

Spiritual Direction For Adult Children Of Alcoholics

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Spiritual direction respects the unique character, situation, and needs of each person. Every one of us travels his or her own particular and unique journey home to God, and good spiritual direction willingly embraces the fact that “the wind blows where it will.” Because the Holy Spirit works freely in every person, the spiritual director must be open to the unexpected, sensitive to surprise, and ready to relinquish any preconceived notions about how a person might fit into this or that category, this or that model of spiritual development. At the same time, it has been my experience that the process of spiritual direction is strengthened and enriched if the director has a basic understanding of the emotional effects of growing up in a family troubled by such dysfunctions as alcoholism, addiction, and physical or sexual abuse. Although each person is unique, adults who are recovering from the pain and damage caused by growing up in a dysfunctional family do tend to share characteristic emotional problems that can affect their capacity and their inclination to pray, their images of God, and their relationship to the divine. I am convinced that the more clearly a spiritual director understands the emotional difficulties that tend to plague those who grew up in dysfunctional families, the more discerning and effective the director can be in guiding such persons toward spiritual growth and wholeness.

In recent years, mental health professionals have begun to focus on the unique constellation of emotional problems that characterize adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs)--persons who grew up in a family in which one or both of the parents were alcoholic. In *The Addictive Organization*, Anne Wilson Schaefer and Diane Fassel define an alcoholic family in more general terms, as a family “that repeats alcoholic or addictive patterns.” It has been estimated that in the United States, as many as 28 to 34 million people, or 15 percent of the population, are ACOAs, though Schaefer and Fassel believe that even this estimate is too low. What’s more, persons who did not grow up with an alcoholic parent but whose grandparent, spouse, or love partner is chemically addicted suffer from many of the same dysfunctional patterns of thinking and behavior that characterize ACOAs. These so-called co-dependents represent an even larger percentage of the American population. Obviously, the problem of growing up with or living in a close relationship with an addicted person is one that permeates our society. Many of those seeking spiritual direction today are struggling to recover from the spiritual damage that addiction inflicts on the human psyche and spirit..

My own interest in discovering what hinders or helps an ACOA to grow spiritually comes not only from the ACOAs to whom I’ve offered spiritual direction but also from my own personal experience of growing up with an alcoholic parent. Both as director and directee, I have come to respect the power of the emotional patterns that haunt ACOAs and block their relationship to God. For example, ACOAs may be obsessed with control and the fear of being out of control. ACOAs

usually find it difficult to trust either themselves or other people, and tend to avoid experiencing or expressing their feelings. ACOAs also tend to ignore their own personal needs, to fear criticism and conflict, and to dread abandonment. The list goes on. In different ways, each of these patterns can distort or dry up one's prayer life and one's sense of the presence of God.

APPROACHES TO PRAYER

Having grown up in an alcoholic home, I have come to appreciate the importance of finding a spiritual director who understands the emotional dynamics of the ACOA. In addition, like other ACOAs, I have found that it is crucial to my own ministry of spiritual direction that I continue to work on my own personal recovery. We ACOAs must keep our eyes open, for the very role of spiritual director can in itself trigger such familiar co-dependent patterns of behavior as trying to "save" the other person, trying to be perfect, avoiding conflict, trying to maintain an idealized self-image, and so on.

Given the particular emotional and spiritual difficulties that tend to trouble ACOAs, how can spiritual directors facilitate their spiritual growth and enable them to develop a vital, lively relationship with God? The following suggestions and reflections--based on my own experience, as an ACOA, of both giving and receiving spiritual direction--focus especially on two aspects of the spiritual life: attitudes toward prayer and forms of prayer.

Prayer is a process of making ourselves available to God, of sharing ourselves as candidly and openly as we can with the One whose love sustains and embraces us from moment to moment throughout our lives. In prayer we seek to throw off the disguises and drop the poses with which we ordinarily protect ourselves, and to express to God what lies most deeply in our hearts. True prayer requires the twin gifts of courage and humility, for it is no easy thing to invite the Holy Spirit into our depths. All prayer ultimately involves our willingness to reveal ourselves, just as we are, to the eyes of God, and all prayer therefore involves risk.

Not surprisingly, then, every one of us, ACOA or not, has times of coming to prayer with some trepidation. Among other things, we bring with us our shame and guilt and failings, our sense that we have fallen short or missed the mark, and possibly our fear that in prayer we will discover aspects of ourselves that we won't much like or of which we are afraid. This natural human reticence to pray may be exacerbated in the ACOA, who carries such a load of shame and repressed feelings that it may be threatening indeed to begin to expose them to the judgment and mercy of God. Simply settling down to pray may be difficult for the ACOA, who, for example, may be unduly absorbed in caring for other people and may routinely avoid attending to his or her own needs ("Am I not being selfish if I take prayer time for myself?"). Some ACOAs may avoid praying because of their fear of losing control or of being overwhelmed by feelings; others may come face to face in prayer with their fear of abandonment and may hesitate to keep praying (as one woman anxiously whispered to me, "What if I pray and there's no one there?").

