EMBRACING THE MYSTERY WITHIN:
Explorations in the Art of Spiritual Direction

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of this thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in this thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees.

Signed:

Dated: 3 September 2014
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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

Living is as simple as breathing. Yet this very simplicity hides a deep mystery. For this is where every breath hides the constant battle between life and death. The presence of mystery belies what we take for granted in life, and all this flows from and includes relationships and all the inner workings, which often go unnoticed to the naked eye. The same seeming duality underlies human relationships. Here life and truth come together in a simple act of love. In the drawing in of life’s breath and the exhaling of vanished ‘death’ we are constantly in the presence of Mystery. Love appears most simple yet its consequences are enormous, especially when it involves our humanity and its constant relationship with the Divine. This interplay between life and death, love and apathy, human and divine forms the very fabric of what happens at the core of a spiritual direction session.

2. Research Question

I have encountered these elements in my experience of spiritual direction, both as a directee and as a director. I have also experienced how reflecting on these experiences has enabled me to begin a journey into what lies underneath such encounters. What has unfolded was truly hidden at the first encounter, as is often the mystery of life. I have realised that like a modern piece of art the fullness and complete impact of these moments hides itself until I am truly ready to be trusted with the deeper realities enclosed in such encounters. The passport to enter this holy place requires a willingness to be in relationship, truly present, and thus to surrender to the full consequences which flow from encountering such inner truth. Words and images become inadequate in conveying the depth of what happens between director, directee and the underlying Primary Agent or Spirit. Despite this challenge, and after experiencing
spatial direction over a number of years, I have been left with a deep need to plumb the depths of this mystery. My primary research question then is: What really happens at the core of a spiritual direction session, which can generate transformative unity and spawn new life, love and truth? Secondly, what kind of listening posture by the spiritual director could best provide the environment for this to occur?

3. Background and Need for This Study

Over many centuries, the engaging, mysterious presence of the Divine has been experienced, reflected upon and celebrated in myriad ways. Yet despite such extensive exposure and reflection in expressing the human experience of Love’s presence, we struggle to name the grounded experience of God, who is acting, moving and participating in our ordinary life. We struggle to define with our human expression and imagination such experiences which oft leave us bereft of a richness normally associated with such genuine personal encounters. Around such poverty of expression we could be tempted to give up the search and the greater definition of such a life-giving engagement. We could then fall into the trap of limiting ourselves by lingering with a superficial definition of this encounter and thus only seeking the gifts rather than the Giver.

The researcher will select that moment in spiritual direction when both director and directee stand poised in a deep posture of listening to each other. This moment includes the manner in which they both stand in relation to the One whose presence invites and generates compassion, communion and truth. This research project will then explore the main elements that constitute such an encounter with the Divine Lover at the heart of a spiritual direction session.

The researcher will then engage with the body of research literature in order to depth what these genuine personal encounters are all about. He will further explore what is the most
appropriate posture of listening that could help facilitate such an encounter experience. He will use his own narratives to propose some clear reference points to delineate a genuine encounter between God, ourselves and others.

4. The Researcher’s Background

The Second Vatican Council expressed the challenge for the Catholic Church to resist the temptation of becoming insular, exclusive and, to a certain extent, heaven-centred. This rallying cry echoes back to the Gospels, wherein the author of St John’s Gospel announced that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us” (John 1:14). God’s willingness to live amongst us as Incarnate Compassion was the model for the Church, most preferred by the Vatican Council, to be present in the world today. The Church has undergone a number of historical periods where, due to misdirection or persecution, it has relegated itself to becoming a self-serving institution. It has retreated behind barricades of exclusive dogma and self-preservation. Its noble calling to enshrine, preserve and pass on that which is ancient, truthful and living has somehow been sacrificed, by pursuing a path which has degenerated into a pursuit of locking up, museum-like, that which is living, incarnational and truly relational.\(^1\)

The Ecumenical Council, under the instigation of John XXIII opened up the ‘windows’ and tried to re-emphasise the Church’s true calling of promoting the Kingdom of God, not in heaven, but immersed in the steps of the One whose words make our hearts ‘burn within us’ (Luke 24:32).

I have lived my life as a priest in this milieu which has shaped and formed my great desire over the years to be part of this Incarnate Compassion in the world today. There have been many experiences, talks and conferences over the years which have filled my mind and

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inspired me to pursue this way of living. But none have managed to give me the opportunity of experiencing this Incarnate Love as I have in spiritual direction. Yet the literature on spiritual direction seems to lack adequate definition of the mysterious core encounter, which is generally found at the heart of each session. For me, the literature around this encounter seems to fall short of exploring and articulating the inner workings of this core experience and its radically transforming dynamism in a way that conveys its ‘rawness’ whilst respecting its mystery.

It is the researcher’s hope that this project will lead spiritual directors to a greater awareness and understanding of: the presence of encounters with God in spiritual direction; a deeper awareness of the true self; and a greater freedom to be available for others; which are the dynamics of spiritual direction. The research questions will address the poverty of expression that seemingly fail to recognise the full potential of the transformative power of spiritual direction, as well as the posture of listening and attentiveness required by the spiritual director for these kinds of transformative encounters.

5. Terminology

Terms defined:

a. *Spiritual direction*: is a process by which one person helps another grow in intimacy with God and in right relationship with all creation. The focus of this ministry is the relationship between God and the person seeking direction.

b. *Person*: is one who at centre is; capable of loving and being loved through the faculty of the *Spirit or Heart*; through the *Soul or conscious, subconscious and unconscious Mind*, the person is capable of seeking Truth and becoming part of It. This includes imagination insight, understanding, and judgement, which helps to form the conscience and thus the will in order to lead a moral life. Finally through *Body* a
person has the capacity to communicate to self and O/ others and thus facilitating communion.

c. *Spiritual director:* is one who helps the person coming for direction, to notice how God’s Spirit is moving in his or her life. The director helps this person become aware of God’s self-communication, respond to that self-communication, and live out the consequences of that relationship.²

d. *Directee:* a person seeking spiritual direction from a spiritual director.

e. *Spirituality:* Christian spirituality is our conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and in the context of the community of believers.³ Contemporary Christian spirituality is explicitly Trinitarian, Christological and ecclesial.⁴

f. *Listening Posture:* the receptive manner with which both director and directee are poised unto the Holy.

g. *God:* various descriptors are used to name the Divine, to emphasise the mysterious nature of this Reality. Some of the descriptors used in this thesis include: the Eternal One; Father; Creator; Eternal Thou; Mystery; Love; etc.

