

NOT THE SAME?: Online Spiritual Direction, Supervision, and Training

By John R. Mabry, PhD

“Online spiritual direction?” Karen said, with a horrified look on her face. “Oh, I could never do *that*.”

We were catching up after a meeting, and I had mentioned the work that I was doing with one of my clients via email. “Why not?” I asked, a little playfully.

But I knew “why not.” This was the same response I got from many colleagues whenever this particular subject was addressed—shock and mild revulsion. And the reasons for this antipathy are usually the same—the diminished intimacy, the lack of information (especially body language), but more than anything else, the attachment that we all feel to the familiar.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she said after a few moments of consideration.

She’s right. Online spiritual direction isn’t the same. But it has arrived, it isn’t going away, and the ministry of spiritual direction will never be the same, either.

Online Spiritual Direction

Spiritual Direction via Chat Rooms. I’ve been doing online spiritual direction in one form or another almost as long as humans have been going online. My first

experience of this was an online spiritual ritual group called the Online Celebration Circle. We met in an AOL chat room in the mid-1990s, at 6pm on Tuesday nights twice per month. As many as twenty of us and as few as three or four, we came from all parts of the United States, and using Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* as a lectionary, we met for ritual, prayer, and spiritual discernment around the themes presented in Fox's book.

This was the online counterpart of a real-world ritual group I also organized, called the Berkeley Celebration Circle. So even back then, in the primitive chat-room era, I was comparing real-world experiences with their digital analogs. What I discovered was enlightening, and has guided all of my subsequent online ministry endeavors: it wasn't the same, but it was valuable.

If my evaluation of the Online Celebration Circle was dependent upon how closely it conformed to the experience of participating in the Berkeley Celebration Circle, then it was an unmitigated failure. The experience was very, very different. Gone were the dances, the smiles, the shimmer of the tears in candlelight, the sound of sighings too deep for words.

In its place was a single candle on my desk before my computer and whatever light classical or new age music I happened to have on the CD player for atmosphere, and the scrolling lines of text that appeared in the little window on my screen.

So no, not the same, by any means. Yet, what about the content of those scrolling lines of text? What did they reveal? They connected me with real people, usually far away from Berkeley, California—Jewish Megan in upstate New York, Willa in Minneapolis, catechist for the Polish National Catholic Church, Wiccan Fanny in Illinois, and many, many others over the couple of years that we met. We celebrated themes that had real impact on our lives and our spirituality. We shared intimate details, confessed struggles and doubts, solicited advice and theological opinions, challenged each other, disagreed with each other, edified and encouraged each other. We made community. We grew as human beings. We grew spiritually.

Was it the same as the Berkeley ritual group? No. Was it valuable in its own right? Absolutely. Any anyone who was a part of it would agree—it was important to us, it stretched us, it connected us to one another and to the Divine. A couple of years later, as I was touring the East Coast in support of my first book, I stayed with Megan and her husband. We had never met before face-to-face, but we were already good friends. Our connection was real, even when we crossed the digital-to-analog barrier.

My dear friend Lawson Barnes defines *worship* as “any activity that helps us to connect—to our deepest selves, to one another, to God.” By this definition, the Online Celebration Circle was an authentic worship experience. My own definition of *spiritual guidance* is “facilitating the deepening of one’s intimacy with the Divine.” As a leader of spiritual direction groups, I believe the Online Celebration Circle

succeeded in facilitating its members' intimacy with the Divine and with one another. Different? Yes. Successful? Yes.

Spiritual Direction via Email. Not long after completing my training in spiritual direction at the Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, I received an email request from Jane, a woman in New Orleans looking for a spiritual director. She had stumbled upon my website and was wondering if I would consider taking her on as a client and working via email. As you might expect, I found this a novel and exciting prospect.

The history of epistolary spiritual direction is long, well-honored, and well-attested. The letters of Paul to the churches under his care are the earliest examples in the Christian tradition, but the examples since then are too numerous to name, so successful is this medium of spiritual guidance. The use of email is no different, except that the time that elapses between exchanges is almost non-existent.

