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# Finding a Spiritual Director

**Eugene H. Peterson** | posted May 19, 2004

It is not wise to treat lightly what most generations of Christians have agreed is essential.

—*Eugene H. Peterson*

Many years ago in Baltimore I heard Pete Seeger play the five-string banjo. I was seized with the conviction that I must do it too. I was in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University at the time and had little money, but poverty was no deterrent in the rush of such urgencies: I went to the pawnshops on East Baltimore Street the next morning and bought a banjo for eleven dollars.

I found an instruction manual in a used-book store for fifty cents. I was on my way. I applied myself to strumming and frailing and three-finger picking. I had neither the time nor the money for formal instruction, but in odd moments between seminars and papers, I worked at making the sounds and singing the songs Seeger had introduced into my life.

In the years following, the impetus of the first enthusiasm slackened. I repeated myself a lot. From time to time I would pick up another instruction book, another songbook.

Occasionally someone would be in our home who played the banjo, and I would pick up a new technique. At such moments I became fleetingly aware of a great pool of lore that banjo players took for granted. I recognized some of the items from the footnotes and appendixes in my instruction books. Eventually I realized if I was going to advance, I would have to get a teacher. It wasn't that I lacked knowledge—my stack of instruction books was now quite high. It wasn't that I lacked material—there were already far more songs in my books than I could ever learn well. But I didn't seem to be able to get the hang of some things just by reading about them.

I have not yet gotten a teacher. It was never the right time. I procrastinated. I am still picking and singing the same songs I learned in the first few years. My crisp, glittering banjo sound that used to set feet tapping and laughter rippling now bores my wife and children to tears. I am not a little bored myself. I still intend to find a teacher.

## Soul instinct

A desire for prayer was kindled in my early life. When the embers cooled, as they did from time to time, I applied the bellows of a lecture or a book or a workshop or a conference. The evangelical movement, in which I grew up, gave frequent exhortations to pray. I was told in many and various ways that prayer was urgent. There was also a great quantity of didactic material on prayer, most of it in books. I responded to the exhortations and read the books. But useful as these resources were to get me started and established, there came a time when I felt the need for something else—something more personal, more intimate.

But what? As I groped for clarity, I found out what I did not want. I didn't want a counselor or therapist. I was not conscious of any incapacitating neurosis that needed fixing. I did not want information; I already knew far more than I practiced. It was not for lack of knowledge that I was unsettled. And it wasn't exactly a friend I wanted, a person with whom I could unburden my inner hopes and fears when I felt like it.

My sense of need was vague and unfocused. It had, though, to do with my development in prayer and my growth in faith—I knew that much. But I didn't know how to get it. I began to pray for someone who would guide me in the essential, formative parts of my life: my sense of God, my practice of prayer, my understanding of grace.

I knew from my books that in previous centuries, spiritual directors were a regular part of the life of faith. I also knew that in other traditions it was unthinkable for persons with any kind of leadership responsibilities to proceed without a spiritual director. Spiritual intensities were dangerous and the heart desperately wicked: anyone entering the lion's cage of prayer required regular, personal guidance. But this knowledge, like the footnotes and appendixes in my banjo books, was outside the orbit of my associations.

Besides, I like doing things on my own. Figuring them out. Mastering skills. Fasting. Frailing. Double-thumbing. Meditating. I was all right for a person who was uninstructed or unmotivated to get help, but I was neither. It was better to strike out through virgin territory on my own. "Just Jesus and me" was deeply embedded in my understanding of the mature Christian life. The goal was independence from every human relationship and intimacy with Christ alone.

All the same, going against the grain of training and inclination, I found myself with a focus prayer: "Lead me to a spiritual director."

I considered various friends and acquaintances. Somehow no one seemed right. I sensed they would not understand my needs. I may have been wrong in this—in one instance, I know now that I was. But no one seemed to be the answer to my prayer for a spiritual director.

I was in no real hurry. I kept alert. In the course of this waiting and watching, I met a man whom I gradually came to feel was the right person. The more I knew him, the more confident I became that he would understand me and guide me wisely.

At this point I greatly surprised myself: I didn't ask him. I was convinced I needed a spiritual director. I was reasonably

sure this person would help me. And suddenly I felt this great reluctance to approach him. We were together quite regularly, and so I had frequent opportunities to approach him. I procrastinated.

It didn't take me long to get to the root of my reluctance: I didn't want to share what was most essential to me. I wanted to keep control. I wanted to be boss. I had often felt and sometimes complained of the loneliness of prayer, but now I found cherished pleasures I was loathe to give up—a kind of elitist spirituality fed by the incomprehension or misunderstanding of outsiders but which would vanish the moment even one other comprehended and understood. I wanted to be in charge of my inner life. I wanted to have the final say-so in my relationship with God.

I had no idea I had those feelings. I was genuinely surprised at their intensity. I tried the route of theological rationalization: that Christ was my mediator, that the Spirit was praying deeply within me, beyond words, and that a spiritual director would interfere in these primary relationships. But while the theology was sound, the relevance to my condition was not. What I detected in myself was not a fight for theological integrity but a battle with spiritual pride.

It took me exactly one year to ask John to be my spiritual director. But it was not a wasted year. Now I knew at least one of the reasons the old masters recommended a spiritual director and why they insisted that we never grow out of the need for one. It was because of pride, this incredibly devious, alarmingly insidious evil that is so difficult to detect in myself but so obvious to a discerning friend. At the same time, I understood one component of my spiritual loneliness, of not having anyone appreciate the intensity of spiritual struggles and disciplines.

