



Using the Arts in Spiritual Direction and Discernment

Christine Valters Paintner

Today like every other day
 We wake up empty and scared
 Don't open the door of your study
 And begin reading.
 Take down a musical instrument
 let the beauty we love be what we do
 There are hundreds of way to kneel
 And kiss the earth.
 —Rumi (Barks, p. 36)

Remembering Who We Are

Plato writes that all learning is recollection or remembering. The chief job of the teacher is to help us to remember all that we have forgotten. This image for me is a powerful one in connection with the work I do teaching people to use the arts and imagination in spiritual direction and other ministries. I believe strongly that what I teach is not something new so much as helping people to re-member, to make whole again, all the dimensions of who they are, connecting to their creative and intuitive selves. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we believe we are created in the image of a Creator God. What would it mean if we could remember this and took this belief seriously?

Jung had a concept related to Plato's that he called *archetypal memory*; when we are deep into the intuitive, subconscious self, we remember more than we know, through our connection to our ancestors and the collective unconscious. A Native American friend told me that in his tradition this is also called *blood memory*.

Take a moment to remember your own life story, but don't just limit this exercise of imagination to your physical lifetime. Use your imagination to remember back before you were even born, through your ancestors, the hundreds of generations of people who lived before you and made your life possible. Keep remembering back to the very moment when God formed and crafted the universe and breathed life into human beings. Receive that breath in and remember that *spiritus* and *ruach*, the

Latin and Hebrew for *spirit*, also both mean *breath*. In spiritual direction, we are helping our directees remember that essential connection, that we are each molded lovingly in God's image, in the image of a Creator God and given the breath of life.

In one of his poems, Rumi talks about two intelligences. The first is our acquired knowledge, book learning, the kind of intelligence that helps us to get ahead in the world and is tested to see how well we retain this information, "getting always more marks on your preserving tablets." This is the intelligence of our schooling and striving to succeed.

The poem then says there is another kind of tablet or intelligence: "one already completed and preserved inside you. / A spring overflowing its springbox." This intelligence is not the kind that moves from the outside in, as in traditional learning. "This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out" (Barks, p. 178). This is connected to the remembering I believe Plato and Jung are talking about, the kind of knowing that is already within us.

The Native American poet Mary TallMountain writes about our seventh sense, which is the part of ourselves that "stirs and lives / from first faint shiver / of the far sea flutes / to rushing soaring knowing / of the full symphonic voice." Coming back to this music of our spirits returns us to a state of being "whole complete / unfettered unbound" (p. 62). Remembering who we are is a return to the full symphonic voice, a state of being whole again.

Professor of education Howard Gardner says there are not one or even two intelligences, but perhaps eight or more. Our education processes emphasize linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, rooted in a left-brained, highly verbal and analytical mode, emphasizing measurable results through testing. However, Gardner claims, we also have spatial, kinesthetic, and musical intelligence. Others include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and natural. With so many faculties of knowing, how much we limit ourselves by focusing on just two or three. What could we discover of the sacred if we expanded our ways of knowing?



Spiritual Direction and the Arts

Carl Jung believed images are expressions of deep human experience and our authentic selves. They are the natural and primary language for the psyche and only secondarily do we move to conceptual thought. Jung saw images as clues to the unlived life that was seeking expression in him and urged others to look at the images of our lives in a symbolic way so that they may reveal to us our deeper meanings and our fuller authentic selves.

Spiritual direction is an ancient practice where one person listens deeply to the story of another, helping the directee to hear the call of the holy in the text and symbols of his or her life. By engaging the symbolic, intuitive, and feeling dimensions, the director helps bring a much deeper sense of integration than can be done by words alone. The arts and imagination help to make the ministry of spiritual direction more holistic and attuned to the mysterious ways of the divine. The inner life is rooted in symbol and image and speaks the language of dreams. This is also the primary language of the holy. Humans are aesthetic as well as rational beings and cannot fully encounter God without song or poetry or art.

