

Apprenticeship—One Model for Spiritual Direction

By William Ryan

The December 2005 article in *Presence*, "Witnessing the Emergence of a Split in Spiritual Direction," (Schulte, *Presence*, p. 6) highlights the ongoing attempt to define the growing discipline of spiritual direction. Rather than a split, I observe that spiritual direction always has been a multi-modal, multi-polar field. This article outlines spiritual direction as a form of apprenticeship in teaching and guidance in apophatic contemplative spiritual praxis.

Spiritual Direction as Training in Praxis

Benedicta Ward, in "Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers," quotes Abba Antony, "this conviction, that the kingdom of God is to be discovered in the human heart lies at the centre of the spiritual teaching of the desert. ... The whole of life of the monks was a training, not a search for 'illumination', but a training, an ascesis, both for and in the life of the kingdom of God" (Byrne, p. 3).

Both training and ascesis connote that learning and full consecration of the human soul to the process of inner communion with the Divine is the core of the mystic path in Christianity and arguably every other mystic path. Indeed, the root meaning of the word "monk" is *monos*, to be singular, undivided. To grow into the undivided life and the full consecration of the soul or consciousness to communion with the Divine, we must of necessity commit to a life-long spiritual praxis (to actualize, to bring forth or to express what is already true.) One might say that the central message of the teaching of Yeshua is to proclaim that God is accessible, self-offering love, and the task of the human spiritual

journey is to become accessible to the Divine in a conscious and intentional way. His revolution is to point to his heart in each of us and say, "the real temple is here, not the stone building on the hill."

To be a seeker is to be a disciple of the way, to be as the Beloved Disciple, resting one's cheek on the breast of Christ, and attending to the heartbeat of Christ in one's own heart, "the gateway to the Center of All" (Main, p.29). This image of the Beloved Disciple is a metaphor for the contemplative spiritual journey, but it doesn't reflect efforts of asceticism and training in consecrated attention and intention over the course of a lifetime. Ancient seekers of the desert tradition apprenticed themselves to spiritual elders to be trained and guided in praxis of the way.

Like many mystic writers, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* teaches that at the center of our own being is God's being, and we enjoy an ontological union with the Divine from the beginning. (Johnston, p. 13) This ontological union can be dormant or unrealized unless the spiritual faculties of awareness and will are brought to full development. Such development means that consecrated (given to God) awareness becomes ceaseless presence and adoration, and consecrated will or willingness becomes ceaseless self-offering and surrender in love. This growth in one's life, realizing the kingdom within, requires full learning and dedication to a life-long praxis. For most, an apprenticeship is the way such an asceticism can be learned best.

Transmission and Lineage

Transmission and lineage are foundational in learning spiritual praxis in Eastern spiritual traditions. Transmission is the gift given between teacher and student, including the insights and transformation each receives as spiritual growth and receptiveness allows. Transmission in the Christian tradition occurs in two ways. First is the sum of the teacher's instruction and experience, guidance in providing safe intensive practice environments, and cultivating a safe sanctuary space (where the soul's wounds and illusions can be laid bare). The second transmission is more esoteric but no less true. It happens when least expected, in an unfiltered moment, or a glance when the student receives the light of Christ exposed in utter loving kindness in the teacher's eyes, presence, or behavior.

Lineage arises from all those souls in the spiritual traditions, formally recognized or not, who have transmitted this same praxis and light in the past or the present. Lineage in spiritual praxis rarely has had recognition in a Christian context, except to a limited degree in the Eastern Christian monastic traditions of the staretz. Both lineage and transmission may find healthy expression in the newly emerging, lay led, Western spiritual traditions.

Apprenticeship as Formation in Spiritual Praxis

A person who desires an apprenticeship in spiritual direction is seeking either training in a spiritual discipline, or wanting to teach and guide others in a spiritual praxis.

Elements of the former are examined next in this article. Then elements of the latter are discussed.

John of the Cross and other mystics have said that seekers who come to an impasse using cataphatic practices may come to seek the imageless way of apophatic prayer. The Desert abbas and ammas had a simple formulation: thinking about God in the prayer of the mind, speaking to God with the prayer of the lips, and abiding in God beyond concepts and images in the prayer of the heart. (Thompson, p.47) The point is seekers simply become given to their longing as the conceptually based practices wane. The contemplative way is natural to us therefore, and has important precedent and a body of teaching in the tradition, from the earliest centuries of the Christian movement and before.