Again, pride: pride isolates.

## Soul benefits

In our first meeting, John asked what my expectations were. I didn't have any. I had never done this before and didn't know what to expect. I only knew I wanted to explore the personal dimensions of faith and prayer with a guide instead of working by trial and error as I had been.

In reflecting on what has developed in these monthly conversations, three things stand out.

**1. My spontaneity has increased.** Since this person has agreed to pay attention to my spiritual condition with me, I no longer feel solely responsible for watching over it. Now that someone experienced in assessing health and pathology in the life of faith is there to tell me if I am coming off the wall, I have quit weighing and evaluating every nuance of attitude and behavior. I have always had a tendency to compulsiveness in spiritual disciplines and would often persist in certain practices whether I felt like it or not, year in and year out, in a stubborn determination to be ready for whatever the Spirit had for me. I knew the dangers of obsessive rigidity and tried to guard against it. But that was just the problem. I was the disciplinarian of my inner life, the one being disciplined, and the supervisor of my disciplinarian. A lot of roles to be shifting in and out of through the day.

I immediately gave up being "supervisor" and shared "disciplinarian" with my director as well. The psychic load was reduced markedly. I relaxed. I was no longer afraid that if I diverged from my rule, I would be subject to creeping self-indulgence, quite sure it would now be spotted in short order by my director. I trusted my intuitions more, knowing that self-deceit would be called to account sooner or later. **The line that divided my structured time of prayer and meditation from the rest of my life blurred.** I no longer had the entire responsibility for deciding how to shape the disciplines. I found myself more spontaneous, more free to innovate, more at ease in being nonproductive and playful.

**2. I have become aware of subjects I rarely, if ever, discuss with other people in my life that I regularly bring to my director.** These are not shameful things, nor are they flattering things about which I am modest. **They are the mundane, the ordinary things in my life. I don't bring them up in everyday conversation because I don't want to bore my family and friends.** I don't want people to lose interest in me and look for a more exciting conversationalist in the same way they have gone looking for a better banjo player. But these matters take up a great deal of my life. **My director expressing interest in who I *am* (not what I do) and directing attention to what *is* (not what ought to be or what I want things to be) makes conversational reflection possible in these areas.**

**I am used to looking for signs of God's presence in crisis and in blessing. I must be forced to look to God when I have failed or sinned. I am already motivated to look to God when everything comes together in an experience of wholeness and arrival. But the random ordinary? That is when I am getting ready for the next triumph. Or drifting into the next disaster.**

**My director keeps exploring everyday ordinariness for the presence of God and the workings of grace. When "nothing is going on," is there, perhaps, something going on? The flat times, the in-between times, the routine behaviors are also charged with the grandeur of God. I have always known that but have been fitful and sporadic in exploring the territory.**

Now, because there is this person with whom I don't have to hold up my end of the conversation, **I have space and leisure to take expeditions into the ordinary.** I remembered James Joyce's insistence that "literature deals with the ordinary; the unusual and extraordinary belongs to journalism," and saw the analogy to what was going on in these conversations.

**3. I have been struck by the difference of being in touch with an oral tradition as compared to a written one.** I discovered prayer masters of the church at an early age and subsequently immersed myself in their writings. Their experience and analysis are familiar to me. I profit from reading them. Some of them seem very alive and contemporary. For a long time that seemed to suffice. But **there is a radical difference between a book and a person. A book tells me about the dark night; the person who comments on *my* dark night, even though the words are the same, is different. I can read with detachment; I cannot listen with detachment. The immediacy and intimacy of conversation turn knowledge into wisdom.**

**There is also the matter of timing. Out of the scores of writers on prayer, the hundreds of truths about faith, and the myriad penetrating truths of the spiritual life, which one is appropriate right now? Searching through indexes to find the page where a certain subject is presented is not the same as having a person notice and name the truth I am grappling with right now in my own life.**

In meetings with my spiritual director, I have often had the sense of being drawn into a living, oral tradition. I am in touch with a pool of wisdom and insight in a way different from when I am alone in my study. It is not unlike the experience I have in worship as I participate in Scripture readings, preaching, hymn singing, and sacraments. These are not so much subjects you know *about* as an organic life you enter *into*. In spiritual direction I am guided to attend to my uniqueness and discern more precisely where my faith development fits on the horizon of judgment and grace.

Quite obviously none of these experiences depends on having a spiritual director. None of them was new to me in kind but only in degree. I do not want to claim more for the practice than it warrants. Some people develop marvelously in these areas without ever having so much as heard of a spiritual director.

Still, for most of the history of the Christian faith, it was expected that a person should have a spiritual director. It was not an exceptional practice. It was not for those who were gifted in prayer or more highly motivated than the rest. In fact, as responsibility and maturity increase in the life of faith, the urgency of having a spiritual director increases.

Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that spiritual direction "must explore every path, must know where the errors lurk, where the moods have their hiding places, how the passions understand themselves in solitude (and every man who has passion is always to some degree solitary, it is only the slobberers who wear their hearts wholly on their sleeves); it must know where the illusions spread their temptations, where the bypaths slink away." The greatest errors in the spiritual life are not committed by the novices but by the adepts. The greatest capacity for self-deceit in prayer comes not in the early years but in the middle and late years.

It strikes me that it is not wise to treat lightly what most generations of Christians have agreed is essential.

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