The arts engage us in the fullness of our ways of knowing and connect us back to who we really are: creators made in the image of a Creator God. Learning to engage in creative expression is connecting to our innate knowledge. In this article I am encouraging us to remember this part of ourselves society diminishes: the part that explores new possibilities and ways of being. Artistic knowing is different from intellectual knowing, engaging us somatically and symbolically, stretching us beyond the limits of rational, linear thinking.

Discernment

Discernment is a growing sensitivity to and awareness of the action of God in one's daily life and the

understanding of one's own heart. Discernment is a way of being that encounters God in the center of our being and listens for the ways God speaks to us from this center through God's desires for our growing wholeness. Many times, directees first come to us for spiritual direction in the midst of transition. They want help in

listening to the still, small voice within them, guiding them toward life-giving choices. In discernment we listen to the truth of our inner self that dwells in God as distinct from all of the other voices both within and without that demand our attention and energy.

When we enter into a process of discernment, we are entering a threshold space in our lives. What has come before is different

than what comes after. Even if we ultimately choose to make no outward changes, we have approached our lives with intention and deep listening and thus made choices about how to live in a meaningful way. *Liminal* is derived from the Latin *limen*, meaning *threshold*. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes the liminal as the time and space of transition integral to all rites of passage. Entering this condition, a person leaves behind his or her old identity and dwells in a threshold state of ambiguity and openness. Discernment often thrusts us into a place of unknowing, waiting, and listening.

Structure is the order of our lives, when we can articulate who we are and where we are going. Anti-structure is a time of chaos. Liminal experiences are those transition experiences when we move from one to the other, experiences of passage. Image is vital in the anti-structure experience as image is the only language left. As Jung said, meaning comes to us in images first and only conceptual thought after.

Experiences that call us to discernment often subvert our everyday world and carry us out into the experience of wilderness and disorientation. Our words cannot yet carry the weight of the new meanings being born in the



Sharron Erro



darkness of anti-structure. In these times, image can be a vehicle for carrying the feelings and the meanings that we cannot yet articulate. Images help us to hold onto the experience, stay with it, and communicate it.

Gradually we develop words to go with the images. The symbol gives rise to thought and reflection. The image has helped to capture the intuitive feeling side of the experience and give the experience some manageable form. The concepts begin to capture the understandings resulting from the experience and help to define my world and what I now need to do and be. We are back in the structure again.

The arts hold this liminal space in the threshold and transition times, when we dwell in life's cracks and edges. This creative act of transforming our lives, of allowing something new to break forth and be birthed within is *poiesis*, the fundamental human capacity for the creation of new meaning.

There are many fine tools available to us for discernment, such as the Ignatian Rules and Quaker clearness committees. In this article, however, I will explore the arts as an essential tool for discernment that can be integrated with these other tools, offering directors a way to give form to the emerging images prior to being able to articulate them.

A central aspect of discernment is remembering who we really are, to reclaim and recognize the "true self" that dwells within us already, as Thomas Merton describes. Using the arts helps us to remember who we really are. The arts also honor possibility, imagination, questions, and mystery. The poet Rilke wrote, "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves.... Live the questions now" (p. 35). Discernment is about living and loving the questions of our lives, the unresolved places, and the arts help us to dwell in that space of the question by allowing us to honor the images and feelings without having to move to linear and logical thinking, the thinking that wants to find answers.

The arts help us to dwell in mystery and possibility and be present to the challenges of our lives: It is because the arts are rooted in the existential capacity of the imagination to transcend literal reality that they can serve to present alternative possibilities of being to us and afford us insights not known through cognitive

means.

Expressive Arts and the Creative Process

The arts have become both professionalized and specialized in our culture, with an emphasis on creating and consuming art products. We no longer value the daily experience of crafting or making. Most of us are too busy to even cook or garden or sew. We live in an entertainment-driven culture in which we are encouraged to be passively entertained by television, movies, and the internet and to receive premade images and sound bites rather than engage our own imaginations actively.