Typically persons seeking to learn meditation or contemplation also have a great longing for it and possibly have dabbled in methods of meditation. Often they report floundering, either because of lack of direction, coherent teaching, or adequate accountability and support. Personally, I only accept directees who have developed, or are attempting, a daily disciplined practice of apophatic meditation or contemplative prayer. Important elements in this praxis apprenticeship process include commitment, teaching, support and guidance, intensive/retreat experience, and termination.

Directees commit several months of frequent sessions to learn the basics of developing a daily practice. They also commit to daily contemplation, regular sessions with the

director, and integrating the teaching and guidance received. Additionally, the teacher commits to scheduled appointments and being on-call for support or guidance as questions or concerns arise. Both commit to a set of ethical standards to preserve the sanctuary and sacredness of the relationship.

The director provides an incremental set of teachings with written enrichment materials in the methodology, theological foundations, and ethical commitments involved in the daily development and growth in meditation praxis. The student is asked to engage in implementing these in daily life and to use the sessions to report on the experiences with the praxis. Such experiences generally involve both spiritual and psychological challenges and consolations. The direction sessions are a space for processing those experiences and giving further teaching.

The apprenticeship process involves helping students learn to focus awareness on the interior life, to harmonize mind and emotion with the life of interior communion with the Divine, to make conscious the choices of the soul, to observe the arising of dark and unhealed places in the soul, and to offer them to the light of Christ's healing. This process of inner transformation can expose pain and vulnerability in unknown ways. For this reason, diligent support and continual guidance in soul work is an absolute necessity. On-call availability is essential, and sessions must be focused, fruitful, and cover crucial areas. The teacher also helps the student arrive at a daily rule of life to structure contemplative praxis. As the student progresses, a written covenant or formulation of this

daily rule of life is shared and becomes the basis of accountability as well as an objective yardstick of faithfulness.

Over time, the teacher assists the trainee arrange intensive retreat experiences either at home or in a retreat setting where deeper growth and practice can occur. The teacher is available for consultation during such times too.

The length of apprenticeship is not fixed as a rule. When directees believes they have received the training they want for the time being and want to terminate, then that is the time of closure. In like manner, the teacher may discern that the student should seek another guide or that the time of learning for the present is finished. Apprenticeship can go on indefinitely as long as both parties discern the process to be fruitful for the directee, and the director is willing to provide guidance and support.

Apprenticeship as Training in Teaching Spiritual Praxis

Candidates for apprenticeship in teaching and guidance in Prayer of the Heart need many years of experience; demonstrated growth, insight, and maturity in integrating spiritual discipline; and some formal training in spiritual direction or ministry. To date all candidates who have completed our program have had prior training in spiritual direction and ministry.

Stated simply, the goal of the teaching apprenticeship is liberation—to be fully given to the consecrated life of inner communion with God in Prayer of the Heart and having

acquired the growth and skills necessary, is graced to transmit that the same teaching of consecrated life to others who wish to receive and live it.

This apprenticeship requires maturity in Prayer of the Heart such that one is willing and able to assume full responsibility for one's spiritual practice. The apprentice also must attain autonomy and fruitfulness in that practice and acquire the skills and grace to be a guide to others. Autonomy in practice means one is able to sustain that spiritual discipline and continue the transformative life of communion with God without the presence of a human guide or a supportive community.

While human guides and supportive communities of practice are welcome and helpful, frequently in the life of the contemplative these are not present. Indeed, there may be antipathy and criticism from others actively attempting to undermine one's desire to realize the consecrated life. The practitioner relies on the interior life of communion with God and is willing to stand alone to cultivate the consecrated life. Acceptance of full responsibility for the state of one's relational life in God is essential for those who are serious devotees of the Prayer of the Heart way.

The teacher-student relationship in the teaching apprenticeship is paramount and sacrosanct. Its purpose is to cultivate the necessary commitment and sanctuary for a transmission of this ancient spiritual praxis to take place. This relationship encourages such growth, knowledge, and skills that the teacher trainee is then able to transmit this praxis to others. It is temporary, existing for the purpose of this transmission. In this

relationship, the student gives permission for the teacher bring the fullness of Prayer of the Heart practice into the student's inner life so that transformation can occur. The teacher gives permission to the student to ask for ongoing guidance and support necessary for growth. The student and the teacher are both free at any time to terminate. The ethical guidelines and boundaries of a spiritual direction relationship extend to this relationship as well.