The strategy Jane and I settled upon was as follows: early in a given month, she would write me one substantive letter, and would email it to me. I would read that letter, and then sit with it for a week before responding. At the end of the week, I would write her a substantive reply. She would then read that and sit with it for a week before writing me again. I, in turn, would read and reflect for a week before my response.

Thus, every month she would write two letters, and I would respond with two letters, each with a week of reflection between the reading and the response. And every month, she would send me a check equal to my normal fee for one hour of direction.

It worked very well indeed. The week in between responses provided virtual “contemplative space” in which to discern the Voice of the Divine and to carefully consider how to reply. I learned that greater personal sharing on my part was necessary to establish the same level of intimacy that I was able to achieve in face-to-face sessions, and after a while I found the proper place to set those boundaries in this medium. While we are on the subject of boundaries, I should mention that the letters never took me more than a half hour to write, so my time was appropriately used and compensated. And real connection happened, real discernment was done, real growth occurred. The same? Hardly. Valuable? Very.

Not long after, I got another request from a woman in Wisconsin for email direction. We tried it for a while, but it was a very different relationship, and due to a great deal of resistance, the email medium was not as effective. We switched to using the telephone after several months of trying email, and had a much more fruitful experience. My client in New Orleans, however? It is nearly ten years later now, and we are still “meeting” via email.

Spiritual Direction via Instant Messaging. I have not attempted spiritual direction via I/M (instant messaging) so I cannot report as to its effectiveness first-hand. My opinion is that when it is used via a small hand-held device such as a cell phone, the length of exchange and the inconvenience of typing long strings of text with one's thumbs make it an unruly medium for serious spiritual direction. However, when it is used at a full-sized keyboard, where typing can be done quickly and longer strings of text do not become burdensome, that it could work very well. The Online Celebration Circle used a very similar technology, and if it worked in a group context, I see no reason why it could not be similarly effective for one-to-one sessions.

Group Spiritual Direction via listserv or facebook. A listserv or facebook page set up specifically for the purpose of spiritual discernment and mutual spiritual support can work very well, allowing a non-synchronous (people don't have to be present online at the same time) environment for reflection and sharing.

Advantages are that people can take as long as they need for contemplation, posting when things are "ripe" for sharing, and allowing multiple conversation "threads" at one time to develop and unfold. Also, members can share items for prayer or discernment in real-time, as they occur, without having to wait until the next in-person meeting.

If someone needs support immediately, all he or she need do is post—within minutes other group members will reach out, acknowledging their comprehension and concern, assuring the member in crisis that they are praying for him or her, offering emotional support and asking what else they might do.

A disadvantage to this kind of group is that members can easily get off-topic, or can respond to one another unkindly. Thus it requires a moderator with strong boundaries to make sure the group stays on-topic and to filter out extraneous and inappropriate messages, especially amongst groups that are “open” to anyone who wants to join.

When well-managed, such groups can effectively build spiritual community and intimacy, especially in “closed” groups where real trust can be built among people who come to know one another and can be accountable to one another. The same as in in-person spiritual direction group? No. Valuable? Very.

Spiritual Direction via Skype. The single greatest advance for those of us interested in doing spiritual direction online is Skype. Skype is a free program (downloadable from www.skype.com) that runs on any platform, sets up quickly and easily, and allows one to speak to anyone else running Skype anywhere in the world. But Skype is more than simply a free-world wide telephone service—Skype allows you to *see* the person you are speaking to, as well.

I have a large, 27-inch iMac, which is perfect for Skype. The camera and microphone are built-in, so all I have to do is call up the program and call someone. When the connection is made, her face fills my computer screen, a little larger than real-life.

And there she is. I see her in her own environment. I see every facial feature, every reaction, every twitch, whether she leans in or leans back, crosses her arms, smiles, frowns, or wrinkles her nose.