### 6. Limits and Possibilities of This Research

In this research project, the researcher will limit his explorations to his own experience of spiritual direction, both as directee and director. He will draw from his own personal narratives for this research, as well as engage with the body of literature that enlightens and depths his own experiences, in order to address the research questions. He will limit himself to those elements of the raw material from his own narratives that best illustrate the heart of

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the encounter of spiritual direction, the transformative consequences and the genuine availability that can come as a result of such spiritual direction.

This project will therefore not include an analysis or summary of others’ experiences of spiritual direction, as the primary investigation is of the researcher’s own experiential narratives.

The research will not examine spiritual direction comprehensively. This means there will be no prescriptive treatment on how spiritual direction ought to be conducted or its historical development since the early centuries. The theological foundations and psychological aspects and dynamics of spiritual direction will not be within the scope of this research project; nor will there be an analysis of spiritual direction in the history of the church over the years.

The researcher is aware of some difficulty in fully capturing this moment of encounter or defining the experience of communion, since it is built around and generated by the presence of Mystery. However, at the heart of a spiritual direction session this Mystery begins to take shape, unmeasured by time and accompanied by the unfolding of one’s true self, true communion with others and the embrace of the One who did become flesh. Further, the researcher is very conscious that in his attempt to define this mystery he may trivialise and desacralise the very heart of a relationship that can only be fully known and experienced in the act of living. However, there is a need to better understand how this experience has been instrumental in such transformation in his life, to help him relate in a much deeper way with the Other, his true self and others.

7. Methodology

The main data for this inquiry is the researcher’s personal story as a case study, so he has chosen to use autoethnography as his research methodology. This requires him to present an
in-depth account of his own personal life and experience. He will not be looking in depth at his whole life story, but will provide three narratives that capture and portray three occasions when he experienced ‘transformation’ in spiritual direction, whether as directee or director.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Usually written in first person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms. The researcher has chosen to use the narrative inquiry form in this paper. This writing genre is more intimate, personal and self-conscious.

One emergent ethnographic writing practice involves highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture. Such evocative writing practises have been labelled ‘autoethnography’ (Reed-Danahay, 1997). The movement toward personalized research reflects calls to place greater emphasis on the ways in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched.

The author of such narratives usually writes a first person account, making himself or herself the object of the inquiry, thereby breaching the conventional separation of researcher and subject. The story typically focuses on a single case. This narrative inquiry would be a story that creates:

[t]he effect of reality, showing a character embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life’s unity in the face of unexpected blows of faith that calls one meanings and value into question.

Autoethnography explores a single case in detail, presenting an in-depth account of one particular person’s life and concrete experience. The writer is required to constantly monitor

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7 Ellis and Bochner, *Autoethnography*, 744.
the method and revise it as it progresses. This methodology also invites readers of the story to put themselves in the writer’s place. The narrative is “(t)o provoke readers to broaden their horizon, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathetically (sic.) into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the... implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered.”

Autoethnography is the preferred method for this thesis because it allows the researcher, whose experience is the object of the inquiry, to adequately address the research questions of what happens in and around the encounter that lies at the heart of a spiritual direction session and the nature of the most appropriate listening posture. This posture, from the perspective of both director and directee, includes the time of preparation, engagement and reflection.

There is merit in staying as close as possible to the unprocessed data within the narratives. Such fidelity to the ‘raw material’ yields a greater possibility of uncovering what is underpinning such ‘sacred’ encounters. Reflection on these encounters with the Divine can lead to a deeper expression of these mysteries. However, pure analysis of one’s past experience can never exhaust new expressions of life and love, which though ever ancient are also ever new.

This autoethnographic method ensures that the sacredness of what is being explored can be truly respected as something still living, challenging and calling for a response today. This method also provides the rigour to measure, analyse and ratify the individual experience against a greater body of truth. This method, then, allows one to research the living material encapsulated in the narratives. At the same time, it also provides the means for a dialogue with others’ human experience of spiritual direction. This method, then, respects both the uniqueness of every encounter, which is so essential to every human interaction, and also

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8 Ellis and Bochner, Autoethnography, 748e.
confronts the individual story with the larger communal stories of divine human encounter held and carried faithfully by the whole body of various religious traditions. It is as though this engagement ensures that what the researcher elicits from the narratives not only resonates with the experience of many others but also brings a freshness of what is unfolding in the present.

Following the data gathering and reflection, the next stage of the research process requires that all the material be brought into critical dialogue with the existing body of literature. The underlying elements and questions arising from the raw data of the personal narratives will determine which texts from the research literature are examined. This will help address some of the objections that have at times been levelled against this kind of autoethnographic research.9

The engagement with this body of literature will help depth, direct and challenge the researcher’s emerging hypotheses. By engaging critically with this literature the researcher will identify some valuable contributions to the wider body of research in spiritual direction.

The next chapter presents the three narratives that form the primary data for this research project which will then critically engage with the literature in order to answer the research question.

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9 For instance, the use of self as the only data source in autoethnography has been questioned (see, for example, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000). Accordingly, autoethnographies have been criticised for being too self-indulgent and narcissistic (Coffey, 1999). Sparkes (2000) suggested that autoethnography is at the boundaries of academic research because such accounts do not sit comfortably with traditional criteria used to judge qualitative inquiries, from Nicholas L. Holt, "Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography, from http://www.ualberta.ca/~itqm/back issues/2_1final/hem/holt.html [accessed 27/11/13].
CHAPTER 2

