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Not-knowing in Spiritual Direction: Reflections on Social Identity

I love the adventure of a new spiritual direction relationship. I love watching the relationship unfold as I surrender to the mystery of *not-knowing* this other person or God's intentions for us as spiritual companions. However, as much as I love the organic, intuitive nature of Christian spiritual direction, I also believe spiritual directors can benefit from critical reflection on the process. Recently I focused a critical eye on the practice of not-knowing, setting aside assumptions about an individual or our relationship. The practice of not-knowing does not eliminate our need to educate ourselves in ways that enable us to work with people who have different backgrounds and experiences. In fact, I wondered if more intentional awareness of differences would help me be more fully present and free from judgment in spiritual direction.

Growing interest in contextual approaches to spiritual direction is evident in the proliferation of essays in Spiritual Directors International publications such as the edited volume, *Spiritual Direction in Context* (Wagner), as well as articles in *Presence* on the diversity of people seeking spiritual guidance, such as "Companioning People with Dementia" (Hansen, Mabry, & Williams); "An Experience of Doing Spiritual Direction with Poor Hispanic Women" (Hernandez-Fornaguera) and "Spiritual Direction and Encounters with the Marginalized" (Harris). Attentiveness to the unique aspects of each directee is one way to enhance our ability to be in relationship with people who are different from us. Taking into account our own biases is another aspect of the process. William Barry and William Connolly note in their classic text on spiritual direction that "spiritual directors, like everyone else, are all so enmeshed in and part of the cultural, social, political, and religious mores and institutions of society and various sub-

societies that they are unconsciously their agents and, so, prone to want to protect them from threat or aberration. The totally unbiased spiritual director is a chimaera, of course” (129). Given that bias is present in the spiritual direction relationship, recognizing the “elephant in the room” of our consciousness may prevent bias from undermining our practice of not-knowing.

Spiritual directors have drawn on the wisdom of the pastoral care and psychological counseling traditions for years (e.g., Hamilton-Poore & Sullender; May). Our colleagues have been attentive to bias in spiritual care relationships, and their insights are helpful for us. Psychologist Pamela Hays echoes my concern: “To avoid making inaccurate assumptions about their clients, therapists may decide that the best approach is to assume nothing...The idea that one can ‘turn off’ preconceptions about groups of people is appealing. However, given the subtle and pervasive nature of our assumptions, such control is extremely difficult if not impossible. What is more likely to occur when one attempts to ignore the presence of assumptions is decreased awareness that one is making them” (22-23).

At one time, spiritual directors may have “run the risk of gathering around them a small coterie of people, all of the same social class, race, education, milieu, and religious denomination” (Barry & Connolly, 195), but this is not as likely today. Self-reflection becomes particularly important in a multicultural context where we partner with people from backgrounds and experiences that differ widely from our own. When spiritual directors hold positions of privilege because we are part of a dominant social group, our experiences, values, and assumptions may limit our ability to fully engage with a directee or listen without judgment for and with a directee. Hays notes: “We all have our own unique identities and experiences, and consequently the areas in which we hold privilege vary. In general, though, these privileged areas are often those in which we hold the least awareness. The challenge then is to recognize

our areas of privilege and commit ourselves to the extra work that is required to fill in our knowledge gaps” (36).

In this article, I offer one approach to reflection on social identity that may enhance awareness of our potential to judge or disengage from people who seek companionship on their spiritual journeys. By judgment, I mean disapproval based on perceived differences in social identity or values. Judgment can create impermeable barriers between director and directee. Disengagement refers to emotional distance or withdrawal from a person because of perceived differences. Although disengagement suggests a more neutral emotional state, it can have a negative effect on a spiritual direction relationship.

The SHARES Reflective Process

I developed the SHARES reflection process from a similar model designed for psychologists (Hays’ ADDRESSING model). The SHARES acronym should be easy for spiritual directors to remember: it is in the process of sharing between director and directee that we discover the similarities and differences between us. The SHARES model prompts us to reflect on our

S – Sexual orientation and gender

H – Health

A – Age and generational influences

R – Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices

E – Ethnicity, national origin, and racial identity

S – Socioeconomic status

I began my SHARES reflective process by constructing a genogram, or family tree, to help me think about my cultural, historical, and family influences. Psychological and pastoral counseling professionals often use genograms for reflective work on family and cultural influences (e.g., Ellenwood & Snyders; Lim; Pargament). On my genogram, which included seven generations along some family lines, I noted information relevant to the dimensions of my social identity, including countries of origin, dates of immigration to the United States, religious affiliations, instances of marriage and divorce, experiences of mental or physical impairment or substance abuse, and levels of formal education.