Much of my work engaging the arts in spiritual formation and direction is grounded in insights from the field of expressive arts therapy. Two emphases of the expressive arts that I find especially helpful in this work are process over product and the integration of various art forms:

1. Process over product. While what we create can be an important source of insight for our own journeys, equally important is the process of art-making itself. Noticing what is stirring within us as we engage with the materials, noticing places of resistance, and listening for movements of the spirit are all places for self-awareness and growth. The focus is not on specific techniques or the quality of the product itself but on the power and process of symbolic expression in any of the arts.

2. The integration of various art forms. The integration of different art modalities deepens meaning and knowing in ways one form of expression cannot access. By moving from poetry to visual art to music to movement, for example, each art modality opens up the experience in new ways. The integration of these new meanings creates insights that don't happen from engaging in just one form.

Art-Making as Pilgrimage

One of the metaphors I like to use for the art-making process is *pilgrimage*. A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken of spiritual significance, in which an outward physical journey parallels an inner spiritual one. On a pilgrimage, as in art-making, we take a journey to encounter the sacred in a more intimate way in our lives. We prepare for the journey and the art-making time with prayer and take what we need with us. Pilgrims bring an intention for the journey, and intention is an essential element for making the time

*A complementary
metaphor
to pilgrimage
is looking at
art-making
as tabernacle.
A tabernacle
is a dwelling place
for the holy.
Creative processes
help us to make
space for an encounter
with God
while also creating
a safe container
in which
to experiment
and explore
new possibilities.*

of creating art an act of prayer. On pilgrimage, as in the art-making process, we risk entering the unknown with the hope of being transformed. We leave our familiar world behind. We are also connected to a whole community of people who have taken this journey before us, who take it alongside of us, and who will take it in the future. It is the journey itself that is important, more so than the end goal. We are transformed in the doing of it, allowing ourselves to be led through the inner and outer experience by the divine impulse.

Art-making as pilgrimage helps us to understand the arts as both a *vehicle of discovery* and a *way of being* in the world. The theologian Jeremy Begbie writes that art-making goes beyond entertainment and self-expression and “can also reveal, disclose, open up the world we live in, and in unique ways. In other words, art-making can be a vehicle of discovery” (p. xi). When we enter the creative process with the intention of listening for the movements of the Spirit in the midst of the work, we discover new insights about ourselves and God. Engaging the arts in a prayerful way also helps us to develop ways of being in the world that respect mystery and cultivates a way of deeply listening to what is stirring within us.

Art-Making as Tabernacle

A complementary metaphor to *pilgrimage* is looking at art-making as *tabernacle*. A tabernacle is a dwelling place for the holy. Creative processes help us to make space for an encounter with God while also creating a safe container in which to experiment and explore new possibilities. “The practice of the arts, as disciplined rituals of play in painting, sculpting, acting, dancing, making music, writing, story-telling, is and always was a safe container, a secure vessel to meet existential themes, pathos, and mystery” (Knill, p. 45). The arts allow us to explore and look at new, uncomfortable, or scary feelings by giving them shape and form, revealing new insights to us. They also create a meditative space in which one is held in the present moment. Working with the arts in spiritual direction or retreat settings, I see one of my roles as holding the space and making a safe container for participants or directees to explore new territory and encounter the sacred in new ways.

Resonance and Dissonance

Two principles that I like to make people aware of when they begin an art-making process are what I call *resonance* and *dissonance*. When we engage the arts as a time of prayer and discovery, we listen to what is happening within us for information about ourselves and God. Tending to the places of strong emotional response, whether positive or negative, can provide extraordinary insights. When working with the arts, we may be engaging external images, such



as in collage work or photography, or internal images, such as movement and painting. Both kinds of images can elicit a response that acts as a vehicle of discovery. *Resonance* means *richness* or *significance*, especially evoking an association or strong emotion. As I move into my creative time, what images and symbols that arise in me offer me a sense of richness or significance in my life? Similarly, dissonance also evokes strong emotion, but because of a sense of conflict or lack of harmony. Which images and symbols elicit a strong negative reaction, and how does this response offer clues to me of areas of resistance perhaps not even in my awareness yet?

Guidelines for Using the Arts

I offer some initial words before moving into specific suggestions for engaging the arts as a spiritual practice. The first six suggestions are about ways to engage the arts personally, which is essential to leading others in art experiences. The last two are suggestions for engaging others in the experience of art-making.