1. Narrative 1: Who Am I?

This spiritual direction session began like many others. At one stage, while I was thinking about what had been significant since the last session, I decided to share an aspect of my life which I had never fully admitted to myself, let alone to others. I was feeling very tentative and found myself taking long pauses. Inside I was battling over whether I was willing to share how my life seemed to be running on two tracks. The thought of sharing this truth immediately touched my sense of shame for the way I had lost enthusiasm for my priestly ministry. I felt wary of admitting to such truth, fearing that I may be judged as inauthentic. I recall that I kept my eyes on the director, wondering whether I could entrust her with this hiddenness in my life. I was not hiding anything sinister, though I would need to reveal how my public ministry as a priest seemed to be on one track while my private life seemed to be on a separate track. My unease at this moment softened as I tried to rationalise that this was very natural, especially for those of us who lived their lives publicly. But I felt anxious as I realised that what I considered to be my vocation in life was different from what I enjoyed and tried to live in my own private life. I paused for a while longer and began to feel more unease in having to admit that perhaps my vocation as a priest was not fulfilling all that I would describe as my own life. It was as though I were saying internally, in shame, “If you really got to know me on the inside you would realise that I have more fulfilment from the private aspects of my life which have little to do with serving the Church.” I looked up again at my director and wondered whether she would judge my vocation as a priest as quite shallow. I felt somewhat paralysed until I heard a voice inside saying that this was unimportant and that everyone is like this anyway. I almost decided not to say anything and
instead share some other aspect of my life as part of this spiritual direction session. But as I hesitated I found that I was still feeling the urge to share this truth of my life.

Looking down, I tentatively began to mention how I was experiencing these dual aspects of my life. As I looked up while I was relating this, I could feel a certain amount of embarrassment and yet, as I looked at my director’s face, who appeared unjudgemental though seemingly surprised by what my words, I felt safe. Her acceptance encouraged me to continue, until she asked how I felt admitting this duality. Further encouragement from my director made it much easier to stay focussed on my own shame, including the apparent contradiction which I had lived for so many years.

If I were asked, ”who am I?”, my reply would have been something like, “I have to serve as a priest!” but there would also have been a sense that all of this lacked the personal fulfilment which I was experiencing in this hidden part of my life. It was as though I saw myself for the first time. I could see myself as “him” and then my “self”. My private life was justified by my public service to God and others as priest. Both parts of me were real. One part, highly respectable, was vital in showing my own sense of being important, acceptable and worthwhile. The other part of me which needed acceptance, remained separate. I questioned why there were two sides of me. This thought ran concurrently with a growing conviction that notwithstanding the ‘double’ strand in my life, I am one and the same. Whatever I was called to do as a public servant in my duty as a priest was no less truly ‘me’, than the need to take time out and relax and enjoy my own solitude, interests, or my friends’ company. I was beginning to sense a freedom from needing to switch myself on or off, whichever track I was on. Either way, I was slowly becoming more aware of a unity in my self-consciousness that began to help me move toward integrating these two tracks.
This sense of ‘being on the one track’ began to feel more like my true way of living. In exploring the emerging feelings from this newfound sense of self in spiritual direction, I was able to see that the part in me which had been ‘my track’ no longer needed to be hidden or excused for existing. I could be myself 24 hours a day without apology. It felt a little surreal and embarrassing that I was coming to this realisation at such a late stage of my life.

As I finished the session I felt a new sense of hope and a desire to be myself, no matter what. I felt a growing willingness to live my public life from a place of personal need and no more solely influenced by others’ demands. I began to sense that I could find the courage to say ‘no’ when I needed to, having been enslaved for many years to saying ‘yes’.

In later spiritual direction sessions, I felt safe enough to continue exploring what was emerging about living on ‘two tracks’. What slowly emerged was that my public life as a priest seemed to still be one step removed from being fully present. As I admitted to myself that there were times when I felt that I was only doing a ‘job’, I kept looking for reassurance from the director that there was no condemnation for such exposures. I became aware of the tiredness that often surrounded my public life which, as I related it to my director, gave me all the more reason to seek what I wanted and needed to do, without trying to meet everybody’s needs 24 hours a day. The director invited me to say a little more about this tiredness. Some tears came as I shared how my public work was becoming overwhelming at times. I admitted to feeling a certain amount of emptiness in doing my duty. At that moment my director asked no searching question seeking analysis of this duality in my life, so I began to let go of self-judgement and felt at peace with this truth of my emerging self. I had no need to analyse, judge or condemn myself. I was starting to feel differently about myself.

I stayed with the feelings which had emerged around this area of my life. I felt frustration rising in me from the way that I always seemed at everyone’s beck and call. I also recognised
that my own need to fulfil my priestly duties seemed to leave no room for me to do what I wanted. An inner voice suggested that I had been the one to choose this. There was a sense of unreasonableness in questioning what I had chosen to be in the first place. And yet I repeated again to my director that these two parts of my life seemed to run parallel to each other. One left me burdened while the hidden part was never enough. I remember we stayed with this seeming contradiction of interests without comment or advice, accompanied by tears.

When I looked up at my director and found that I was being held by her presence and teary gaze, I felt truly accompanied in my state of frustration and seeming contradiction. I then realised that the time had come for me to discern a path between that which was truly life-giving as opposed to the seeking of mere approval. I began searching for the cause of this dichotomy in my life, and sensed there was an underlying story which maybe nobody, including me, had ever heard.

But I no longer felt alone. I didn’t have to hide anymore. I felt I had the right not to hide, but rather look at myself without condemnation. Apart from the presence of the director, what other Presence was there that had engendered such an interaction? Was this an intimate brush with the truer self and maybe with some other source of love from within? In hindsight, I realise that this was one link in a long chain of events towards a deeper integration with my inner or true self. This spiritual direction session revealed a change in the way that I related to myself, that was not the result of any pre-meditated and carefully developed plan of healing or self-improvement. Different elements seemed to be at play. A much deeper awareness of my true self was emerging that was new and even surprising. Part of me had finally come fully out into the open and no part of me was hiding anymore. This was a significant transformation that gave me greater freedom to be my true or authentic self and to accompany others who struggle with their self-identity. It was the first time I had admitted
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that my life had been lived on ‘two tracks’, and happened at the heart of a spiritual direction session in 1998.

2. Narrative 2: The Derelict Comes Home

In this spiritual direction session, unlike many others, I knew what I wanted to talk about. But how would this unfold? This session centred around a very important part of my life. My life was changing; I was at a crossroad in my life. This was a very difficult time for me.

