



Spiritual Direction vs. Therapy

by Rev. Joshua J. Whitfield

Spiritual direction or therapy? Knowing the difference and which to choose matters. Interest in spiritual direction, in what St. Gregory Nazianzen called the “art of arts,” has only grown since Vatican II. It’s the fruit of the Council’s reemphasis on the universal call to holiness, meant for “all the faithful,” the renewal of Christ’s call to perfection (LG 5.40; Mtt 5:48).

However, today when collectively we’re more alert to the reality of mental health, we run into confusion due to the similarity of spiritual direction and things like therapy. As Henri Nouwen put it, the difficulty is that spiritual direction and therapy “often appear to be one and the same thing” when in fact they’re not. The idea of therapy, of counseling, the concern for brain health and mental health are indeed similar horizons of human understanding and compassion, but they are distinct from spiritual direction and should be kept so because therapy and spiritual direction serve different purposes: the former *integration* and the latter *vocation*.

First about spiritual direction, it helps to remember, as Thomas Merton wrote, that it’s a “monastic concept.” Ancient and Egyptian in origin, the art of spiritual direction was formed among men and women monastics struggling to serve God in the desert. Apart from community, these men and women needed trustworthy guides to help them stay the spiritual course. Spiritual direction was meant in this context to help a person fulfill his or her unique vocation, the ultimate purpose of which was union with God. Identifying graces as well as temptations and consolations as well as struggles, the spiritual director helps a person follow a particular vocation of prayer, whether a monk or a mom. This is why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls spiritual directors “servants of prayer,” because that’s what they do (CCC 2690). They help us find Christ in prayer and in our lives.

Which begins to explain both the difference and relationship of spiritual direction to therapy. As I said, therapy is about, what from Jungian psychology, we call integration. Rooted in what the ancients, and later Freud, called the “talking cure,” therapy in its different forms helps a person integrate behaviors, emotions, conceptions (or misconceptions), issuing from both the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche, into a healthy understanding of the self in relation to reality. Processing childhood trauma, understanding emotions, managing depression or anxiety, even interpersonal problem solving are areas in which a therapist helps a person realize what Jung called “individuation”—the achievement of a healthy self in relation to the rest of the world.

And, so, the relationship of spiritual direction to therapy is best understood in terms of the relationship of integration to vocation, that the former serves the latter. Integration isn't a matter for spiritual direction, but therapy. A good spiritual director will encourage a directee to seek integration, sometimes with the help of a qualified therapist, because it serves the vocation of prayer. Therapy can help a person do a lot of things better and more healthily, prayer included. But, also, a good therapist will respect the healthy faith of his or her clients, open at least to the idea that there might be something like grace perfecting nature, aware that therapy is not an end but rather an instrument. Therapists and spiritual directors, ideally, should work in harmony because both serve human flourishing, health and ultimately the perfection of holiness in spirit, soul, and body (2 Thess 5:23).



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If you are in crisis or you think you may have an emergency, call your doctor or 911 immediately. If you're having suicidal thoughts, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to speak with a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area at any time (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline). If you are located outside the United States, call your local emergency line immediately.

With the help of professionals and those who have struggled with stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, we're offering insights, resources, and suggestions for a path to healing and a road to hope in the midst of dark and scary times.