Poetic listening and Inspiration for the Spiritual Director

Let the poetry of prayer open your heart
right down the sternum

Introduction

This chapter is addressed to the spiritual director who discerns that the use of poetry in spiritual direction might be prayerful and helpful for some persons. Poetry is prayer as I have discussed in Chapter Three. It is also a Spiritual Exercise or action as Ignatius indicates in the Spiritual Exercises:

By this name of Spiritual Exercises is meant every way of examining one’s conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions ... [1].

As a giver of the Spiritual Exercises, spiritual director and formator of spiritual directors, I have engaged with writing poetry as prayer and reflection in a variety of ways which honour a person’s sacred story as well as my own.

Spiritual direction and giving the Spiritual Exercises are offered in many forms, and ‘direction’ is understood severally. Spiritual direction can occur when a director guides the kind of prayer a directee wants to pray or is expected to pray. It can be understood as personal and prayerful accompaniment, companioning, or co-discerning. Spiritual direction is importantly an encounter in which the spiritual direction or path of a person is discerned. Spiritual direction presumes that spirituality in the lives of praying individuals is a dynamic process in which a person may move along many different paths. Both the spiritual director and the directee are engaged in a dynamic journey with God.

As God is in all things, nothing ought to be excluded from spiritual direction. Monty Williams challenges narrow views of spiritual direction by saying “Everything is
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spiritual direction.”¹ I understand this statement as meaning that everything in life has a spiritual direction; everything can invite a person towards spiritual well-being or its opposite. I also understand that even a crisis holds an invitation to choose what is life-giving. If everything can come into the spiritual direction conversation, mutual and helpful co-discernment of the religious experience, which a directee shares, is possible especially when there is a benevolent disposition between director and directee so that the relationship might experience resonance, synchrony and trust.²

It is very helpful to him who is receiving the Exercises to enter them with great courage and generosity towards his Creator and Lord, offering³ Him all his will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may make use of his person and of all he has according to His most holy will [5].

In this chapter, I will explore

- Writing poetry as Ignatian prayer
- Poetic listening in spiritual direction
- An exercise in poetry-writing
- The poem in spiritual direction
- Self-disclosure in poetry and spiritual direction
- Self-supervision after spiritual direction
- Seeking pathways through poetry.

Preliminary considerations

Poetry requires word skills but not more than average mastery. Familiarity with basic grammar and punctuation helps to clarify meaning. My education in this regard was average but I observe my interest is above average, such that I had an open disposition to the complexities of linguistics; form, meaning and content, especially idiom.

² A detailed study on inter-subjectivity is found in Stern, The Present Moment, especially 75-111.
³ “Offering” is in St Ignatius’ handwriting, correcting “giving” or “presenting” which is crossed out.
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Poets are practitioners who study, use and challenge traditional linguistics. As such, poets know if they are bending or offending the rules of language. I wrote for many years without formal education in poetry writing.⁴ I read books about poetry forms and language.⁵ ‘Inspiration’—with its etymology in ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’, the source of sustained life—sustains my interest in writing poetry.

Prayer is desire for God and an awareness of the presence of God in life. Poetry is distilled communication of meaning at many levels. The poem The right words, speaks about words in prayer-poetry which are ‘right’ because they seem to originate in God and return to God.

The right words

There is no point snatching words from the air—they are the wrong words. They will break you.
The right words float into you—they make you; recreate you.

Writing poetry as Ignatian prayer

a. Preparing for prayer

Prepositioning God, the experimental prayer-poem preceding the present chapter in Fig. 18. helps me to examine my disposition as I begin a prayer time. The idea of the poem emerged as I experimented with circular computer images of the word ‘God’. The image was mesmerising, and I experienced a sense of being ‘in God’ as I gazed at it. After the awareness of ‘in God’ emerged, I wrote ‘in’ in the centre of the image and added many other prepositions as well.

The title came as a surprise to me. I experimented with ‘proposition’, ‘preposition’, ‘pre-positioning’ and ‘position’. I mused over ‘God’ and ‘me’ as subject and object, such as ‘Me prepositioning God’ and ‘God prepositioning me’. I experimented with

⁴ I have studied Poetry as part of various Writing courses at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in Melbourne.
colour: yellow at first, then muted shades of grey or mauve felt more invitational to me. The poem is used as a centring exercise and can be helpful as a prayer in itself. 

b. Place and Inspiration

Posture and environment contribute to poetic inspiration. Ignatius says:

[I] enter on the contemplation now on my knees, now prostrate on the earth, now lying face upwards, now seated, now standing, always intent on seeking what I want [76].

Inspiration for poetry can happen anywhere. Reading, experiences of travel or conversations can inspire me to write. Many poets write in coffee shops as I do. I write in prayer, late at night, when I wake or walk, at weddings and meetings. It feels unfortunate when I do not have paper and pen at hand. I write on serviettes, used envelopes, the back of shopping lists and in journals. Over years I have written dozens of journals, but much of my present poetry is written directly into the computer. Musing is the term which poets use in relation to pondering. Mr Brown in the film Bright Star which is about the poet John Keats (1795-1821), speaks succinctly and eloquently in saying that musing is ‘making one’s mind available for inspiration’.

coffee breakthrough

coffee stains the pauses
ordinary aroma swirling
warm surrounding us
I put down my cup
take up yours
you swallow
speak the hard things
I dip my biscuit
You tilt your cup

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7 Jane Campion. "Bright Star." 114 minutes: Pathé Productions Limited; Screen Australia; British Broadcasting Corporation; UK Film Council; New South Wales Film and Television Office; Jan Chapman Productions Pty. Ltd., 2009.
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drench your lips  
spill on the table  
splash on sponge  
coffee circles  
wiped away  
and the aroma lingers

c. Composition of Place

All the senses are engaged in poetry writing. I see, hear, touch, taste, smell and use my intuition in detailing the content of a poem. Ignatius wrote about applying the senses in prayerful contemplation. He encouraged use of the imagination and ‘composition of place.’