It was a period when I felt like my life had stopped. My position had finished, which was unfamiliar territory for me. I felt a sense of loss and a lack of clarity – just darkness. All joy had disappeared and anxiety was slowly taking over. I wondered how I could journey through this difficult time. At that time, my 25 years of experience and achievements in my ministry seemed of little help. Many questions arose in my mind but very few answers emerged in response. I had come to spiritual direction in order to be able to contain what I began to feel around this very difficult moment of my life. It had become like a solid wall which seemed impenetrable and was accompanied by a deep sense of aloneness. I was seeking the safety to be able to speak about this particularly as it was bringing into question some of the fundamental elements of my life especially my relationship with God. As I sat there with my director with whom I had shared about my twin tracks some years earlier, I found myself looking for the same safe holding environment which I had experienced years before. My mind was racing in a hundred different directions. A sense of disbelief accompanied me as I fought against the inner feelings of being abandoned that were darkly rising in me. I began to relate to my director the whole story.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon and the feeling of anxiety had overtaken me. As I walked around the block to relieve the symptoms I was experiencing, my heart was racing, trying to keep up with the many thoughts crossing my mind. I recalled the spiritual direction
session of ten years earlier where I explored my life being lived on two tracks. All of a sudden I realised I had become derailed. My public face seemed to be disappearing, leaving me in a place of total abandonment and, in my isolation, I had been stopped in my tracks. As with that earlier spiritual direction session, I found myself asking again, ‘who am I?’. This time I was left standing alone in the darkness. I not only sensed the seriousness of the situation but, unlike at other times, there seemed to be no exit or new track to take. This left me feeling diminished and lost. I kept searching for some clarity or new understanding to lessen the devastating impact of that ‘stripping’, but to no avail. As my mind threw up each new possibility, I kept coming to the same dead end. There was no question about it; I felt that I was standing alone. As I walked through the city streets that Christmas, the jingle bells felt hollow. This would be a different Christmas.

I recalled to my spiritual director, that as I tried to immerse myself in the colour and tinsel of the big stores it felt as if someone had turned the lights off inside me and all sense of celebration disappeared. I was tempted to put a different spin or draw a silver lining in this otherwise very dark cloud in my life. The word ‘happy’ plastered all over the shop windows seemed really out of place. I tried to distract myself without success.

I decided to drive into the country, away from the city din, in order to change the scenery, with the hope of some relief from my dark inner landscape. I kept driving, allowing the road to dictate my journey without really knowing my destination. My car started climbing a hill and all of a sudden I saw an open space at the top overlooking a little valley where big boulders lay haphazardly on top of each other. The place was desolate, which seemed an appropriate metaphor for my interior landscape. I stopped the car and walked up onto one of these huge round boulders and sat down overlooking the small valley.
I felt totally alone and as heavy as these boulders. I had no eyes for the beauty of the countryside before me. So I stood still and waited, hoping that I could catch a glimpse of any silver lining at the edge of those dark clouds that seemed to be ushering a storm within me. At that moment, many other similar memories of aloneness, and the ensuing loneliness, rushed in from my past and compounded themselves very thickly inside my head. They enveloped me in a deep sense of dereliction, that made me feel like the world was closing in on me and like all horizons were disappearing. I felt as if I were being sucked into a deep dark hole of no return. No sense of hope remained.

I stood still and all thoughts of driving to the country house where I was staying were drowned out by the deathly internal silence. A sense of despair set in, defying every vain attempt to put a different perspective on this darkness.

Later, as I ate a meal with the family I was staying with, I noticed I had lost my sense of taste. So, after some polite conversation, I retired to my bedroom. As I slipped into bed that evening, I was hoping that I could bury myself into a deep sleep and wake up the following morning with some ray of hope.

At this point of telling my story, as I looked up I felt the utter attention of my spiritual director. It felt safe to go on and her attention became a very secure place of being held. What follows, was accompanied by a deep sense of being present and fully cognisant t that I had come a long way from living on two tracks that I had shared about ten years earlier. I was already beginning to experience a lessening of the dread that was part of this present experience that was a result of sharing this with my director. However I sensed that something more was happening. I began to realise that I was able to reflect on that dreadful night in a slightly different way than the way I had been recalling it. This was often accompanied by a deep sense of being sucked into a vortex and often surrounded by despair.
Yet in the presence of the spiritual director this incident was beginning to take a different place in my life. I felt encouraged to continue as the spiritual director without interruption indicated for me to go on. I know now that this was becoming a life-changing moment. I continued sharing the following with my director.

In the early morning I did wake up, but there was no silver lining. I felt the dread again that I was alone and a sense of panic from being closed in and choked by fear. I climbed out of bed and fumbled in the dark until I found and lit a bedside candle and then decided to sit with a blanket around me. I just stared at the candle, hearing an inner voice reiterating ‘I am alone.’ Questions started arising: ‘Where do I go from here?’ I remained silent, as if waiting for some voice to reply. And so, I waited. And waited. The sound of the wind outside the window was the only interruption to this stillness. Fear and despair were growing within me. ‘Where do I go?!’ I kept repeating. Then I was surprised to hear an inviting voice, ‘where will you go when you die?’ I’m not sure why but I spontaneously answered, ‘I’ll come to you,’ to which the same voice replied, ‘Come now, then.’ Without understanding, I stood up, blew out the candle and, feeling comforted, went back to sleep.

After returning to Melbourne later that day, I went for a walk. I felt somewhat lost in my thoughts as I recalled what had happened to me the night before. At one point my attention was captured by a figure walking up the street towards me. Looking steadily in that direction, my eyes fixed on him and I immediately recognised him as one of the derelicts who often came to our presbytery door for food. But that morning something different drew my attention to him. When I saw him I felt as if I were looking at a mirror of my truer self within – the ‘derelict’ I had encountered the night before.

The fact of his dereliction and abandonment, as well as living on his own, were now much more real to me. They were much closer to my own experience of dereliction which I had just
faced quite dramatically the night before. It seemed that I could more truly ‘see’ him as he truly was, not his dereliction, abandonment or needs, nor my need to help. It seemed as if none of these other things could distract me from being present to him. This had followed my own somewhat new experience of being present to my inner self, where abandonment, loneliness, fear and despair were still very palpable and alive in me. As I approached him I was uninterested in giving the usual welcoming kind of smile or in saying platitudes.