1. Always try the exercise yourself before engaging another person in it, whether in direction or a retreat setting. Use suggestions 2 to 6 to facilitate your own creative process. As you grow comfortable with this way of praying, you can use these as guidelines for leading others into an arts experience.

2. To begin, connect with your breath as a grounding practice that roots you in your body. The arts draw on the wisdom of our bodies. Use meditation and intention to practice receptivity to images as a way of encountering the holy.

3. It is helpful to begin art-making by cultivating a stance of openness, of letting go of control of the outcome, and risking the unfamiliar—all qualities essential to good discernment itself.

4. As much as possible, engage in spontaneous expression that helps break through blocks. Don't spend too much time "thinking it through." Allow the Spirit to be a part of the creative process.

5. Focus on the creative process itself; notice your places of resistance as well as movement and flow. Listen for experiences of both resonance and dissonance and what those experiences have to teach you.

6. Notice what the art form itself has to teach you—for example, working with collage is a very differ-

ent experience from paint or clay. The materials you work with themselves can elicit different responses.

7. When working with the arts in a spiritual direction session, it is important to always frame the possibility as an invitation to the directee.

8. When leading others in art-making, always begin with experiences that have greater structure to create a sense of safety. Build the freedom of the experience in incremental steps.

I suggest below a few simple ways of beginning to work with the visual arts and movement in a direction session. Poetry and music are also rich areas of exploration, but in the interest of space here, they will be the topic of future articles.

Visual Arts as a Way of Knowing

There are many different mediums for the visual arts. You can use clay, collage, assemblage, paint, mosaic, paper cutting, and fabric, to name just a few. Depending on the medium, we may be seeking internal or external images. Both approaches are valuable tools. Each medium also uses different materials that have their own texture and shape to which it is helpful to pay attention.

Here I suggest two exercises for discernment.

Reflection Using Clay

The first exercise is a simple one using a lump of clay. Begin with the scripture text of Jer 18:1–6:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Close your eyes and hold this image in your mind and heart and begin playing with the clay. Get familiar with the clay; notice how it feels in your hand. Play with it for a while, appreciating its texture and the way it resists.



Don't worry about making an image, just be present to the materials and to what is stirring inside of you. As you continue to listen and be present, begin to notice if there are any images bubbling up. As you continue to play with the clay, notice if it wants to be formed into a particular shape. Hold the question in your heart of how is God shaping and forming you? Work with the clay for a while, perhaps ten minutes or longer, engaging in the process, tending what comes to you without censoring. After the experience is over, reflect on how the process of working with the clay felt and what you noticed about your own reactions. How did you feel God moving in you during this time? Where did you experience resonance or dissonance? What does the process and what you created have to tell you about your discernment process?

Collage Exploration

One of my favorite mediums for visual art is collage because it is an especially good art form for those who are new to the arts or hesitant, as it relies on found images rather than creating one's own. Collage can be especially helpful in noticing images of resonance and dissonance. Look through images in magazines and notice which ones give you energy and which repel you. In a time of discernment you might focus on an intention, such as creating an image of the possibilities ahead and sort through images noticing which ones invite you and those that either repel you or that you think don't "fit" with what you are discerning. As the collage comes together, notice where the images are placed in relation to one another and notice where your energy is drawn in the image. What does this collection of images say to your discernment process?

Movement as a Way of Knowing

How often we forget we are embodied beings. One simple way of being in touch with the body in spiritual direction is taking time regularly during the session to check in and notice what feelings arise and where they are located in the body. Placing a hand over this area is an elemental way of connecting to our physical selves. When a directee is sharing an experience that seems especially pregnant with meaning or feeling, invite him or her to pause briefly and rest in silence just noticing the feelings and body sensations that are stirring, where they are

located, and then if comfortable, to make contact with the place and just notice what rises up. This simple exercise can help cultivate greater body awareness for both directee and spiritual director.