The first prelude is a composition, seeing the place ...to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. [47].

At times, when I attempt to write poetry without an initial image in mind, I intentionally try to become posturally and interiorly still and to clear my mind so as to allow words and images to emerge unencumbered. Simple exercises such as attending to breath, heartbeat or turning my awareness consciously to my extremities or other body parts can help to prepare me for this exercise.⁸ There are many competitors vying for mind space; coming to stillness can take some time.

While I think these preliminary practices are reliable and useful, the most consistent preparation I use is mind focus which happens concomitantly with inspiration. Inspiration makes my body and mind take notice. It heightens my awareness through the senses and the spiritual senses. This inspiration is the outcome of creative interaction of the exterior world of concrete and symbolic structures with the interior landscape of my life. At times I find that affective engagement with music supports or precipitates this inspiration. A period of absence from poetry can also be a source of inspiration, as in the following haiku:⁹


⁹ A haiku follows a particular form of 17 syllables 5-7-5 in three lines having a seasonal reference. The rules to a traditional Japanese haiku do not translate well in English. Many English ‘haiku’ are modified.
blank winter silence
interred metaphors await
recomposition

Any one of the three lines in the haiku black winter silence could be the starting place for another poem, and another entry into the mystery of poetry and how it awakens the whole self including the spiritual senses.

When the inspiration comes, I might imagine the physical place of the poem’s content. Before I begin writing, there might be a phrase or line in my mind. There might be the beginning or ending, or less often, the title. When I begin writing I let the words lead me. I do not lead the words. I have an organic approach to writing consistent with autoethnography. This approach enjoys a surprising relationship with words, language and content, something like a knock at the door from an unexpected visitor. The ideas emerge from the past and open the future before me. As such, the poems are a slice of life and offer a new contribution to life. They are a microcosm of human ideas.

Inspiration opens the door to spaciousness. It invites the poet to enter the interior composition of place. For me, poetry is the most centered place in which I can be, and hence it is a most prayerful place, the place of consolation and invitation.

d. Imagination

A fertile imagination assists a poet in growing a poem from within. In a free association of words I follow the content as it emerges through my faculties in a stream of consciousness similar to dreaming. In terms of the journey with God, the worth of the poem is measured by its meaningfulness to the person who creates it. With practice and attentiveness, the imagination has the capacity to further personal growth and vision.

The perceived quality of the poem for others is dependent on the depth and breadth of the poet’s personal interaction with the external and internal worlds of words, ideas and symbols, and his or her ability to distil those interactions in language. It also depends on the life experience and disposition of the reader.
e. Form and Formation

The imagination comes to fruit in the form of the poem as well as the content. The poet allows the content to develop the poem in fixed forms such as a sonnet, a repetitive poem like a pantoum, villanelle or sestina, or a shaped concrete poem. Some poets choose the form and let it dictate the content of the poem. Mostly I begin with the content and let it dictate the form. Repetitive poems act on the person like repetitive music, affirming the constancy of that line, the constancy of life, or the faithfulness of God.

I find that a free form is best for most of my poetry. Free verse it not restricted by traditional rhyme and metric patterns but neither is it simply prose put into short lines. It demands that line lengths, line endings and arrangement of words and verses have a purpose. It may contain any of the tools of poetry such as alliteration, rhymes of consonance, assonance and the sound echoes of onomatopoeia. It always demands a distillation of ideas. It uses figurative language such as simile and metaphor, and usually holds individual and universal meaning.

f. Poetic intention

There are relational components in poetry, such as my desire to be in relationship with God, the reader and myself. Poets do not necessarily intend their readers to ‘discover’ what is in their minds, as I have heard said. While readers might discover what is in the mind of a poet, it is more important for me to know the content and processes of my own mind, than for anyone else to know, and further that a reader discovers what is in his or her own thoughts and feelings in response to a poem he or she reads. While poetry reveals more about the poet than about anyone else, it is a vehicle for a reader’s self-communication. It helps people to define themselves, their sameness and difference to another or others.

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The poet in spiritual direction

a. Listening to voice

I listen to my directees’ stories as a poet attends to detail – to what is said and not said. The listening acuity of a spiritual director and poet are similar.

The Spiritual Exercises have to be adapted to the dispositions of the persons who wish to receive them, that is, to their age, education, or ability... Again, that should be given to each one by which, according to his wish to dispose himself, he may be better able to help himself and to profit. [#18]

As the introduction to this work suggests, I instinctively knew from a young age that voice and word were related; I spoke poems to my mother. Attentiveness to voice refines the work of spiritual direction. The poet’s audible voice accents her meaning at many levels as Kirk-Duggan suggests: ‘We use our voices as accents to pronounce, proclaim and announce.’

Gilligan et al write about voice as a relational method:

Voice is a distinct footprint of the psyche, bearing the marks of the body, of that person’s history, of culture in the form of language, and the myriad ways in which human society and history shape the voice and thus leave their imprints on the human soul.