I have to admit, the immediacy was a little hard to get used to. Her face is *huge*, about a foot and a half from my eyes. If we were face-to-face and she appeared that large, she would either be a giant or our knees would be touching. I had to do some internal adjustment in order to avoid the irrational feeling of having my personal space invaded.

Granted, this will not be a problem for people with smaller screens! And when I am in my office at the church and working on my laptop, this problem vanishes. Still, I mention it only because it was the most uncomfortable adjustment I had to make with Skype. The problem was too much intimacy, more than one is comfortable with in face-to-face settings. And with the advent of Skype, the main objections to online spiritual direction vanish in a puff of smoke.

Using Skype is almost identical to being in the same room with someone. They are there before you, life-sized (or even larger), body language on full display,

responding to you in real time, talking normally. The intimacy and response that one is used to in face-to-face sessions is actually possible. The same? Well...yes, actually. Valuable? Infinitely. Here's why....

Skype opens up the world of spiritual direction because it makes geography irrelevant. I can build up a lively spiritual direction practice even if I live on a remote farm in North Dakota, because I can meet with my clients "face-to-face" via Skype whether they live in Mexico, Florida, Moscow, or Sao Paulo. Location becomes a non-issue. If the internet is the great equalizer for business, Skype is the great equalizer for spiritual direction. Anyone can do it, *anywhere*. And nothing that one values about the face-to-face session is lost.

The business side of things is equally easy. Since you can set up a paypal account if you have five minutes and a credit card, receiving payment for your services from around the world is a snap.

I have several clients whom I see via Skype, and it works perfectly. Some clients live at such a distance that when they are in my area for other matters they will schedule an in-person meeting, but then we will meet via Skype on months that do not bring them to my city. Others meet with me only via Skype. I find this way of working every bit as valuable and satisfying as actually meeting in person.

There are even advantages to it: I need not rent an office, I need not burn fossil fuels to get to said office, nor endanger myself on the road. And if I am working at home, is that my jammies under my sweater? Have I showered? My wife may complain that I reek, but my clients need never know.

Online Supervision

The Interfaith Spiritual Direction Certificate Program at the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry is an 18-month, low-residency program based in Berkeley. Because we only meet quarterly, for a week at a time, we have students from all over the United States. After the second week of instruction, students are required to begin to see clients in an unpaid capacity, one session per month for the first six months (one client), two sessions per month for the next six months (two clients).

As director of this program, it is my responsibility to ensure the quality of our instruction, and this includes requiring that our students have adequate supervision. They are invited to seek out trained supervisors in their own areas, but because many of them have difficulty finding local supervisors who are comfortable working in an interfaith context, they often turn to one of our instructors for supervision. When we live in Berkeley and the student lives in Nebraska, this would have been problematic in an earlier time.

It used to be that I would work with such students by telephone—far from ideal. With the advent of Skype, however, working with these students is as easy as working with anyone in a face-to-face context. I am confident that my Skype supervisees are getting the same quality of care that my in-person clients receive, and they enjoy working in this medium as well. The same? Very nearly so. Valuable? Since several of our students would not be able to find adequate supervision without it, absolutely.

Online Training

For many, the idea that you can train people to do spiritual direction online is even more abhorrent than the notion of *doing* spiritual direction online. But at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology we are forging a new model of training that is doing just that. As associate director of the program, I advise students, help plan curriculum, and teach several of the classes.

Like the Chaplaincy Institute program, the ITP program is low-residency, requiring students to attend a week of face-to-face instruction every quarter. Unlike the Chaplaincy Institute program, however, ITP is offering not just a certificate in spiritual direction, but an accredited Master's degree in Interfaith Spiritual Guidance, so the instruction continues over two years.

At face-to-face meetings, students build community with their instructors and student cohort. These weeks are intensive programmatically, engaging students

from early in the day to late in the evening, not wasting a single moment of precious in-person time. During these intensives, they are introduced to foundational spiritual guidance concepts, and begin to develop their listening and discernment skills in dyads and triads.

