Spiritual direction is an ancient practice now emerging into a new form of spirituality. For many, it helps satisfy a growing hunger to evolve beyond our culture’s shallow materialism and bitter divisiveness to instead have a more immediate and direct experience of spirituality—one expressed consistently in everyday life.

Many people have heard of spiritual direction but don’t have a clear idea of what it is. Its essential qualities are, after all, not easy to describe. Imagine trying to describe a strawberry to someone who has never seen one; knowing a strawberry lies more in the taste than in the words.

Until a few decades ago, spiritual direction functioned largely within the purview of the Catholic contemplative community. However, the practice itself is ancient and universal. In the Western tradition, this practice goes back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers, a third-century monastic movement that attempted to avoid the politicization of the Church by the Roman Empire and return to earlier forms of Christianity.

At that time the spiritual director was likely an abbot or senior monastic who was an authoritative figure in the contemplative community; spiritual direction was in fact about directing. Today, the relationship between director and directee is more likely to be a collegial one. The director’s authority arises primarily from the respect and the trust that the directee places in the director.

A more accurate description of spiritual direction these days might be spiritual mentoring or spiritual companionship. Although these terms are sometimes used, the term spiritual direction is still more common.

Spiritual direction is a process rather than a procedure; it is fluid and open-ended. The essential quality of spiritual direction is that the director and directee come together seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit within each of them. The director serves as a mentor, a guide, and a confidant—but most important, a listening presence. Through deep listening, a director encourages the directee to listen to their own internal guidance, asking questions such as:

- How do you discern God’s voice (that is, intuition or guidance) within you?
- How are you responding to God’s voice as you understand it?
- What is your heart’s deepest desire?
- How does your life reflect your soul’s desire?

The director can assist the directee in discerning and responding to God’s voice, but the directee is the final determiner of what this means and how it should be lived. Spiritual direction is not psychotherapy, pastoral counseling, or coaching. These practices can be very helpful but their intentions are quite different from that of spiritual direction. Although the directee is encouraged to share whatever feels relevant in their life’s experience, the primary focus of the director is on the directee’s spiritual growth and development. (Someone in spiritual direction could also be involved in psychotherapy or coaching without it conflicting with their spiritual direction process.)

Why Spiritual Direction Is Relevant
The influence of religion in the West has been steadily declining for the past 60 years, yet interest in spirituality seems greater than ever. One result of these converging trends is the formation of a huge spiritual vacuum in our culture. This void has allowed a few religious denominations to step in and speak on behalf of all of Christianity, presenting a rather distorted public image of the faith and for many, creating an even greater aversion to religion.

Another product of these two trends is the rapidly growing interest in Buddhist meditation and secular mindfulness practices. Also, certain authors and spiritual teachers have become very popular, and to their followers, spirituality is whatever their teacher teaches or writes. For some, their spirituality is based upon the last book they’ve read. Do-it-yourself, custom-fit spirituality has become the new normal.
This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can lead to some serious pitfalls—especially if we don’t anticipate them. One potential problem lies in a lack of spiritual roots grounded in a time-honored tradition. The result is that when (inevitable) challenges arise, a dilettante spirituality makes it all too easy to drop out, change paths, or distract oneself with other pursuits, slowing spiritual growth.

Another potential problem is that a tailor-made spirituality may not be able to hold people accountable for keeping commitments and taking responsibility for their choices. It can be all too easy to fall out of integrity with oneself—and not even know it.

Spiritual direction can provide a remedy to both situations. It is true that, ultimately, all we need lies within us; but paradoxically, we also need others to help us find our own internal resources. At times we need support and assurance, and at other times we need to be confronted and challenged. It’s said that the work of the minister is to sometimes comfort the afflicted, and to sometimes afflict the comfortable. This is particularly true with spiritual direction.

The heart of spiritual direction lies in the quality of the relationship between the director and the directee. Our brains are wired for relationships; it’s in relationships with others that we can better understand ourselves. An effective spiritual direction relationship does not promote an unhealthy dependence on the director, nor does it advocate a militant self-reliance for the directee. The optimal relationship is based upon a healthy interdependence between the two.

By trusting another we can learn to trust ourselves. By being accountable to another we can learn self-discipline. In relationship to another we can develop self-awareness. By knowing ourselves, we discover the Divine.

“Spiritual direction has supported me in a deep healing process of shifting into expressing my authentic self, rather than the self I think others want me to be,” explains Rev. Jeanmarie Eck, associate minister at Unity of Houston, Texas. “The process has put me in touch with the wisdom inherent in my body, leading me to uncover hidden beliefs that were unconsciously inhibiting my genuine expression.”

Qualifications of a Spiritual Director

In seeking a spiritual director, the primary consideration is to find someone you trust who is deeply grounded in their own spiritual practice. Look for someone capable of deep empathy and yet able to set clear boundaries, one who is deeply committed to their own journey yet understands and honors other spiritual paths.

Another consideration is to examine the person’s training. Although the essential qualities of a spiritual director may be largely innate, training from a respected organization is still crucial. At present there are no nationwide legal or professional certification standards for spiritual directors, yet directors must follow standard professional guidelines regarding confidentiality and ethical behavior.

Until recently, most training programs have operated under the aegis of an established religious denomination—typically a Catholic religious order. In recent years several programs sponsored by other Christian denominations have emerged, as well as some Jewish- and Buddhist-oriented training programs. While New Thought has not historically offered spiritual direction programs, Unity will be offering one starting later this year (see box). 

Unity Spiritual Direction Training Program

Unity Worldwide Ministries has developed a two-year certification program in spiritual direction. The program balances academic study with supervised practice and spiritual mentoring. Classes are primarily online, with some residential requirements. The program begins fall term 2021. For information, visit unityworldwideministries.org/spiritual-direction or email spiritualdirection@unity.org.