At this point my director invited me to pause. After a little while she encouraged me to explore what was happening in me at this moment of the story. I remember saying that somehow I felt a sense of connection with him which required no words or any of the friendly gestures with which I had filled the air in the past. It was as if I had stepped inside his skin and I had seen the world through his eyes. In this place I felt no great distance between us. There was no rushing in my mind as to how I could help or how I could somehow relieve his obvious dereliction. All these gestures seemed to be presumptuous, if not an unwelcome intrusion. I recalled that as we walked past each other I felt a certain amount of intense closeness towards him. It was then, looking at his eyes, that I felt we were held in a sacred and holy moment of communion.

As I saw him in his dereliction, I felt inwardly connected with my own inner sense of dereliction which was still fresh and raw in me from the night before. It was a unitive moment in me. This brief encounter was therefore happening at a deep place in my true self. Yet something about this encounter beckoned me to remain open, for I knew I had encountered more than I could comprehend at that moment. No words were spoken; there was no history between us that could be recalled. There was nothing of what could normally be labelled ‘esoteric’. Yet it was coloured by and experienced with a sense of truth. What united us at that moment was an experience of shared dereliction. This brief communion was
penetrated with the same truth that I had encountered internally the night before. I came to realise later, upon deeper reflection, and within the spiritual direction sessions that followed that the experiences both the night before and this morning were imbued with the presence of the One who had clearly identified himself with the poor. What was amazing was that this was not the fruit of intellectual understanding or theological training. This was an encounter between the Divine Lover and the very essence of who I was at that moment; namely, the derelict within. This left me overwhelmed; I had been embraced by the Divine Other in my greatest place of despair and suffering.

3. Narrative 3: Accompanying Another

I was directing someone who was struggling with parts of himself that evoked shame and self-condemnation. It had taken a whole year before he had found the courage to bring this aspect of his life into a direction session. We began this session with the usual preparation and, as he struggled to begin, I listened attentively. Inside I kept pushing back any curiosity or questions that lingered from our last session and somehow felt the need to stay open to what he was presenting right now. Before long he started to speak more slowly than usual and eventually admitted to me the secret with which he had lived for many years. I allowed myself to be drawn in to his story and followed all the various emotions he was presenting as he arrived at the doorway of his own inner secret.

In my attentiveness, my focus became more and more centred on him. He looked furtively at me with some discomfort. As I maintained my own inviting gaze he seemed to find courage to continue sharing. I sensed that he was struggling with giving full expression to what he was being led to speak about. It was a moment for me of silently gazing and waiting patiently for him to continue. He did so and began to share deeply about an aspect of his life which had obviously been a source of great shame and hiddenness for him. I wondered whether he
expected me to condemn him. I did not. I held my gaze openly and continued to invite him to come further in sharing this obviously difficult and hidden part of his life. When he finally did self-disclose, both shame and self-condemnation seemed to rush in. He could barely look me straight in the eye, but in his furtive glances I sensed that he was trying to assess my opinion of him.

At this moment the biggest judge that he was encountering was himself. The silence as he looked down, interrupted by an occasional glance at each other, seemed to convey a sense of connection between us which brought closeness with it. This moment of communion and encounter rendered words somewhat superfluous. The gentlest coaxing on my part was all that was needed to convey a depth and colour to his feelings, which he started sharing very slowly with accompanying tears. My own tears at that moment seemed to flow simultaneously. As he made a couple of attempts to speak about something else my gentle encouragement to say a little bit more about what was happening with his tears gave rise to more tears on his part. There had been darkness, aloneness and a deep self-loathing which paved the way to this moment of deep self-revelation. The long silences and the tears had followed. Again, no words had needed to be spoken and yet I had felt a deep sense of union with him.

This connection with my directee continued to build and strengthen his resolve not to go back into hiding. The intensity of focus by both of us seemed to create the safety whereby he was able to face his hidden poverty. There was a moment where a silence enveloped us both like a warm winter coat. This enveloping embrace led to yet another step in his journey of self-integration. In this silence I felt a deep longing to stay with him and wait for what was emerging from deep within his heart. Interestingly, as this silence grew I could also sense, as the director, the invitation in me to step aside and let the Spirit deal directly with the directee.
I found myself surrendering to the process of the relationship of trust in the Spirit within me as well as within the directee.

The question that remained with me is: in what way, and by whose enabling, could we both have such a deep encounter? I suspect that the same could be asked of the surprising new way that I saw the derelict in the street in the incident described above.

In preparing for this spiritual direction session, I learnt to be quiet in order to become conscious of the directee whom I was about to meet. All the distractions or predictions of how I would fare in the encounter seemed irrelevant in the face of surrendering myself firstly to the encounter itself. Previously, I would quietly recall past encounters and listen again as if to immerse myself in the raw story that had been presented thus far. All other mental preparations and curiosities were lessened in the face of cultivating an inner silence and a deep sense of welcome to the one who was to meet me. Any fears about my performance were put to the side as I began to develop a growing trust in the One who would be faithful in His presence to both of us.

My prior need to be successful and to be seen as an effective pastoral minister became quite secondary to focussing on the person whom I was to meet. The discipline of ‘making time’ for the directee was quite a change from regarding this appointment as just another slot in my busy schedule. Such changes made me aware that my popularity, my need to be successful and effective, and my anxiety about being found wanting, were being replaced with a grateful sense of invitation to be truly present, even before I welcomed the directee for the session.

All the theology and smart logical argument faded away completely as a distraction in my invitation to stay close, open and totally welcoming of the directee who felt safe enough to expose this aspect of his life. Having answers counts for little when the invitation is to be truly compassionate and faithfully present and accepting of the other. I started to realise more
strongly that the trust shown to me had little to do with my ability to think theologically or to dispel his shame and despair.

I began to experience a different way of being priest: as one who serves. Silent communion with the directee spoke much louder than all the neat clichés or theological insights I could offer. Furthermore, this deep sense of connection with the directee lingered with me afterwards as I continued to savour the experience after the session. I felt this connection slowly being transformed into a sense of both awe and gratitude at having participated in such a sacred moment. At this time I resonated strongly with the felt experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who ‘asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”’ (Luke 24:32). I believed when the secret was broken open, and in the silent teary gaze we shared, we found the presence of the One who had invited us both to be present.