The first task of the spiritual director may simply be to encourage the ACOA to persist in prayer and to explore with the ACOA what blocks him or her from taking time to pray. The director's second task may then be to help the ACOA to discover what particular forms of prayer help him or her to listen more attentively and to open himself or herself more completely to the presence of God.

The ACOAs whom I've met in spiritual direction have tended to have practiced, and to feel comfortable with, one of two forms of prayer: either positive affirmations or imageless prayer.

Each of these forms of prayer has its strengths and its weaknesses in helping the soul to be drawn to God. The spiritual director needs to be sensitive in discerning, and in assisting the directee to discern, why a particular kind of prayer may be appealing to the directee at a given point in his or her recovery.

Positive affirmations include the repetition of the Serenity Prayer or the reading of Rokelle Lerner's *Daily Affirmations for Adult Children of Alcoholics* or *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*. These and similar affirmations and meditations can play an invaluable part in the prayer life of the ACOA. They offer hope, they may begin to rebuild a person's damaged self-esteem, and they provide useful reminders about the importance of letting go, attending to one's own needs as well as those of others, accepting one's imperfections, and meeting life's challenges optimistically. I frequently recommend the two Lerner books to ACOAs who are unfamiliar with them. At the same time, I stress that these positive affirmations need to be used wisely and with discernment, for they can be used not to face but rather to avoid and to conceal the darker aspects of the self. For instance, to cling too tightly to the phrase "Right now my life is changing for the better" may interfere with one's frankly admitting to oneself and to God the depth of one's despair and hopelessness. Repeating a phrase like "God is always with me" may obscure one's honest sense that God is in fact absent.

When working with a directee who finds positive affirmations a helpful part of prayer, the spiritual director may want to complement the affirmations by emphasizing that God welcomes hearing our despair as well as our helpfulness, our sorrow as well as our joy, our rage as well as our patience. To the ACOA in the initial stages of recovery, this idea will no doubt sound fanciful or incredible. Before ACOAs can entrust their darker selves to God, they may well need first to learn to trust their spiritual directors with some of the feelings, memories, or ideas that the ACOAs find shameful or repellent. If spiritual directors maintain a nonanxious, nonjudgmental, and accepting presence with these directees, then the ACOAs will be enabled to share more fully with God the truth of who they really are, warts and all. I have the impression that the more freely and openly an ACOA comes to trust God with his or her "negative" qualities and feelings, the more the need for using positive affirmations will drop away.

Many ACOAs are attracted to engaging in imageless prayer that concentrates the mind and suspends thought—for example, practicing the Jesus Prayer or Centering Prayer, or using such Eastern methods as repeating a mantra or becoming mindful of one's breath. Some are similarly drawn to the apophatic tradition of experiencing God in "unknowing" and in "darkness." This approach to prayer has a long and distinguished history in Christian spirituality and was practiced by such masters as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart, Bernard of Clairvaux,