Voice is inextricable from our relationships and culture. People’s voices have their own tonality, specific inflections, slope and cadence, playful and sorrowful tones, shrill and seemingly manic tones, those of dread and fear, repressed in the throat or free and floating tones, aggressive, demanding tones, unpredictable edges, uncharacteristic indifferent tones that create suspicion and fear, whining and manipulative tones, resonant or muffled tones, the tones of musical and lyrical language, rhythmic and metric patterns of language and the arrangement of language that accompanies these differences.

Sometimes these differences seem intensified by focusing on listening with closed eyes. Sometimes they are enhanced by visual cues and exploring words. We read things into what is said (isogesis) or out of what is said (exegesis). We receive the voice of another as if filtered through or soaked in our own agenda. In spiritual direction, directors need to develop self-awareness to the extent that we can distinguish between the voices of ourselves and our directees. Self-awareness developed through poetry or some other technique enables us to become familiar with these voices and with patterns of movement between consolation and desolation. The multiple voices are those of people, place and culture which reside within the directee and director. They make their way invited and uninvited into a person’s story and poetry in the context of spiritual direction. I mention some familiar voices outlined by Peter Bentley: the ego; the inner critic; the doubter; the activist; the analyst; the diablos or ‘divider’; the shadow; the enemy. All of these have the capacity to free or undermine a person. Once recognized, they can also invite self-acceptance and love.

b. Aural elements of poetry

If a person brings raw poetry to spiritual direction, the sound of the poem might importantly contribute to the content as in well-crafted poetry. When the poem is read aloud, the chords of the poem reflect the content. They might be jagged or discordant, or repeat certain movements or phases. They might have short sharp lines to create tension, and long lines to improve flow and freedom. Some people have a sense of rhythm and voice modulation which match the natural iambic metre of the English language. Certain stresses are natural when we speak. Some people are more attuned to this and can hear discord more readily than other people.

c. The non-poet’s guide to poetry

Poetry can be explored in order to deepen intimacy with oneself and God. Although writers such as Edwina Gately, Diarmuid O’Murchu and Elizabeth-Anne Vanek have specifically married poetry and scripture through poems which tell the stories from scripture in various contemporary ways, I describe a way for the novice-poet to begin

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Just as the specifics of life and prayer experience, images and artwork, journal material, scripture, music, and movement are the content of spiritual direction, so is poetry. I have found that some directees write poetry every day of a retreat and some never do. Sharing poetry in spiritual direction is typical spiritual direction with a person who is willing to address liminal experience.

d. Performance anxiety

Rilke says to Mr Kappus, the young poet, that it is a mistake to compare one poem with another or to be disturbed when an editor rejects a poem for publication.

Now (since you have allowed me to advise you) I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. … There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out if it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart …\footnote{Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet. Translated by M.D. Herter Norton. Revised ed. (New York: W.W. Norton &Co. Ltd, 1954. Reprint, 2004). 16.}

In spiritual direction, there are no rejected poems, but there might be poems left unwritten, so in response to Rilke, I write this poem:

Dear blocked-writer

You say:

I cannot write poetry.

Such irony.

You speak,

form letters and words.

I am listening.

But, my poetry will not be good enough

It will be food enough.
Do you say ‘no’ to food
you have cooked and seasoned?
Savour it.
I remain.

Rejected-writer.

As the aural and oral elements are integral to poetry because rhythm and voice add depth dimensions, a person might consciously or unconsciously believe that all the poetry they write is for performance. Performance anxiety or panic about not being ‘good enough’ or that something bad might happen in the performance are issues for spiritual direction.

What an inestimable grace it is to recognize and appreciate all that is good enough in ourselves and in our lives! Good enough for our love, loyalty, dedication, and humble gratitude. Good enough insists there is something between perfection and mediocrity.\(^{16}\)

Poets are vulnerable. They write from layers of personal raw experience. The spiritual director’s respect is paramount as in all spiritual direction, regardless of the quality of the poem.

An exercise in writing poetry

The following exercise is for beginners and experienced writers when accompanied or unaccompanied by a spiritual director. It is also a helpful tool for group work. I have used the reflexive process language of Ferder: Notice, Name, Own and Respond.\(^ {17}\)

Ignatius reminds us:

If the person who is making the contemplation takes the true groundwork of the narrative and discussing and considering for himself, finds something which makes the events a little clearer or brings them a little more home to him – whether this comes through his own reasoning, or because his intellect is enlightened by the divine power – he will get more spiritual relish and fruit, than if he who is giving the Exercises had explained and amplified the meaning of the events. For it is not

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in knowing much but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul [2].

a. Notice: becoming ready to listen

As with all reflective practices, it is helpful to have at hand the tools required for the Exercise: pen, journal and spider diagram as below. It is also effective to begin with some silence, stillness:

1. Sit in a comfortable chair, clear your lap, let the chair support you.

2. Choose a posture which will allow you to breathe well.

3. Take in three deep breaths, enjoying the life that breath gives to you.

4. Settle into normal breathing.

5. Become aware of how you feel, and name it.

6. Run your mind over the experiences of the last day, beginning with now and going backwards until you find an experience which takes your attention, moves you in one way or another, is pleasant, happy, annoying or disconsolate .... Give the experience a name – a word or phrase.  

b. Name: writing

7. Take up your journal with the spider diagrams (similar to the one below) drawn on each of two sheets of paper.

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18 Alternatives to the words in italics are as many as the poems possible e.g. childhood memories; a person’s words to you; colloquy with God; words from scripture; an experience of imaginative prayer; a conversation you would like to have; an idea; a belief; a value; a dream; line from a song or poem; an image; an image of God; a person’s name; your own name.
8. In the body of the first spider, write your word or phrase.