Patterns emerged within my family tree, and I created a simple four-column worksheet to record my reflections, which included:

- (1) Dimensions of social identity (SHARES)
- (2) The ways in which I may hold social privilege by being a member of a dominant social group or by having access to knowledge or experience that affords me a privileged position relative to a directee. I used (+) to indicate positions of privilege and (-) to indicate areas in which I do not hold privilege.
- (3) Values I hold because of my cultural, historical, and familial influences, as well as values I hold as a result of other personal experiences.
- (4) Ways in which I have the potential to become disengaged from or pass judgment on directees because of my values or social privileges.

Table 1 summarizes the notes I made during my reflective process. I elaborate further on each dimension of social identity and illustrate my reflective process in the following sections.

As I considered each dimension of my identity, I tried to focus on values and areas of potential judgment or disengagement specifically within the context of spiritual direction. A

similar exercise focused on raising children or teaching students at a secular university might yield different results. I asked myself questions such as: How have my experiences and family history shaped my values in this area? How comfortable am I being present to someone who values this differently? Hays reminds us that “privilege is contextual: A privileged identity in one cultural context may not be privileged in another” (52), so I also considered how a shift in privilege might affect my ability to be present to a directee.

As we consider our values, we may find that we simultaneously hold contradictory viewpoints. For example, I value stoic self-control modeled by family members who live with chronic pain, but I also value tears as a means of emotional expression when words prove inadequate. We should be aware of strong feelings we may have about a particular dimension of social identity (e.g., sexual orientation). The more neutral we are about an aspect of identity, the less likely it will provoke judgment or disengagement. Referring to counseling relationships, psychologist Allen Bergin observes: “It is vital that we be more explicit about values because we use them, however unconsciously, as a means of therapeutic change...being explicit actually protects our clients. The more subtle our values, the more likely we are to be hidden persuaders. The more open we are about our view, the more choice clients will have in electing to be influenced or not to be influenced” (107). In the following sections I offer prompts that may help you reflect on the dimensions of your social identity. I also offer more specific examples from my own reflections to provide further insight into my process. You may find another approach that works better for you.

Sexual Orientation and Gender

Prompts:

- How did the men or women in your family help shape your identity? Was one gender noticeably absent in your family? Did one gender provide a stronger role model than the other?
- Have you experienced marginalization or oppression because of your sexual orientation or gender? Have you had a relationship with someone whose sexual orientation is different from your own?
- How did sibling, parental, marital, or other family relations affect your values around sexual orientation and gender?
- Do you have children? Did you struggle with fertility issues? (This may also influence the health dimension of your identity). Have you adopted children or cared for foster children? How did you come to be part of your family?

Example reflections:

- My parents were divorced when I was ten years old. I have few memories of my father when he lived with us. After the divorce, my mother provided a strong role model as a single parent and working woman. My maternal grandfather cared for me and my brothers when my mother traveled for her job. However, because I was responsible for meal preparation when my grandfather stayed with us, I felt like he was another male who needed care. In my first marriage, I was also the primary caretaker and decision-maker. As a result of these family dynamics and other personal experiences, I value self-reliant and independent women.

- I have no immediate experience of non-heterosexual family members. Friendships have all been with people who live openly with respect to their sexual orientation. I have the potential to disengage from people who are conflicted about or hide their sexual identity.

Health

Prompts:

- Do you or others close to you have a chronic illness, chronic pain, physical limitation, or mental illness? Were these conditions present at birth or acquired later in life?
- Do you or others close to you have a substance abuse, gambling, or pornography addiction or an eating disorder?
- Have you experienced marginalization due to a physical condition (e.g., obesity, scarring) or a mental condition (e.g., learning disability)?