What was experienced in communion in this time of deep listening renders all the discipline of critical analysis and intellectual inquiry inadequate. The doorway to such communion was rather in the willingness to listen with all the senses and my formed heart. The ears heard many words but certain phrases stood out. The eyes saw, but in moments saw more deeply. My mind struggled to make sense of what my heart understood completely when the directee entrusted me with a little glimpse inside his heart. He then waited to see if I would respond not with logic or erudite thinking or condemnation but with a welcoming and silent acceptance. As a spiritual director I perceived an invitation to surrender and be on equal footing with the directee as we both experienced the presence of the One in whose presence we were held.
Conclusion

Upon reflection on these three narratives I am left with a deeper question: What is at the heart of a spiritual direction session which can generate the depths of such a transformative encounter? The common experience from each of these narratives is that the changes that I saw happening in me and the other were not the fruit of self-seeking or the avid implementation of someone else’s theories or ideas. The truth of the way in which I saw myself changing emerged from an unsolicited freedom that left me open to unchartered possibilities. This freedom and connection could be frightening or feel shame-filled. What I later realised was that this freedom was an invitation to be led into deeper communion with my true self, the other and the Divine within. As a director this included a willingness to be more fully available to a directee. This leaves me thirsting for a greater connection with that which makes all this possible.

I discovered the freedom to be present to my true self, to God as the indwelling Mystery and to others in their true self and to the indwelling mystery within them. I realised also that the issue was not between living on the twin track but whether I would live either according to the true or according to a false direction in my life. There was greater freedom and ease in living in the present moment. Therefore I came to recognise that it was a choice which in that moment helped me to stay present. I understand that the contemplative nature of the posture of listening in spiritual direction is what facilitated and helped form a good foundation for the beginning of ongoing transformation in a spiritual direction session.

The next chapter engages with the research literature in order to address the questions that emerged from these personal narratives.
CHAPTER 3

Literature Review

In this chapter the researcher reviews and engages with some of the research literature to address the abovementioned research questions. The researcher had discovered that the underlying elements that had emerged from the narratives are inextricably connected with relationship in all its forms from which communion both human and divine emerge. This will help to determine in the selection of the literature under review from authors who have engaged with this reality in their explorations. This will then eventually help to depth and to reflect on the data from the research which emerged from the three personal narratives in chapter two. This data explores: the core encounter at the heart of a spiritual direction session; the transformative consequences that arose from this encounter; and the listening posture that facilitated this transformative encounter. In the next chapter the researcher outlines the key outcomes from the three narratives and their engagement with this literature review.

1. At the Core of a Spiritual Direction Session

During a spiritual direction session, several points of communion occur: between the director and directee; the director’s and directee’s own inner selves; and their own encounters with the Divine Presence. In spiritual direction the director’s sensitivity to safety is indispensable in fostering such communion. This safety also helps those present in the process of surrendering to any movement towards communion with God as well as with his/her true self. The quality and nature of this communion makes the session of spiritual direction somewhat different from other types of encounter.
In *I and Thou*¹ Martin Buber addresses the question of relationships between humans, nature and the divine. His work explores the implications of the ways in which humans relate to each other. This often alternates between a relationship characterised by the ‘I-Thou’ and others characterised as ‘I-It’. The ‘I-Thou’ relationship denotes what may happen when human beings connect with each other, the world, and the Divine.

Buber asserts that this particular relationship is quite distinct from relating with each other as objects of study and function. He connects presence, reality and living relationships in a way that emphasises an inner living centre common and present to all persons in which he associates clearly with an ‘I-Thou’ relationship. Rather than seeing this connection from the external efforts of social custom, Buber attributes this to a common internal connection to the Living Centre, which is very radically different from that which he terms an ‘I-It’ connection, as he points out:

> I-it can develop into a relationship of I-Thou but this is not so easy, the true community does not arise from having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living centre, and second, there being in living mutual relation with one another… The community is built up out of living mutual relation but the builder is a living effective Centre.²

In the latter part of his work Buber looks at this living effective Centre as ‘the eternal Thou,’ where he asserts that “the eternal lines of relations meet in the eternal Thou”.³ He then develops and promotes the manner that every time we decide to engage in an ‘I-Thou’ relationship, we are confronted, albeit in a hidden way, with the very ground of our being. Although Buber’s book does not deal directly with spiritual direction it has given the

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researcher some clarity as to what can occur in a spiritual direction session regarding the inner connections between director, directee and the Divine Other.

Buber’s proposal around the interconnectedness of personal relationships in the context of ‘I-Thou’ has helped strengthen the researcher’s findings around the depth of relationship that the narrator found as directee and as director. The researcher was able to see how such depth of connections was also suggestive that the spiritual direction session was of a different nature than that of a therapeutic or counselling session.

Gerald May confirms this distinction:

> Besides differing from psychotherapy in intent, content, and basic attitude, spiritual direction is generally surrounded by a characteristic atmosphere that is seldom encountered in any other interpersonal relationship. This atmosphere is one of spaciousness and underlying peace; of openness and receptivity; of a kind of quiet clarity in which it is easier to allow and let be. As one person put it, “Being in spiritual direction is just like being in prayer, only there’s someone with me in it”.

In this comment Gerald May clearly approves of the kind of depth which Buber brings out in the encounter between humans and the Divine. However May is quite specific in pointing out the distinctive nature, intent and outlook of a spiritual direction session. Max Woolaver illustrates this when commenting on Elizabeth of the Trinity as a mentor for spiritual directors. He agrees with her understanding about this when he affirms, “a good definition of the direction moment is to describe it as a moment of shared grace.”

Barry and Connolly provide a good and grounded introduction to the whole practice of spiritual direction. They also follow this vein of understanding in their definition of spiritual direction:

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Help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The focus of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on the religious dimension of experience, i.e., that dimension of any experience that evokes the presence of the mysterious Other whom we call God. Moreover this experience is viewed, not as an isolated event, but as an expression of the ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us.6

They later reemphasise the central task of spiritual directors as:

[t]he facilitation of the relationship between directees and God. They offer direct help with that relationship. Teaching, preaching and moral guidance are not the proper task of spiritual directors. Their task is to help experience God’s action and respond to God. Fostering discovery rather than teaching is their purpose.7

Having established a clear definition of spiritual direction, they then expand on what type of relationship it is and what is entailed in fostering such a relationship. Notwithstanding the informative and at times prescriptive nature of this text, the researcher sought further clarity on what actually happens within the encounter of spiritual direction in order to address the primary research question.