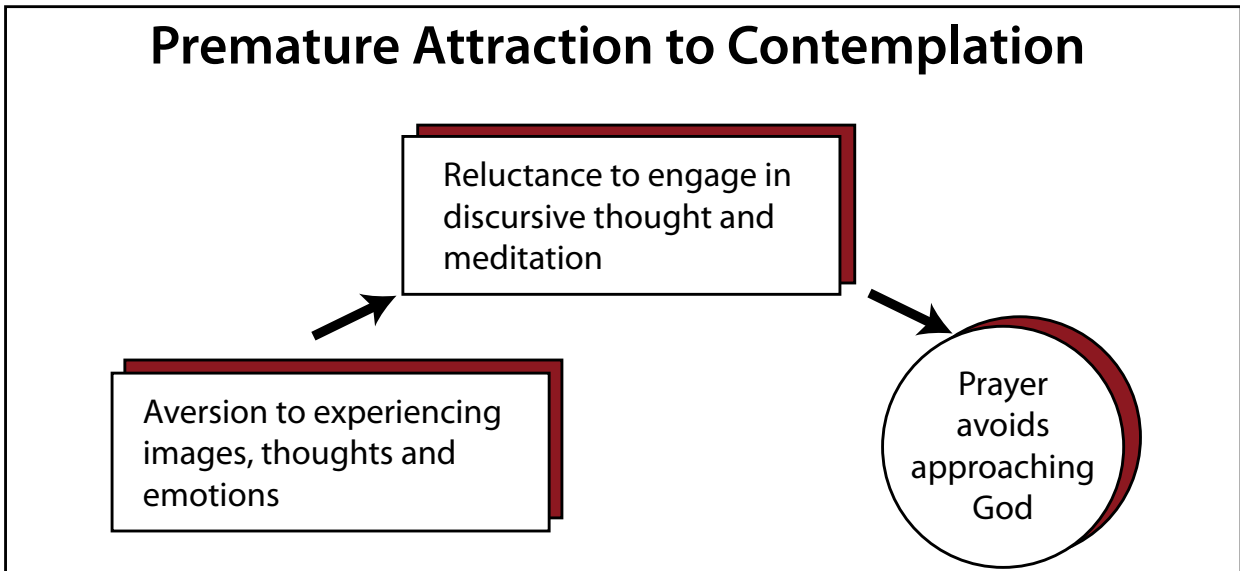
John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Thomas Merton. For example, in "The Inner Experience: Infused Contemplation (V)" (*Cistercian Studies*, 1984), Merton declares that "contemplation is pure in proportion as it is free from sensible and conceptual elements. . . The higher and more perfect contemplation goes beyond sense imagery and discursive understanding, and 'flashes out in the darkness of 'unknowing.'" He is scathing in his assessment of liturgies and spiritual exercises that "rob" the contemplative of "the emptiness, darkness, and purposelessness in which God speaks with such overwhelming effect!" John of the Cross is similarly devastating in *Living Flame of Love* when he likens the spiritual director who does not understand the stages of prayer beyond discursive meditation to "a blacksmith, [who] knows no more than how to hammer and pound with the faculties." Again, the *Life* of Teresa of Avila describes her pain when for some twenty years she was unable to find a spiritual director who understood that she had reached the higher stages of prayer.

READINESS FOR CONTEMPLATION

At the risk of joining the unfortunate ranks of spiritual directors who did not recognize or affirm their directees' genuine call to contemplation, I must assert that the spiritual director should be alert to the possibility that the ACOA's attraction to contemplative prayer is premature. While it may be that the Holy Spirit is drawing the person to apophatic or contemplative prayer, it is also possible that the directee's own aversion to exploring and experiencing certain emotions, thoughts, and images is making him or her reluctant to engage in discursive thought and meditation. I believe that if the latter is the case, the directee is unwittingly using contemplative prayer as a way of avoiding rather than approaching God.

It is worth remembering that even the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* warns of the danger and futility of a premature desire to enter into contemplation. In discerning with an ACOA directee about whether or not the directee is in fact being called by God to contemplative prayer, the spiritual director might find it helpful to explore such questions as these: How experienced is the directee in expressive forms of prayer such as penitence, petition, thanksgiving, adoration, or praise? How much time does the directee devote to prayer? Is there a sense in director or directee that prayer is being used as a way of avoiding a full engagement with life? Is the directee free to share with God the full range of human emotion, or are there particular emotions from which the directee will flee at almost any cost? Under what circumstances does the directee feel called to pray? Does the directee feel drawn to imageless prayer when uncomfortable emotions or situations arise in his or her life?

To what extent does the directee know and accept the "messy" parts of himself or herself? Does



the directee tend to judge himself or herself unmercifully? Is the directee attached to a self-image of being "spiritual," "saintly," or "a contemplative"? Would the directee feel embarrassed or ashamed if God were not at this point calling him or her to the higher stages of prayer? What are the fruits of the person's contemplative prayer--for instance, does he or she live a life increasingly free of either self-centeredness or self-abnegation?

In sorting out these questions with the directee, the director should be sensitive to the person's body language. Does the directee maintain eye contact? Does he or she seem comfortable in his or her body? The director should also observe the directee's tone of voice and quality of emotional feeling.

Many of the ACOAs I've met who are attracted to apophatic prayer present themselves as controlled, earnest, "nice," sometimes rather isolated individuals who don't seem quite grounded in their bodies or at ease with the messiness of anger, desire, or grief. Apophatic prayer can seem immensely appealing to persons sincerely seeking God who are at the same time burdened with shame, self-hate, and a fear of expressing feelings. It can be tempting to use the silence of imageless prayer as a way of skipping over whatever is uncomfortable in one's life or in one's heart. And practicing imageless prayer, especially for long periods of time at a stretch, can bolster one's idealized self-image of being a spiritual person.

I myself was drawn to contemplative prayer for some of these reasons, and I remember my initial anger and shame (and eventual gratitude) when my clinical pastoral education supervisor, Claire McGowan, O.P., confronted me about my using such prayer as a way to avoid the pain and the passion of being alive. In the years since that encounter, which marked a turning point in my spiritual life, I have come to appreciate the wisdom of such spiritual seekers as Richard of St. Victor, a twelfth-century theologian who warned about "[the one who] raises the eye of the heart in vain to see God when [one] is not fully prepared to see [oneself]. Let a person first learn to know [one's] own concealed reality before [one] considers [oneself] capable of grasping invisible things. You must know the invisible things of your own spirit before you can be capable of knowing the invisible things of God."

IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ENCOUNTER

I would not claim that one must know oneself fully before one can seek to know God, if for no other reason than that self-knowledge is always incomplete and that to wait for the perfection of self-knowledge before beginning the spiritual journey would thus be to delay the journey forever. Still, to embark on the search for God while dismissing or avoiding self-knowledge is equally unproductive, for God is the foundation on which our very being rests. To resist self-knowledge is to resist the God who speaks to us in and through all things. We cannot encounter God if we are unwilling to encounter ourselves.

How, then, might a spiritual director help the ACOA to encounter God and self? For the ACOA struck numb with what Schaef and Fassel call frozen feelings, the spiritual director might encourage exploring affective prayer. Praying the psalms can help isolated and emotionally frozen ACOAs to connect not only with the person who wrote the psalms but also with the generations of the faithful who have used the psalms in private and corporate prayer, and the God who welcomes and listens to the whole range of human feelings. For the ACOA who comes to spiritual direction confused, obsessively talkative, and anxious to "figure everything out," the spiritual director might break in with humor (nothing seems to cut through obsessive thinking so quickly as shared laughter); with an invitation to some moments of silence or of attention to bodily sensations or the breath (a person overly busy in thought tends to lose contact with the body); or with a simple question, such as "What are you feeling right now?" Encouraging the ACOA to stay in the here and now, in the present encounter with the spiritual director, may help the directee to become present to himself or herself and to God.

For the ACOA who seems oblivious to or cut off from the body, the spiritual director might discuss the value of intentionally including the body in one's prayer, and show the directee some simple bodily postures or gestures that can deepen one's experience of prayer. The director might also discuss how expressive the body can be in communicating with God; the emotionally inhibited ACOA may be astonished to learn that prayer can take place while one kneels on all fours and sobs, or while one pounds a pillow in anger.

Again, many ACOAs are secretly convinced that as human beings, as selves, they are worthless, and they may try to make a virtue out of necessity by believing that the height of spiritual maturity is to have no self at all. With these persons the spiritual director might want to discuss the Christian mystical tradition, which affirms that in the ultimate, transforming union with God, the individual self is cherished rather than obliterated or discarded. The spiritual director might also encourage the ACOA to begin to seek a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, however charismatic or evangelical (and therefore, in some circles, however ludicrous) that might sound. In daring to accept a personal relationship with Christ, the individual may be overwhelmed by the discovery that indeed Christ does value him or her as a person.

Finally, many ACOAs constantly focus their attention outside themselves and devote their lives to efforts to please other people or to please God. They may come to spiritual direction anxiously absorbed in trying to discern “the will of God” and to carry out the will of this alien Other, who is somewhere “out there.” The spiritual director might speak to these persons of a God who is intimate and immanent, as well as transcendent, and encourage them, as part of the process of discernment, to explore their own inner truth and their own heart’s desire. What a revelation it may be to the ACOA to learn—in the words of Charles Healey, S.I., writing about Thomas Merton’s approach to spiritual direction—that “often the real and genuine aspirations of the heart are important indicators of the will of God, and a humble and sincere desire may be a sign that God is asking this of us.”

The ACOA who comes to a spiritual director for guidance in the life of prayer is a person who has been hurt, a person who has probably been forced to suppress or to split off parts of himself or herself in order to cope with growing up in a dysfunctional family. The task of the spiritual director is to help such a person to bring his or her whole self to God so that at last the suppressed and scattered parts of the self can be integrated and the person freed to love God with all his or her heart and soul and mind and strength.

Perhaps it is worth noting, in conclusion, that in helping the ACOA to be freed of the addictive patterns in which he or she has been caught, the spiritual director engages in an act of cultural resistance. Our society is one that needs addictions. As Schaef and Fassel point out, our society

...fosters addictions because the best-adjusted person in the society is the person who is not dead and not alive, just numb, a zombie. When you are dead you are not able to do the work of the society. When you are fully alive, you are constantly saying no to many of the processes of the society: the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water, and eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it is in the interests of the society to promote those things that “take the edge off,” get us busy with our “fixes,” and keep us slightly “numbed out” and zombielike.

To the extent that it is in the interests of society that we remain zombies, then in supporting and challenging a person to awaken, to see clearly, to feel deeply, to act decisively, and in all things to listen attentively to the will of God, today’s spiritual director has in effect become a social revolutionary.

RECOMMENDED READING

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