Example reflections:

- Twelve years ago I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, an incurable autoimmune disease characterized by chronic pain and fatigue. Some members of my family have physical and mental limitations, and others live with chronic pain from illness and injury. These personal and familial experiences of suffering have made me aware of the impact of illness and disability on a person's life, including his spirituality. After much theological reflection on the nature of illness and suffering, I value complex understandings of suffering, healing, health, and wellness that make room for lament, ambiguity, and redemption.
- Through my experiences with rheumatoid arthritis, I have developed a high tolerance for physical pain. I may judge others with acute or chronic pain, discounting the severity of their experiences and expecting them to cope effectively.

Age and Generational Influences

Prompts:

- How have historical periods or events influenced who you are (e.g., times of war or the movement of women into the workforce)?
- Have you or people close to you experienced war or served in the military?
- What were family expectations of intellectual pursuits? Career choices? Political persuasion? Marriage and family? Where you chose to live?
- Have you experienced marginalization because of your age? How were children treated in your family? Elders? Did expectations of people change with age?

Example reflections:

- My maternal grandparents were farmers in central Kansas, USA. Because they had little cash, they gave homemade gifts. My grandfather carved birds from scraps of wood, and my grandmother painted and displayed them on twigs. As more people received gifts of birds, my grandparents' reputation grew. People from across the country drove to the farm to see "the bird people." My grandmother painted murals on the walls of several rooms in the farmhouse, and they displayed birds and paintings throughout their home, offering many for sale. When they retired from farming, they built a home with an art studio where they could work on and display art for sale. I and other family members have carried on the folk art tradition. I value artistic pursuits and creativity in the home.
- My family members do not discuss politics; we consider the topic to be private. As a result, I have the potential to disengage from people who express strong political opinions.

Religious and Spiritual Beliefs and Practices

Prompts:

As spiritual directors, we have likely spent a great deal of time reflecting on this dimension of our identity. However, it is worth thinking about ways in which we hold privilege relative to directees.

- What was your religious upbringing like? Have you remained within your family's religious tradition or explored other traditions?
- How do you understand the spiritual growth process?
- How familiar are you with other faith traditions? Is your familiarity based on personal experience or book knowledge? Do you have formal theological, religious, or spiritual training or education?
- How do you understand the role of laypersons and clergy within a faith community?

Example reflections:

- In the course of pursuing graduate theological education, I have studied at a conservative seminary and at a liberal seminary which has exposed me to a broad range of religious and theological discourse. In addition, my doctoral work includes a number of graduate courses in psychology. My personal spiritual journey has included immersion within a variety of faith traditions from Roman Catholicism to Hinduism. In the context of spiritual direction relationships, I value both formal education and life experience, but I place a higher value on personal experience over book knowledge.
- Because of my broad personal experience with spiritual beliefs and practices from a number of religious traditions, I appreciate the individual nature of the spiritual journey. I may disengage from directees who have a dogmatic perspective on spirituality.

Ethnicity, National Origin, and Racial Identity

Prompts:

- How has your family's country(s) of origin influenced you? Do you maintain family traditions that originated in another country?
- Have you lived in another country? Have you traveled extensively or not at all? When you travel, do you immerse yourself in other cultures? Do you speak more than one language?
- Are you part of the dominant racial group where you live? Have you experienced marginalization because of ethnic heritage, national origin, or race?
- What is your opinion of marriages between people from different countries or ethnic backgrounds? How do you feel about adopting children from other countries?

Example reflections:

- My husband was born in India, and both of our children share his dominant physical characteristics of dark hair, skin, and eyes. However, each child developed a unique self-identity. My daughter thinks of herself as Asian; my son considers himself as Caucasian. I value a person's right to claim their own racial identity.
- My Germanic/Swedish ancestry makes me part of the dominant racial group in United States and in the area of the country where I live. Immigration is a concern in my home state, and I have the potential to judge people who do not follow the United States to immigration laws.

Socioeconomic Status

Prompts:

- How have you been influenced by the financial circumstances in which you were raised?
- How have you supported yourself as an adult? Are you able to work if you choose to do so? Do mental or physical limitations prevent you from holding a job? Does your educational or vocational training background help or hinder your ability to obtain or hold a job?
- How do you approach savings? Spending? Debt? Giving?
- Do you provide financial support to other people?
- Have you ever experienced marginalization based on socioeconomic status?