9. While still in a reflective personal space, allow your word or phrase to inspire other freely-associated words or phrases. You might like to use the following ideas:

- Who are the players involved in this experience?

- Describe the experience in terms of place; colour; shape; texture; smell; taste; intuition.

- Use your feelings to describe the experience e.g. warm, cold, exciting, loving, expansive, limiting, fearful.

- Use your memory to deepen the experience e.g. It reminds me of ...; Last time this happened ...
- Use your desire to imagine the experience.

10. In the body of the second spider, write the word or phrase from one leg of the first spider chart, so as to begin the process again.

11. Repeat that process as often as you like until you have a satisfying collection of words and phrases.
Fig.21 Second spider diagram: Underline the most personally meaningful words as shown.

c. Own: the content of the poem

12. Underline your most meaningful words and phrases.

13. Link them into a sentence or a poem.

d. Respond: to the whole poem

14. Pray with the whole poem, allowing God to be present to your words and asking for wisdom. If you choose, you can begin the ‘Notice, Name, Own and Respond’ reflexive process again along with the spider chart, or you could allow your poem to minister quietly to you.

15. Does the poem ask you to respond in any way? Is there consolation or desolation which calls or requires you to act?

e. The poem as revelation

*Seeing it through* demonstrates the outcome of the process I used in relation to a simple appointment with the salesman who came to measure our windows for fly-screens. My cynical first impressions of the man gradually changed. I knew that engaging the process would be a helpful exercise to expose my preconceived
judgments of him. In writing the poem, I was able to express the consolation which my disturbance had invited.

Seeing it through

Blokey
But his values clear as glad wrap
wrapped me gladly

Clear unselfconscious
respect It was
not what he said
but that he said it
and the way he said it

I know the opposite
the stale smother
the busy parent
Catch you later

Today I relish flies
the need for screens
and open air
valuing of small things

The poem in spiritual direction

Once the directee has created a poem, he or she might decide to explore it in spiritual direction. Discernment speaks about one such experience.

Discernment

1.
Here I am holding the paper
my forehead lined
frightened and proud all at once
the ink shaped and formed
urgent like a river
words swimming
not good enough is not enough
to stop this desire I have to grow
in grace
I share myself with you
wanting you to help me see
God hiding under the ink.

2.
I muse; we muse
my circumspect self bunches words
in header and footer
spectators at the margins.

3.
Listening shapes me
elicits new words
clear and sharp
until all words feel right
and I am balanced on the page.

a. Clarity in the re-drafting process

The re-drafting perspective is slightly more objective than the first draft stance, but it is still important to allow affections, movements and intuitions to be identified as information as to what is relevant to explore, develop or omit.

Spiritual direction is not a re-drafting and editing space, but it engages in personal discernment which is like personal ‘re-drafting’ as addressed in Chapter Four, ‘Discernment: Poetry Writing, Re-drafting and Spiritual Direction.’ In spiritual direction, a director helps a person to hear what clouds or helps clarity. He or she tries to hear what the directee might hear, finds ambiguous or confusing. Like a poem, when images are clear, the directee’s words are distilled and poignant.

For me, the spider schema maintains focus, eliminates distractions, helping me to attend to what is important. The distilled words represent what matters to the person.
Just as each word in the poem matters to its immediate context and to the overall meaning(s), the same is true for the person.

Alex Skovron suggests that poems finished in the past belong to the past and ought not be redrafted, and that they represent a significant piece of developmental history in the poet’s life.19 In spiritual direction however, a person might revisit a previous unresolved matter with God and is invited to allow God to ‘re-draft’ the person by revisiting a poem.

b. Directing with poetic form

While a spiritual director would not be expected to be familiar with poetic form, he or she can explore simple meanings such as why a poet has chosen to end a line with a particular word as shown in the following example of enjambment.

White (1)

light blanches my seeing
burns through the senses, dark
shadows give shape to you.

White (2)

light blanches
my seeing burns through the senses,
dark shadows give shape to you.

The line endings and spacings enhance meaning in the overall poem. In the second version of the poem for example, ‘seeing’ becomes the acting subject instead of the acted upon object. The title of the poem could have been ‘White light’ or even ‘light’. The poem was written for an art exhibition for which I had not seen the paintings. It inspired artist Jennifer Long to paint the picture Shadow and Light which demonstrates the personal nature of the poem to the artist and her unique responses to it.20 Long’s imagery was not in my mind in writing the poem. This affirms the poem’s spaciousness, and that it did not impose my images or experience on the artist.

20 Jennifer Long has given permission for the reproduction of this painting for this thesis.
c. Clarity versus ambiguity

Words with multiple meanings, such as ‘light’ and ‘dark’ as in the poem *White*, or ‘smallness’ in the excerpt of the following poem *Still small voice* are only helpful in a poem when the multiple meanings or nuances develop and deepen rather than complicate and confuse the reading of the poem.

*Still small voice*

What does she have but smallness
when the marsh wren
can't hear her own sound; ...

Good poems show, not tell, such as *A Red, Red Rose* by Robert Burns, ‘Love is like a red, red rose’. It tells the reader nothing about love or the rose except its colour, so the reader can make his or her own associations. In its unedited form, it might have said ‘Love is soft and tender, fragile as a red rose’. ‘Soft, tender and fragile’ are fine adjectives but they impose themselves on the reader in a way that their absence does not. While ‘red rose’ might evoke feelings of beauty and fragrance in some people, I am reminded that my mother-in-law did not like red flowers. In spiritual direction,
exploration and explanation are invited to help the directee be more engaged with
his or her spiritual experiences.

d. Why use specific poetry in spiritual direction

There are some poems by well-known poets that I use for giving the Spiritual
Exercises. My rule of thumb is that the poem must speak to the desires of the person
praying the Spiritual Exercises, and hence speak to the graces of the Weeks. On some
occasions the poem might reference circumstances similar to those of the exercitant,
for example, loss, mystical experience or aspects of a life stage. In some cases, I
would avoid a poem overtly speaking to the person’s specific circumstances because
it might be understood that I have some presuppositions and judgments about them
and their circumstances.

