker Palmer.

I repeat this next part often, and so you've probably heard me say it before, but I'll repeat it now again in case you've missed it along the way. In several of his books, but particularly *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer says this, "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. 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 are waiting for may well emerge."

And so the practice of spiritual direction is like walking quietly into the woods. Rather than leading the way for you, a spiritual director as a trained listener who walks prayerfully beside you, waiting with you as you wait for your soul to emerge. You as the directee take the lead, but always within the safe confines of a listening and trustworthy relationship with your director.

Now, I wasn't sure if I would ever offer traditional one-to-one spiritual direction. In fact, as I said before, when I recorded that episode two and a half years ago, I wasn't doing that, but early last year, I decided to accept a limited number of directees and I meet with them now regularly once a month for about an hour per session. Some are in person. Most are online, and of course, confidentiality applies to all our sessions. So I won't be sharing any details about any of my sessions with directees. But what I did want to share here is what more I have discovered as I've offered one-to-one direction, and here are a handful of those things. I've discovered a humility that I can't imagine any other way, to hold space at a most vulnerable and personal time in someone's life, a most sacred space, an image bearer with their God.

This humility for me isn't humiliating, but it brings a smallness that I'm mostly grateful to embody, to hold, and to be. What I've discovered is a great joy in this ministry of presence, holding generous space for fellow journeyers to listen and watch for the movement and mystery of the divine, to in a way have a sort of front row seat to what God might be up to in the life of someone else. I might not always understand it, and they might not either, but here we are open and listening and doing it together. I've discovered an awareness of my own formation, who I am and who I am becoming, my own need for community, direction, and support. I've become aware of my compulsion to help, and I resist it at every turn. This might sound strange because it seems like spiritual direction would help people, and I guess it does, but it's an art form all its own.

And while it may resemble things you're familiar with, like counseling or Christian counseling, discipleship, coaching, mentoring, therapy, friendship, Bible study, it may resemble some of those things, but it is singular in its purpose, and that purpose is not to help, though it may end up being the most helpful of all. Instead, the purpose is to bear witness, to be with, to listen for, and sometimes these things as the director can feel deeply unhelpful, and maybe even as a directee, it feels unhelpful too, but sometimes what someone needs is to enter into a space where the person who is listening to them, to their story, to their questions, whether they be serious or very small, sometimes what that person needs is not helpfulness. It's just presence. And so that's why I say I am aware of my compulsion to help and I resist it at every turn.

Spiritual direction I've discovered is non-transactional. 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."

And then a final thing that I'm learning as a spiritual director is I'm learning the strange healing of silence. Strange, because it is uncommon to think of silence this way, but healing because when you're the one receiving it, if you can manage to work through potential discomfort, it can be quite healing as a directee to have someone else wait for you, to think your thoughts or to feel your feelings without rushing you to a conclusion or an explanation or a summary. And that's not to say that you as a directee might not rush yourself to conclusion, explanation, or summary. I know I've done it as a directee with my director, but a spiritual director is not there for that, and they're willing to wait for you. They will not teach, at least not directly. In fact, it's quite normal for the spiritual director to sit in silence a lot and to hold that silence on your behalf.

I know sometimes in our western culture at least we're not accustomed to holding silence for any amount of time because oftentimes we've been conditioned to think and we've actually experienced that silence can be very scary or it means something is wrong or someone has used silence, maybe even as a weapon against us. But as a spiritual director, I'm learning to cultivate the courage, to hold silence as a gift, knowing that sometimes it's the only response to the experience of another.

Well, I'll close this conversation about what I'm learning as a spiritual director by reading a poem by Derek Walcott called Love After Love. It's a poem I return to, and one I think in some ways offers an image for what spiritual direction could sometimes feel like.

"The time will come when with elation, you will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror, and each will smile at the other's welcome and say, 'Sit here. Eat.' You will love again the stranger who was yourself. Give wine, give bread, give back your heart to itself to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored for another who knows you by heart. Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, the photographs, the desperate notes. Peel your own image from the mirror, sit. Feast on your life."

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Thanks for listening to episode 298 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this continued conversation about spiritual direction can be just one more rung 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 our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman and online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) where you can find a transcript of this in every episode. A special thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound, and to Ashley who does our show notes, and thanks to you for listening. For leaving reviews on Apple podcasts so others can find us here, and for your kind support through email and DMs. It is always good to hear from you. Well, my next book, *How to Walk into A Room* will be my sixth book, but it's the first one I wrote

primarily from the vantage point of a spiritual director.

So if you're hoping to develop the art of knowing when it's good to stay right where you are and when it might be time to walk away, I hope you'll pre-order *How to Walk into a Room* today, wherever you buy your books. It will release on March 12th, 2024. If you've listened to this episode about spiritual direction, but you want to learn more, I've put together a collection of some of my favorite spiritual direction resources. Just go to [emilypfreeman.com/spiritualdirection](http://emilypfreeman.com/spiritualdirection), all one word, and I'll share some of my favorite books, episodes, and resources for finding a spiritual director. The list is free. All you have to do is enter your email and we'll send it to you today. Just go to [emilypfreeman.com/spiritualdirection](http://emilypfreeman.com/spiritualdirection), all one word. Well, in closing, a reminder from Parker Palmer, the soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions. 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 are waiting for may well emerge. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.