Example reflections:

- I grew up with a single working mother, and we had to live frugally. We budgeted carefully, shopped at yard sales, recycled, repaired, and used coupons. I value savings, being debt-free, and being a good steward of one's wealth and possessions.
- Even though my family lived on a tight budget, we always gave time and money to the church and other charitable organizations. Early in our marriage, my husband and I set aside a percentage of our income for charitable giving, and we have included our children in the process of regularly allocating personal and family funds to various charities. I may disengage from people who are not generous with time or money.

Conclusion

I found the SHARES reflection process helpful in my spiritual direction practice, as well as in my relationships with family and friends. It is easy to judge those who make choices that

are different from the choices we would make. This reflection process will not eliminate our tendency to judge or disengage, but it can help us become more aware of where we may be likely to do so. As a result, we may pursue additional knowledge and experiences that will help us relate to people with different backgrounds. The reflection process may also shed light on spiritual direction relationships that are struggling or that never developed. We can take this reflection process a step further and by considering what we know of a directee's social identity. While we may not ask directees to provide a detailed personal history, we can ask them to describe themselves and their backgrounds beyond experiences directly related to spirituality.

Charles Foster and Theodore Brelsford, Christian educators with a multicultural perspective, invite spiritual caregivers "to live in the multiplicity of languages and cultures rather than to master them—to live with rather than to resolve ambiguity...At times [we may say]... 'We really don't know what we are doing.' At other times [we may say]...with an expectant smile, 'You never know quite what is going to happen here'" (159-160). A practice of self-reflection on the potential to judge or disengage from directees because of our positions of social privilege will help us live in the ambiguity of difference that exists in every relationship. The more we know about ourselves and what we value, the more comfortable we can be surrendering to the mystery of not-knowing within the spiritual direction relationship.

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Values Clarification Reflections Using the SHARES Process
 Religion & the Human Quest RT201/RU10
 Your Name:

Dimension of My Social Identity	Ways in which I May Hold Social Privilege	My Related Values	Potential to Judge or Become Disengaged from a Directee
Sexual Orientation and Gender	(+) Heterosexual; married with children (+) Female: Benefit from stereotypes of women as nurturing caregivers	Self-reliant and independent women Self-preservation within relationships How well a person uses his or her talents over gender	Potential to disengage from people who hide or are conflicted about their sexual orientation Potential to judge people in unhealthy relationships or people who use sexual orientation, gender, marital/parental status as a reason for not achieving goals
Health	(-) Rheumatoid arthritis	Broad and complex understandings of suffering, healing, health, and wellness A person's strengths and abilities	Potential to disengage from people who are pessimistic, frequently complain, or limit themselves May diminish others' experiences of pain because I cope with chronic pain
Age and Generational Influences	(+) Middle-aged (-) Grandparents retired from farming to become professional folk artists (-) No family history of military service	Life-long learning, productivity, life experience over formal education, self-expression, artistic creativity Commitment to family over country Privacy of political views	Potential to judge people who limit themselves or others because of age Potential to judge people in the military when they have young children Potential to disengage from people who express strong political views
Religious and Spiritual Beliefs and Practices	(+) Personal experience within multiple faith traditions (+) Interfaith marriage (+) Years of religious education and church leadership experience (+) Formal religious and theological education	Open-minded approaches to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices The individual search over commitment to a particular tradition A call to ministry Life experience over book knowledge	May disengage from people with dogmatic religious points of view Years of intentional practice at being non-judgmental within the spiritual dimension may blind me to other ways in which I have the potential to disengage or judge directees
Ethnicity, National Origin, and Racial Identity	(+) Caucasian: German & Swedish ancestry (-) Husband born in India; children are bi-racial	Protestant work ethic, Midwestern hospitality, nature Immigrant risk-taking & perseverance Claiming one's own racial identify	Potential to judge people from different cultural backgrounds Potential to judge people who do not follow United States immigration laws
Socioeconomic Status	(+) Upper middle class; upbringing lower middle class (+) Professional career status	Stewardship, saving, charitable giving, frugality, financial independence Making the most of one's circumstances	May disengage from people who do not demonstrate responsible stewardship May disengage from people who are not generous with time or money