An Internet search for poems about love, relationship, creation, grief, spirituality can
reward. Any of these searches can help to locate poems addressing the graces of the
Weeks.

e. Skeleton poems

Using a frame of the poem *Story Lines* can also be appropriate for example to assist
the Dossier Exercises in Week One. This particular frame invites rather than
imposes upon the exercitant. It begins with the image of ‘hands’ and asks the
exercitant to complete the poem with their own words.

*Story Lines*

Look at these hands

the patterns
whittled through story-making,

and remember

and wonder

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f. Writing poetry during spiritual direction

Ignatius encouraged the giver of the Exercises to listen to the directee’s interior movements so as to adapt Exercises to the person’s disposition and giftedness.

[H]e who is giving the Exercises ... should be faithfully informed of the various movements and thoughts which the different spirits put in him [the receiver]. For according as is more useful for him, he can give some spiritual exercises suited and adapted to the need of the soul so acted upon. [#17]

As a directee in various modes of spiritual direction, I have drawn mandalas, listened to music and written poetry. I have found these three progressive art forms – music, art, poetry – helpful in bringing to light some new ideas and awareness.

It was in this framework that I first heard ‘You are the poem’. I experienced this as a profoundly intimate moment with God; even so it took a year before I realized what those words held for me.

Fig. 23. You are the poem

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22 May 2008
The words on the drawing are: living water; freedom, all is not as it see(m)s; amen. The image looks like an eye to me, but also like an organic cell in multiplication and development.

As a director, I have directees who enrich their experience of sacred knowing by drawing a mandala around which they name or write comments. These comments can be the beginning or title of a poem.

There could be circumstances in which writing a poem in spiritual direction could be helpful. Gentle holding music having consistent or repetitive phrases might be a supportive accompaniment.24

The director could listen to the poem that the directee has written or could read the poem to the directee, so he or she could hear it from another’s voice, and receive the nuances of the director. This helps in defining what is important for the directee.

I think that it would be easier for a poet to nurture this practice than it would be for a spiritual director unpractised in poetry. But as I have shown in the spider chart, I think it is possible for all to learn ways to help an exercitant who wants to write poetry. The directee’s words are the most natural place to begin.

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23 Images on 31 July 2007
24 I am thinking of music such as Spiegel im Spiegel by Arvo Pärt or Pachabel’s Canon.
Self-disclosure in poetry and spiritual direction

In my training as a spiritual director, it was stressed that I was not to impose my views on the directee. I wrestled with the wisdom of offering my poetry to my directees. Spiritual directors with whom I spoke were at variance; some thought that offering my poetry was a boundary violation, others thought that it was an additional way in which I offered my presence to them.

He who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence him who is receiving them more to a poverty or a promise, than to their opposites, nor to one state or way of life than another ... but standing in the centre like a balance, leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord. [#15]

As I read articles on self-disclosure in spiritual direction, or in a therapeutic relationship, I became more comfortable with the spiritual direction environment as a place of shared experience in which my directee and I were in relationship with each other and God. 25 Graced meeting space shows any director self-discloses through the shared meeting space.

Graced meeting space

i.
At reception, we put faces to voices, smile, shake hands, Enter the retreat centre in silence. We walk along the hallway. stop at room 10. My name and job title are on the door above the opaque window. Please do not disturb, says the sign I have slipped over the door knob.

I say, Come.

Inside
warm, square and small,
the room tries not to be an office.
The computer is closed,
phone switched to silent,
clock, visible.

Paint is pale, dull. A standard
lamp dim-lights the 10-feet ceiling.

Wrought iron secures
the single-width unwashed window
on the south wall.

A picture, photographed
six weeks after the Canberra fires
(in which a friend lost
everything that doesn’t matter),
is proud with pink and green buds
defiant from the worst degree burns.

On the western wall, an aerial photograph
of split light gleams on a battered ocean.

A royal blue circular mat,
detailed in deliberate red and gold swirls,
is evocative, I am told.
It makes soft the boundary for two
cherry fake leather tub chairs face to face.

The small table (from the Salvos)
covered with swathes of soft silk,
has three cushions around its legs.

A lit candle and a sculpture,
a picture of a dry South American landscape
across two large pages,
an aging Indian in the foreground,
suggest what they do to my companion.

From my chair, I see a picture:
two almond eyes
in each smooth and rounded figure.
One holds; one is held.

I say: The door to the adjoining room
is never opened.

I do not say
There are secret chambers.

I do not say
The room is a poem.

ii.
The poetic has begun
with a rhyme in resonance.
Knowing mirrors knowing.
Poems mirror poems.
The space has meter and music;
There is a sonnet or lament,
the rise and fall of
elation and desolation,
joy and sorrow,
fear and love
Pause and silence,
tense moments
intense moments.
Full stops.

Always one who longs to be heard;
one who longs to speak the right word.
We bring all of us
coming to know who we are.

Difference makes no difference.