Teaching apprenticeship in the Christian Prayer of the Heart tradition has its own characteristics. Apprenticeship in some spiritual traditions of the non-Christian East may involve a measure of personal surrender, perhaps life-long, to the teacher, guru, or master. In contrast, the true or ultimate teacher in the Christian Prayer of the Heart tradition is Christ, and the act of life-long surrender or consecration is directed to him alone. At best, the teacher is a spiritual elder, walking for a time with the student on the journey into consecrated life in Christ and transmitting how to offer this same way to others.

A spiritual apprenticeship should not be entered into lightly. Like a sacred covenant, both the teacher and student assume intrinsic and important responsibilities necessary to create the sanctuary for transmission to take place. The student commits to:

- A relationship of openness and transparency in communicating those dimensions of the inner life that are related to Prayer of the Heart practice.

- A relationship of trust and respect towards the teacher and the teaching. This does not mean that questions or doubts should not be processed. Rather the trust and respect extends to addressing in openness those doubts and questions.
- Daily, faithful practice of the Prayer of the Heart in both formal, silent sitting and every-moment practice of consecrated life. The student agrees to accept admonishment and encouragement regarding the faithfulness and intensity of that practice.
- Participate in intensive retreat experiences.
- Weekly contact with the teacher.
- Service to the teacher's ministry and to development of a personal ministry during the tenure of the apprenticeship.
- Accept guidance and supervision and to render service and guidance to others as able and called in grace.
- Leading an ethical life based on a reverence for all life in unitive love and a life devoted to transformation in the love of Christ in all things.

The teacher commits to:

- A relationship of reverence and respect for the student devoted to the student's well being and those whom the student may serve.
- Uphold an ethical life and a life devoted to transformation in the love of Christ, worthy of emulation for one in training to be a teacher of Prayer of the Heart.
- Being accessible for ongoing communication and to give such support and guidance as is needed during formation.

- Weekly contact with the student for purposes of providing guidance in their practice, further communication of teachings, and supervision for service they are providing to others in Prayer of the Heart.
- Providing the structure, content, and ongoing evaluation necessary for the student's continued growth in the apprenticeship relationship.

These commitments are not exclusive but are the foundation for the apprenticeship experience. Other commitments can be expressed and formally brought into the covenant of this relationship.

Transmission in the Teaching Apprenticeship

In the Christian tradition of Prayer of the Heart, the true transmission and the one who transmits is Christ. In the apprenticeship, there is an attempt to be conscious and intentional in being vehicles of this transmission. But how does transmission happen in this relationship?

Transmission happens in a formal way in the teachings of the Prayer of the Heart tradition, through the earthen vessels of our humanity, lens of our personality, depth of spiritual training, and extent of life experience. It is articulated through the life experience and insight of the teacher and received by the student as the vessel of transmission containing the light of Christ incarnate and the communal insights and experiences of those who have gone before, including those of the teacher. This teaching must be assimilated experientially and made one in the life and practice of the student.

God will work a "new thing" in the student through those teachings. The essence of the teachings is being incarnated and lived uniquely by the student according to the student's own insight and life experience. Sometimes, we may become aware of the uncreated light of Christ spontaneously transmitted without filter or intermediating vessel as action of grace and our own receptivity.

The teacher's verbal and non-verbal communications, behavior, presence, and loving kindness are all dimensions of transmission. At the same time, the teacher is fully human and capable of flaws and mistakes, but these do not stand against the validity of the transmission. The power of the teacher's transmission is the sharing of the light of Christ as experienced through the life and praxis of Prayer of the Heart. Over time, the student is able to cultivate the same praxis of inner communion and make it their core commitment in life. Each day, the student works to make the spiritual life their own living bread; so over time, each may be consecrated into the body and blood of Christ in the divinized flesh and psyche of their humanity. This is the true measure of transmission.