Between face-to-face meetings, students are engaged as full time students in online classes. These expand upon the theory and practice they received in the intensives, introducing increasingly advanced concepts, and offering opportunity to interact with fellow students and instructors via the ANGEL web-based learning platform, its online message boards, and email. In addition, they are continuing their dyad work, practicing their new spiritual direction skills with one another via Skype.

As instruction proceeds, student advising is conducted via telephone and email, and instructors stay in touch with one another via email. Eventually, when students are ready to begin their internship, meeting with clients gratis as they begin to hone their skills in real-world contexts, they will be encouraged to do so in a face-to-face context where they live, and to be supervised locally. However, if students wish it, they may see clients who are not local via Skype and be supervised by Skype as well.

At first, we weren't sure whether students would warm to an online master's program in spiritual guidance. We figured we would need at least six students in order to make the program viable, and as we advertised early this year for our first cohort, we crossed our fingers and prayed. Imagine our delight when, as our first in-

person intensive met, we had twelve students enrolled in the master's program and six more adding a certificate in spiritual guidance to their masters program in Women's Spirituality. Eighteen students was beyond our wildest expectations, and although we have had to do some on-the-fly adjustment during our first quarter, all is going very well indeed. Is it the same as a completely face-to-face training program? Not at all. Is it valuable? If the student evaluations of our first quarter of instruction are any indication, it is very valuable indeed.

The Chaplaincy Institute and ITP graduates represent a new, emerging generation of spiritual directors who are comfortable with technology—if they aren't when they begin their instruction, they will be by the time they are finished! They will not be limited by geography when seeking clients, but will be available to the world. Furthermore, their creative insights and ease with technology will take this ministry into places we cannot envision today (and might be horrified by if they were suggested).

Conclusion

The chief advantage of online spiritual direction is the irrelevancy of place. It means that people in the most remote areas can find spiritual guidance with a director who is a good fit. The "Seek and Find" online spiritual director finder at the Spiritual Directors International website (www.sdiworld.org) lists directors by region, but will also allow seekers to search by criteria such as religious orientation or

affiliation. It also means that those who find it difficult to find spiritual community resonant with them can participate in discernment groups that nurture them.

Online direction is a boon not only for lay people searching for appropriate directors or groups, but for those in professional ministry as well. One of the biggest problems for ministers is isolation. Clergy and other religious professionals often have difficulty finding support or spiritual guidance. It may be that they are working in rural areas or overseas, and the only access to spiritual direction they have are with those of another culture or with different theological assumptions. Online spiritual direction can help such people find the support they need, in terms of spiritual guidance, supervision, or support groups.

Online direction is good not just for clients, but for those of us who offer the ministry. Because it frees us as to location, people can build healthy practices no matter where they live. It means that those with no access to training programs can receive training. It also means that skilled and appropriate supervision is always available.

Spiritual direction, like worship, is about fostering connection between the seeker and the Divine. Online media connect people in authentic and practical ways that are unprecedented in human history. The idea that technology is antithetical to authentic spiritual discernment, or is somehow “anti-spiritual” in nature is a culturally-based assumption. The Gen-X spiritual directors we are training today,

and the Millennial generation who will be coming along for training in about ten years take this technology for granted. It is already part of their lives. It is increasingly how people are being educated. It will increasingly be the way in which people offer spiritual guidance to one another as well.

Is it the same? In some ways yes, in some ways no. Is it valuable? To paraphrase Gamaliel (Acts 5:38-39), if it isn't, it will wither. If it is, it will thrive. My money is on the thriving.

BIO

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Reading of the Tao Te Ching; Heretics, Mystics & Misfits; and Crisis and Communion: The Remythologization of the Eucharist. He lives near Berkeley, California, where he maintains an active private practice in spiritual guidance, specializing in Gen-X spirituality, those on alternative spiritual paths, and those in recovery from spiritual and religious abuse.