In the following quote, equally valid for spiritual direction as for therapy, psychotherapist Claudia Elliott says:

The therapist’s instrument is orchestral. It includes the therapist’s whole self and surround all of which influence the process, whether acknowledged and utilized or not … Like musicians, we therapists spend our time practicing the instruments of ourselves in the fullest, most intuitive and integrated ways possible for our patients and for pure experience.\textsuperscript{26}

Elliott uses expressive arts in her work. She stresses that her patients take the lead, and although most people come to talk, some are benefitted by the use of poetry, art or music when spoken language might seem too risky. I believe that the risk of self-exposure is in fact heightened by the use of the arts because they can precipitate movement of material from the unconscious to the conscious arena. I do agree however that these media hold and respect the emotions as I have experienced in well-guided imagery and music (GIM).

Withholding myself suggests God withholds. That is counter-productive behavior in spiritual direction, when the purpose of spiritual direction is to accompany another in their growing intimacy with God.\textsuperscript{27} I open myself to the directee not in a literal way as I might if I shared my story literally, but as one who is on the spiritual journey as well. We are vulnerable companions.\textsuperscript{28}

Each spiritual director needs to reflect on ways in which he or she self-discloses unintentionally. I present myself to my directees within the space of my practice. Whether my walls are covered in paintings or have none, my directees learn about


\textsuperscript{28} I am thinking here of the idea of ‘vulnerable observer’ from Ruth Behar, \textit{The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
me. My directees have their unique ways of perceiving. They might know for example whether I have a tendency to co-dependency such as to rescue, to be maternal or to working harder than I need to in the spiritual direction space.\textsuperscript{29} They learn about me through my posture, questions and responses. Offering poetry appropriately is an expression of my disposition, which is of openness and vulnerability as a director in the presence of God and the directee. It is clear to me now that if my focus is on the person and their relationship with God, poetry is the servant of this relationship and my directee’s growing freedom and wisdom in God.

I want all my work to open a way to freedom. My degree of transparency can help or hinder the development of trust. Self-disclosure for its own sake is unprofessional and unwise. It will happen despite a spiritual director’s best efforts not to influence a person.

When I offer poetry, I read the poem aloud because I believe voice and word are inseparable. The poem might help in imaginative contemplation. I might explore the exercitant’s response as I would anything that an exercitant might say. As with any poetry presented, it must be given indifferently, that is, without expectations of the directee.

**Self-supervision after spiritual direction**

a. Name of grace

The poem *Name of Grace* speaks to the power which love has to orientate a person towards the life-giving journey. It says that one’s name of grace is a centring place and tool of discernment. When a director is listening and acting in accordance with his or her name of grace, resonance and disturbance are more easily identified in the directee to whom he or she is listening.

*Name of Grace* and the critique I offer for self-supervision model the way imaginative poetry speaks to the journey of my ‘name of grace’ or ‘personal vocation’. It shows the enlightenment of seeing a life-giving choice necessary to live life abundantly.

The poem suggests that God’s offer, available to each person, is the gaze of love. In this case the person is the rich young man in Matthew’s gospel 19.13-26 who has not yet discerned his name of grace.

Name of Grace

Do not rest God, until the seventh day
when I am my name of grace,
And all disgrace which would bar my face
from seeing
your eyes gaze on the deeper layers of myself,
is abandoned or transformed.

I am the young man upon whom you looked and loved
and asked for rich relinquishment.
It was not wealth, but an attachment to the thing
which stopped his seeing your desire for him.

And if he had the courage to return your gaze,
he would have known himself
as loved and as such, rich
without a shred of purple on his body.

He would have felt the quickening of nakedness,
fear and desire wedded,
your eyes softly falling
as a cloak of love and intimacy.

Who could want, once this love is known?
He would have followed you anywhere,
had he had returned your gaze.

Love waits

gazing at his heart’s desire
and his latent name of grace.

30 This poem offers a way of introducing the Two Standards meditation in Week Two of the Spiritual Exercises.
31 Purple clothing was a sign of wealth at the time of Jesus.
The rich young man had sought God’s desire but not yet married his own desire to God’s desire. Goodness and desire, and even illumination, are not conversion. He was not yet able to say ‘yes’ to the inward and outward movement in response to the call on his life. My experience affirms that when I seek God sincerely, God is already united with me in desire. The next step is to allow God to appropriate life change.

Reflection is integral to Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius writes:

After finishing the exercise, I will look at how it went with me in the contemplation or meditation, and if badly, I will look for the cause from which it proceeds ... in order to correct myself in the future; and if well ... will do in like manner another time.

b. Writing the director’s experience

Poetry writing as a form of self-supervision has been the most helpful means of exposing some of the more difficult dynamics in spiritual direction relationships. One method I use is to write my immediate response to what has happened in the session. Generally, I write a feeling response which has woven itself around the interview. I might also develop an image related to the feeling I have, and use that image in the writing. I explore the image before writing, for example, if I have an image of a deflated ball, I ask myself what I think and how I feel about the image. I might become the image, and see from the inside what the world looks like. I ask myself if I have ever felt like that or thought about this image of myself before. I explore this asking as many questions as I can. The writing focus is on me, not on the directee.

At times I discover that the poem points to what I am holding on behalf of my directee or what my directee wants me to know about him or her but might not have said overtly.  