Contemplative Walk

Another simple suggestion I use for my directees is a contemplative walk. I walk daily as a spiritual discipline of both being present to my body and being aware of what is happening in the natural world around me. The seasons themselves have rich questions to ask us in times of discernment.

I suggest this format for a discernment walk: Begin by simply being present to the world around you. Notice how your body is feeling. Listen to where you are being led; try not to think about it. Allow your body's own intelligence to guide you. Encourage a deep listening to the body's messages and intuitions. Let this time be a pilgrimage of the heart, noticing where you are being invited to go and where to linger. Try to let go of any goals you have for this time. Even if you walk only a few steps and simply notice, that is enough. After spending time slowing down and being present to what is around you, you might begin tending to the questions stirring within you in response to this presence. What does nature have to say to you? What questions are being asked?

Let this poem by David Wagoner guide you:

Lost

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a hush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you. (P. 10)

Let yourself be found. Listen to the questions of the season. We live our lives so out of touch with the world of nature, in our technological rhythms rather than in the



rhythms of the seasons and of our bodies. Remembering who we are also means connecting with the natural world around us. I find that each season has its own profound questions to ask: In autumn I might consider what I need to let go of, what is dying within me? In winter I might ask where are the bare places in my life and where are the seeds lying dormant? Spring evokes images of blossoming and new life within, while summer is for me both about the fullness of life and time for play. As you walk through the world, what questions does nature ask of you at this particular time of your life? Actually going out into a forest can help, but we can usually find a park or even a tree-lined street that helps us to connect again. Finally, once you have become present to the world around you and listened for the questions being asked of you, ask yourself how you walk in this world. Embody your response in the actual movement of your legs and feet across the ground. Then ask how you want to walk in the world. Notice how your body feels and wants to respond. What does this have to say to your discernment process? How does what stirs within you and your body's reaction give you new information?

Working with Images in Direction

When directees have created a piece of art, whether in the session or between sessions, how are we then to receive it? Just as with the life story of the people we work with, their images and words and movements are to be held in loving reverence. Spend significant time focusing on the process of art-making itself. What did they notice? How did it feel? What were the places of greatest joy and challenge? Where did they notice resonance and dissonance?

In considering the artwork itself, resist imposing your own interpretations and be present to the images and symbols by allowing directees to share the story. Ask questions that encourage reflection. Take time to be with and inhabit the images, allowing them to integrate the images with their life story and take root. If you work with dreams, you can use similar tools to unpack the meaning of the images that have risen up from the same unconscious place within. These are all tools to help access the world of images that lives and flourishes inside of us, opening us up to the vast world of our ways of knowing.

The symbols and images that emerge in art-making are much like the images that arise in our dreams—they have multiple layers and meanings. Consider inviting

your directees to use their images as icons that continue to reveal dimensions of the holy in their lives. My experience is that images created out of prayer continue to speak to the creator long after the initial process, as so often the images and body sensations hold expressions of who we are and how we long to be with God long before we can articulate them in words.

Conclusion

One way I would define *artist* is one who sees and listens deeply to what is happening below the surface, attends to the particular, and then gives outward form and expression. I would say something similar about the spiritual director. Our role is to companion our directees on the spiritual journey and help them to a way of deeper listening and seeing so that they may come to recognize God's presence in all areas of their lives.

The arts help expand our ways of knowing God beyond the cognitive. The arts open up ways of listening to the new possibilities and ways of being that are being birthed within us. They especially help us to tend to times of discernment, when images are surfacing before they have the language to go with them.

The Sufi poet Hafiz, in his poem "Saints Bowing in the Mountains," asks: "Do you know how beautiful you are?... I see saints bowing in the mountains / Hundreds of miles away / To the wonder of sounds / That break into light / From your most common words." The arts call us back to the memory of our beautiful, true selves.

References

- Barks, Coleman, trans. *The Essential Rumi*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995.
- Begbie, Jeremy. *Beholding the Glory*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.
- Knill, Paolo. "Soul Nourishment or the Intermodal Language of the Imagination." In *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publications, 1999.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993.
- TallMountain, Mary. *The Light on the Tent Wall*. Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, 1990.
- Wagoner, David. *Traveling Light*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999.