Janet Ruffing in *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*8 names the mystical process that often proceeds and follows from the exploration of the directee’s experiences brought to a spiritual direction session. Ruffing speaks of the unitive relationship with God, and ‘a sense of profound mutuality with God which begins to become prominent.’9 She states:

Because God is by nature transcendent, we first experience God as dramatically, numinously, and powerfully Other. Few of us quite grasp that the process of mystical transformation gradually overcomes this sense of the utter Otherness of God in favour of a radical mutuality with God.10

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7 Barry and Connolly, *Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 43.
9 Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction*, 125.
10 Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction*, 126.
In his work Buber definitely points towards this depth of encounter, albeit at a philosophical level. He would likely concur with the words of Brian McDermott S.J., who describes spiritual directors as being “poised unto the Holy,”\textsuperscript{11} with this being their most important posture.

In describing “the place of prayerful awareness in spiritual direction as a place of prayer, but with someone else present,”\textsuperscript{12} Gerald May also indicates that the spiritual director’s “responsibility is most clearly to God in God’s wholeness, rather than to some self-selected and personally restricted aspect of that wholeness.”\textsuperscript{13} This opening of awareness is what May refers to as “a oneness, a co-inherence that excludes nothing, yet is fascinated by nothing. Awareness is clear and awake to everything.”\textsuperscript{14}

In his work, \textit{Will and Spirit}\textsuperscript{15} Gerald May speaks of \textit{agape} love “that is given and granted without reservation; that serves no purpose other than to fulfil itself; that seeks no end and is contingent on no performance, no attribute, no personal whim or desire. It is this kind of love that is the most true, pure and perfect spiritual love.”\textsuperscript{16} This unitive state is similar to Martin Buber’s attempt to convey the kind of presence which marks the ‘I-Thou’ relationship as totally relational.

This \textit{agape} love connotes union and oneness, which the researcher found in his experiences as the directee, the experience of dereliction, and his own experience as a director.

Gerald May emphasises this way of being in communion. He goes to great length in highlighting that we are utterly dependent on God to establish true communion. In the light of

\textsuperscript{11} Suzanne M. Buckley, ed. \textit{Sacred is the Call} (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2005), 52.
\textsuperscript{12} May, \textit{Care of Mind, Care of Spirit}, 114.
\textsuperscript{13} May, \textit{Care of Mind, Care of Spirit}, 123.
\textsuperscript{14} May, \textit{Care of Mind, Care of Spirit}, 122.
\textsuperscript{16} May, \textit{Will and Spirit}, 128.
the narratives both as director and directee the researcher found that the core experience of communion lies beyond dependence on words, skills or even clever theology. Gerald May emphasises that:

Regardless of how intelligent or psycho-theologically sophisticated we may be, we eternally lack the ultimate wisdom to know how to take care of anything independently. Even if we cannot bring ourselves to admit this to ourselves in the rest of our life, we must accept it when it comes to the care of other souls. There is no psychological method, no theological treatise, no scriptural message, and no private or collective wisdom that can inform us of the full and ultimate desire God may have for a specific soul at a specific time. And even if we could somehow be privy to such divine knowledge, we would have no capacity to ensure a precise application of it. Accepting and affirming our human abilities for what they are it is imperative in spiritual direction our utter dependence on God.17

2. Personal Transformation

Having defined the core of a spiritual direction session in the previous section, this section reviews the literature to further develop and depth the researcher’s data of transformation from the narratives.

Several authors discuss this at length, including Martin Buber, Neil Pembroke, and Mary Ann Scofield.

The second important aspect of the core of a spiritual direction session, which emerges from the narratives, is personal transformation. As the narrator this deep change in me, both as the director and the directee, was multi-faceted and often ongoing; well beyond the original spiritual direction sessions.

The first area of transformation was in the newfound freedom to be my truest self. As directee I experienced this facet of transformation especially during a time of adversity and dereliction. Secondly, this encounter with/of the true self also involved a deeper engagement

17 May, Care of Mind, Care of Spirit, 123.
with the incarnate compassion of the Divine Other. Thirdly, as director, I found that I became more present to others with a greater capacity for compassion as a result of this change.

The second area of transformation central to the spiritual direction experience involves the ongoing workings within a person’s heart and mind after the actual session. As directee I needed time for reflection to provide the necessary space for transformative gestation of the new to become a reality. I found that what might appear innocuous, disastrous or even a life-threatening moment can become truly redemptive and life-giving in the ensuing period. I found the grace to be open, and thus available, to the generation of new movement and life beyond the moment of the spiritual direction session. This transformation surpassed any short-lived emotional or intellectual excitation but, rather, as Buber describes, is generated at the very depth of one’s existence. He also suggests that some of the darkest moments and oft-alienating experiences can become surprising opportunities to become more conscious of the presence of God.\textsuperscript{18}

When as directee, I found myself deliberating before admitting the shame of living on two ‘tracks’, a transformation was already starting to happen. Unlike at other times, I found the freedom to stay and face what was emerging. The encounter with the truth of myself, and the full acceptance of the director, enabled me to open up in the face of shame to the truth which was being revealed from within.

Pembroke, by affirming that: “self-illumination refers to a profound moment of silence in the inner spaces in which the only sound is that of honesty and truth”,\textsuperscript{19} touches upon some of the possible depths in a moment of transformation. He makes reference to the descent and the abyss of ‘I-with-me’ as he explores the connection between responsibility and conscience and

\textsuperscript{18} Buber, \textit{I and Thou}, 96.
the way that the stimulation of the conscience can lead to the reconciliation of the inner Self. Later, he discusses shame and distorted presence that can so readily affect pastoral care and counselling. He reveals how shame can have a positive effect upon counsellees as they are led through their shameful feelings into a deeper understanding and posture of contemplation: “With awareness comes the possibility of transcending the tendency to distorted presence”\(^{20}\) and further “it takes a lifetime however to even begin to grasp what it means to share in a real meeting with another human being.”\(^{21}\) These comments clarify how shame need not hinder the true self from emerging. This transformation, through honestly facing my truth, notwithstanding the presence of shame, led to a radically new way of being authentic. This was marked by a sense of freedom to be more present to the true self, to God and to others.