Here is a simple example in this untitled poem:

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Fisher, "The Shared Experience of Self-Disclosure." See especially page 13. This article speaks about transference and counter-transferences as useful therapeutic information about the client. "Counter-transference may be a crucial tool in contacting the patient’s repressed feelings. Whether the spiritual director reveals that to the directee, is a matter specific to the situation, but it must be said that the spiritual direction environment is not devoid of transferences and counter-transferences which happen in therapy and in everyday encounters". Although this is another thesis topic in itself, I believe that theory and practice in relation to these psychodynamic issues is necessary in the training of spiritual directors.
Untitled 1

She has stopped
expecting them to be interested
in her I am moved
I want God to bundle her safely
wrap her in swaddling
let her be a child for a while
not having to fix a damn thing
Oh God, help her.

From this poem I learn that my exercitant once believed that others might be interested in her, but has ceased to expect that. She will probably struggle to believe that God is interested in her. Perhaps she was worried that I as director might not be interested in her. The fact that she has shared this story with me indicates that she holds a small hope that I might be interested in her and her story. Although I do not show her the poem, I learn that I can and have shown her I am interested, and from that awareness, she might glean that God is interested also. I am also invited to hear in myself a maternal response. It is likely then that her hurt has come from her childhood.

I am moved to compassion by her story. The fact that I have been hurt in a similar way helps me to have empathy. I respond in the poem as a mother wanting her to know that she can be the object of love whether or not she is responsive or responsible. Although I have not wrapped her literally in anything, I recognise the posture I have had in spiritual direction with her was protective but not smothering love. The prayer-poem gave me the opportunity to bring my exercitant prayerfully before God.

I read the poem aloud and recorded it, playing it back to myself. I heard the long pause after ‘in her’. And with further reflection of the poem’s shape, the negative space in line three, I became aware that I have not seen all of her. She puts words around a vulnerable space, to make her feel safer. I recalled that I felt vulnerable with her every time we met. I have had a sense of unpredictability. I wondered if that is what it was like for her.
Untitled 2

The shape of the poem
peers at me like Ned Kelly
at a rectangular world.

I want to come unarmed

The poem leaks
There is a gaping hole
God won't stitch up.

In the poem Untitled 2, I show how my directee felt towards God. I am pleased that I have a deeper sense of her pain which will help me be more present to her in the future. Eventually I give the poem a name: Peering Out.

I speak the consolation of this new learning in the following poem, Old Wine New Wine, which in the last line uses ‘long finish’ as a metaphor for ‘lasting consolation’. The lasting nature of consolation characterizes its authenticity [14].

Old Wine New Wine

Why describe the wine
when you can savour it
When you can swirl its sweet
complexity over your perceptive buds,
when you can balance the acid
with the right food
and conversation, paying attention
to its transparency, its undertone,
it's long or abrupt finish.

Captivated by love, free, spacious, open, welcoming and generous are usually signs of consolation understood by Ignatius as interior movements towards God and wholeness. Signs of counter-movements might be experienced as being captive or imprisoned, constrained, closed, inhospitable and selfish [322, 325-6, 329, 333, 335].
c. Illumination

In hero mythology, the hero experiences illumination and always returns to share the insights of the illumination with others.

If Moses remained on his mountain, if the Buddha remained under the Bo tree, if Jesus remained on the mountain of transfiguration, then much work would be left undone.\(^{33}\)

In one to one supervision, a supervisor would always ask the spiritual director what the benefit of the new learning might be for ministry. In self-supervision, the question is the same – How am I now free to direct the person more fruitfully? The actual learning in this instance is to be open to explore the person’s disappointments in life especially in terms of significant others who have shown insufficient interest in him or her. I cannot stitch up the gaping hole in his or her life but I can be present to its complexity.

I am also aware that I cannot love her if I do not feel loved myself. I open myself to God’s love which will enable me to direct in an authentically loving way. The fruits of supervision are therefore for the director and the directee.

Seeking pathways through poetry

a. Language and culture

If givers of the Exercises and spiritual directors are sensitive to the religious culture of generation X (born circa mid 1960s to 1970s) and Y (born circa late 1970s - 1990s), they will be familiar with relevant symbols and images of God. Australian statistics reveal increasingly fewer of these two generations are interested in traditional institutional or even non-traditional churches. Of Australian-born generations, aged 25-34 in 2006, 26% identified with no religion—an increase from 20% when they were aged 15–24 in 1996, and 12% when 5–14 in 1986. Over this time period, Christianity among the cohort decreased from 75% in 1986 to 63% in 2006. This was despite the proportion of unrecorded responses to the religion question falling from 12% to 7.1%. This movement away from religion occurred over the ages when most would have left the family

In my experience, a person from Generation X or Y in spiritual direction wants to explore his or her spirituality in the experiences of nature, including the new cosmology, and relationships. Personal encounter with God will be through these important aspects of human life; nature in its beauty, sustaining power and interconnectedness, and relationships in their potential to love and nurture. These things show God’s abundance, love and creative presence. Nature, poetry and music are ways of moving through the barrier of religious language.

Spiritual directors cannot ignore the swell of spiritual seekers from outside the traditional Christian churches. Language in spiritual direction and spirituality resembles language in psychology and the reverse is also true. Individuation; imagination; integration; consciousness; awareness; discernment; meditation; spiritual guidance; empathy; listening; spirit; symbol; grief; longing and love are words in the titles of books which cross the boundaries between spirituality and psychology. Programs of formation cross these boundaries and ought necessarily adopt language welcoming all seekers. Through its universal meaning, poetry offers an inclusive language. Poetry offers a variety of motifs which speak to a variety of ways of being ‘faithed’. I am reminded of Mark 9.24 in which a man asks Jesus to heal his son who was mute and afflicted with seizures. Jesus urged him to proclaim his faith, but the man, humbly aware of his shortcomings in faith, said to Jesus, ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.’