Topics discussed in teaching apprenticeship training include: Entering the Teacher-Student Relationship; Initiation into Prayer of the Heart Practice; Maturation in the Disciplines of Daily Practice; Cultivating Devotional Love; Support and Guidance in Ethical Formation and Behavioral Change; Mental Health Concerns; Commitment to a Rule of Life- See Rule of Life; Liturgical/Devotional Expression; Work and Daily Practice; The Formation of Communities of Practice; Ascesis of Love vs. Attainment Model of Spiritual Growth; Projection in Guidance in Prayer of the Heart; Leading Day

and Weekend Retreats; Leading Intensive Retreats; Guidance and Support in Transformative Movements; Guidance and Support in Unitive Experience; The Mountain Top in the World-Integration in the Horizontal Dimension; Ethical Boundaries and Responsibilities in Spiritual Guidance in Prayer of the Heart Praxis; Ceaseless Practice, Ceaseless Growth, and Conversion in Consecrated Love.

It is customary for students in teaching apprenticeships to contribute to the ministry and livelihood of a spiritual teacher. I do not require such assistance and believe that asking a fee is not in harmony with the nature of transmission or the teaching apprenticeship calling. I do ask that the student contribute to the Prayer of the Heart ministry with volunteer service in a way that is compatible and agreeable with teacher and student. This also serves as an internship training experience for the student. By contrast, a spiritual direction fee is usually asked of directees who have entered into non-teaching apprenticeships.

The teaching apprenticeship training takes generally two years. Completion of the apprenticeship does not happen on a specific timetable but when the aforementioned goals of growth and skill learning have been accomplished. A ritual of completion allows participants to celebrate and recognize the growth of the trainee and the completion of training. We recite a litany of transmission of the light of Christ, invoking the names of a lineage of souls in both the Eastern and Western Christian contemplative traditions who have transmitted the light of Christ in this praxis. Finally, the trainee's written vows of practice and service are placed on the altar, witnessed by the teacher, and ratified by

placing a prayer shawl on the shoulders of the trainee by the teacher. In this way, the teacher recognizes the trainee's completion of training, vowed commitment, and assuming the responsibilities of a new ministry. The liturgy concludes in the devotional chanting of the Jesus Prayer.

Upon successful completion, the teacher recognizes the autonomy of the trainee to serve others as a teacher and guide in Prayer of the Heart practice. That autonomy means the graduate is now fully responsible for the teaching and spiritual work they do in guiding others in Prayer of the Heart. That responsibility means a full acceptance of the mistakes that are made and the need for ongoing conversion and deepening practice and commitment to transformation as central to ceaseless growth in the consecrated life of Prayer of the Heart.

Summary

More than ever, we have before us the task of the healing the soul of humankind, the transformation of human consciousness. The alternative may be the destruction of the planet, its ecological systems of life, and all its creatures by destructive forces unleashed by extremist fundamentalist religion. Armed with weapons of mass death and political power throughout the globe, and fired by end-of-world cataclysmic visions of clashing polarities, all of God's creation stand at great risk from the violence of unhealed, religion-inspired, fear and hatred and disregard for the planet's ecosystems.

Humankind stands in desperate need of the unitive experience and insight that the mystic path can bring. All of us need to know our belonging in the great circle of ultimate reality, the divine beloved, the breath of all breath, who is our true life. This is especially so for Christians. We need to know that the great leap into the heart of Christ is a leap into heart of the universe. The great twentieth century theologian Karl Rahner asserted, "The future Christian will be a mystic, or he or she will not be at all. ... (Christian Living Today., p. 15) The same may be said for all human beings of all or no faith affiliation. The mystic path is not for special people in cloisters; it is the rightful and needed inheritance of all.

In the vineyard of spiritual work, we can bring forth the consecrated wine of communion with divine, and in so doing, make possible for all to find belonging in the one source that Yeshua calls Allaha (Aramaic), the Jews call Ela, the Muslims know as Allah. This root word for the Divine from the Abrahamic faiths points to the essential unity from which all things arise. (Douglas-Klotz, p.27) This, our one circle of belonging, is known by countless other names throughout time by the peoples of our planet, an infinite circle, that the Buddhists recognize as Dharmakaya, the Hindus know as Brahmin, and the indigenous people of the American plains know as Wakan Tanka. May we all take heart and hope in this mystic vision given to us by the Oglala Sioux medicine man, Black Elk. He received this vision for all ages at the age of nine, before the tragic invasion of the white European:

"Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like One Being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one Circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy" (Neihardt p 33.).

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