I am also reminded of Chooka Parker who entered the stage of Australia’s Got Talent in the same way that Susan Boyle catapulted to fame in the United Kingdom. These are people of hope. They make themselves vulnerable for the sake of saying ‘yes’ to their desire. This is my perception of Chooka’s story:

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34 “Cultural Diversity: Religion across the Generations” in A Picture of the Nation 2070.0 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), 57.
Chooka’s got gift

Susan Boyle was first
and who heard of Chooka Parker
except his shearing mates and dad
beating rhythms on oil drums;
the dad who let Chooka grow
in open hands pointing to a limitless love
no ego, no standards
Chooka did you proud, displayed
and played his soul across the keyboard
I saw his heart open wide, keys
percussed and loved to life
Chooka drew closer, his nose on the keys
his eyes shut in intimate embrace
He did not see their jaws drop

b. Between paths

Ann and Barry Ulanov say: “We are training people to go into the dark. The work of ministry goes on in the trenches.”36 ‘Trenches’ carries the baggage of war. The liminal ‘trench’ space may be frightening and a place of conflict. The protection offered in spiritual direction is love and companionship towards interior freedom not exterior liberty. Poetry writing has been my companion towards interior freedom.

Fig. 25. Liminal space: The point of contact37

36 Ulanov and Ulanov, "Imagination and Ministry." 57.
37 May 2011
Discernment and Wobbly Knees

There are liminal spaces
cramped and soggy
like old tomato sandwiches
you wouldn't give to next door's dog.
There are spaces where I crouch
and have to keep my head down.
And spaces
where God can dance,
weak at the knees with love.

Liminal spaces are slippery places between knowing and unknowing, belief and unbelief. They are seeker-spaces, prayer-spaces, challenging and creative spaces where possibilities are explored and limitations are encountered. The liminal prayer space of ‘daring to dream’ calls a person to a growing intimacy with God, to personal growth and to discipleship. To modern secular society, it is a marginal place. It is necessarily a place of mystery that a poet explores and finds infinitely irresistible.

In the mandala above, liminality is paradoxically central. In writing poetry, I am there engaging with the free flow of images. I notice what moves me or what feels, for example, frightening, repugnant, charismatic or magnetic. With personal reflection and the help of others, I can become aware of latent truths and gifts within me. I can invite and allow God to empower them. I can move across the liminal space and not fall into it.³⁸ I have a choice in all this. I can say ‘no’. Love impels me to say ‘yes’ most of the time.³⁹ The alternative is remaining unfree.⁴⁰

In radically living Ignatius’ Suscipe [234], my ‘name of grace’ and ‘personal vocation’⁴¹ are empowered. These names refer to the integrated personal ‘place’ or ‘space’, uniquely fulfilling in relationship with Creator and created, the personal core place from which authentic ministry is impassioned and effected. The Suscipe is:

Take, [my God], and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will – all that I have and call my

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³⁸ Ulanov and Ulanov, "Imagination and Ministry." 72.
⁴⁰ Schemel and Roemer, Beyond Individuation to Discipleship. 15.
own. You have given it all to me: to you, [God], I return it! Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me [234].

Conclusion: Endings are beginnings

In this chapter, I have offered ways of using poetry in spiritual direction, supervision and self-supervision. Poetry is capable of engaging deep levels of consciousness including a person’s desire. Noticing and naming the awareness makes self-appropriation or in Ignatian terms, incarnation, possible.

Any spiritual director can listen to and work with poetry as he or she does with any content that is brought to spiritual direction. Exploring this content helps a directee who has been moved to consoling or disconsolate feelings and thoughts. It is self-revelatory and healing in terms of the directee’s relationship with God.

Poetry is also a tool of self-supervision after a spiritual direction session. Any confusing or disturbing elements from the session can be recorded through a stream of unedited words. The underlying meaning may reveal more about the directee or the director or the relationship between them. In terms of the general thesis statements, this chapter has more particularly addressed:

• Writing poetry is a spiritual exercise which invites a reader into his or her spiritual experience
• Writing and exploring poetry are appropriate and helpful for spiritual direction. This chapter has engaged various tools which extend a person’s self-awareness and have the potential to deepen a person’s experience of God.

In terms of self-disclosure, poetry centred on the directee’s desired graces and relationship with God is not impositional. The spiritual director is a companion who helps a directee co-discern ‘meaning’ in relation to God. It tries to be spacious.

Poetry is able to cross boundaries of language, faith and culture. It uses metaphors of life, including religious metaphors. Poetic content and the form contribute to its meaning. Goddess poem is a ‘concrete’ or ‘shape’ poem in which the form and

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42 Fleming, Draw Me into Your Friendship. 177. The word ‘God’ replaces ‘Lord’ in my paraphrase. All else is as the text.
content complement each other. The poem speaks of the power of God to hold a person in safety and confidence. The combination of spiritual direction and poetry writing provides the safety and confidence a person needs to be able to step into the liminal space in which both disciplines move. Poetry helps me to be more present to God’s love and benevolence. It asks me to continue my apostolic work as both poet and Ignatian spiritual director.

**Goddess poem**

Go inside the poem
Feel the warmth, the roomy safety. Feel her boundaries yield, stretch to accommodate your flips and turns, your struggle to find the comfy space, the just-right holding. Listen to sounds familiar and muffled, and rounded lullaby rhythms growing inside you, nurturing your voice, your claim to be heard, to be silent. Go inside the poem. Feel your body move with fear and love, Retrieve the slippery traces in the poem you know, the poem we all know.