In exploring the period around the encounter with the derelict, I encountered the truer self at a deeper level as well as the incarnated sense of the Divine Other. In *Will and Spirit*, Gerald May defines the unitive experience as helping to articulate this transformative experience:

> There is one kind of spiritual experience, which occurs much more commonly than the others, which seems to be universal among different cultures and environments and most importantly, is characterized by a *loss* of self-definition. This is the unitive experience, the self-losing experience that is the fundamental, paradigmatic experience of consciousness, mystery and being. It constitutes true intuition and radical spontaneity. It is the keystone of contemplative spirituality.\(^{22}\)

This unitive experience correlated with my experience, before, during and after the encounter with the derelict on the street. It provided a sense of being ‘at one’.\(^{23}\) Gerald May suggests that often unitive experiences occur in relationship with nature, in aesthetic settings, moments of loving intimacy, major life events such as birth or death, as well as under times of great stress. This was true for me at the time of abandonment and dereliction. May also states that

\(^{21}\) Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 218.
\(^{22}\) May, *Will and Spirit*, 53.
religious or spiritual disciplines seem to encourage awareness of unitive experiences. It was through reflection and prayerful attentiveness that the narrator came to a fuller awareness of the unitive quality and depth of this encounter with the true self and the Divine presence. As narrator I knew this time was pure gift, echoing the voice of truth and of God’s presence which had started in the prompting to look at the truth of the two tracks and led to the moment of identification with the derelict. In outlining the three qualities or characteristics of the unitive experience, May brings insight to my experience. As narrator I had realised that I had not achieved this transformation on my own. I realised that at most he became more sensitised to recognise the moment of union after the event through the process of reflection and attentiveness. May states:

The first is the unitive quality itself. The experience is always characterized by being-at-one. Note here that I am not using the terms “feeling” or “sensing” oneness. Such feelings and senses do occur, but only after the experience is essentially over, and one is reflecting back upon it. During the experience itself, all self-defining activities cease.

Secondly the fundamental quality of unitive experience is the change in awareness …Wakefulness, alertness, and sharpness of awareness are at a maximum, and awareness is opened radically. All the senses are acute, but there is no mental labelling or reaction concerning sensory stimuli

The third factor characterizing such experiences is somewhat variable. This consists of reactions to the experience and occurs only at the end of the experience or afterward in reflecting upon it.24

As May has described, I could see as the narrator that I was unable to hold onto my experience of ‘oneness’ at the depth to which I had become aware of it. Further, he points out, “A feeling of frustration and poignancy happens because the attempt to hold on never works. Such clinging is of course, such a strongly self-defining act that it could never be successful. Other people, perhaps through grace or because they are inherently less wilful,

simply feel gratitude.”25 I knew both states of mind and heart. I knew what it was to try to ‘get back to business’. At other times the impact of such an experience generated radical transformation. May explores both these states of this self-losing experience.

For the narrator, May’s assertion that unitive experiences are recognised only after the fact, and that reflection afterwards is important to acknowledge the full impact of the event, is sobering. The narrator as directee found that this was the fruit of prayerful attentiveness within the process of spiritual direction.

Gerald May’s descriptions of the *agape* experience seems to best illustrate the profound inner radical transformation that occurred within me as the directee in relation to my deepest self and with the Divine Other. May defines the phrase ‘agapic’ love as,

Ultimate, unconditional love. It is a love that transcends human beings both individually and collectively. Because it does not originate from within individual people, it is not influenced by their personal desires or whims. It is a universal ‘given’ that pre-exists all effort; it neither needs to be earned nor can it be removed. It is only agape that is perfect and capable of casting out fear, for it is only agape that cannot be taken away. 26

As the narrator I came to recognise that this agapic love encompassed the encounter and transformative union with his truest self and the Divine Other. May sums up this knowing of transformative union by saying, “Agape – if it could speak – might say ‘I am you in Love’.”27 This intimacy at the very core of my being touches something of my experience. But, as with the truth of Love, this experience remains unutterable and ultimately fully inexpressible.

Part of this unitive and agapic experience is addressed by Mary Ann Scofield, in her *Friends of God and Prophets*. She suggests the experience of deep union leads to a concern for the world in the heart of the one who has intimately encountered the Divine Other:

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When a human person experiences the radical unconditionally of God’s love, then miracles do occur; joy surges up, affection and freedom emerge, whole new worlds open up. God’s forgiving, life-giving mercy flows into me, it is meant to flow through me into all of my other relationships. God’s justice is about right relationships with all creation, not just setting me right with God. What really happens when we experience God is ... we begin to see with God’s eyes, hear with God’s ears, speak what we hear from God, do what God does, as we more and more desire only what God desires.  

I found later that in my posture as a spiritual director to the directee, I felt truly present. The difference was now I was not alone. I was now at one with my true self and the Divine Other. This was the radical transformation that had been gifted to me. Thus, I was also now most fully present to another. Scofield continues to say that there is a movement beyond being a “friend of God, to becoming a prophet of God, which inevitably sets one apart from and even up against the way most people see and live and think and feel.”

Further, she writes of the possibility that some spiritual experiences can lead to places of apparent inner peace where we are resistant to the pain and injustice of the world around us. However, “true conversion, on the other hand, always thrusts us into community. And conversion requires contemplation. Without community, the prophet slips into arrogance. Without contemplation, the prophet cannot move beyond his or her anger at the world’s injustices.”

Gerald May strengthens the point about this contemplative stance by emphasising that:

[i]n the quiet of contemplative prayer, it is sometimes possible to break out of these limits of perception. More accurately, perhaps, these limitations are broken for us. At such times we experience an opening of attention. The blinders around our eyes fall away, and we are granted a panoramic view that is inclusive rather than selective. As this vision expands it is impossible to avoid the reality of God. At the most open point we no longer can identify ourselves as the seers. Instead, it all becomes a oneness, a co-inherence that excludes nothing yet is fascinated by nothing. Awareness is clear and is awake to everything, yet focused on nothing.

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28 Buckley, ed. *Sacred is the Call*, 203.
29 Buckley, ed. *Sacred is the Call*, 206.
30 Buckley, ed. *Sacred is the Call*, 206.
special. There is nothing special here – or everything is equally special. The totality in all that exists, and one knows and feels immediately, without any need for inference or thought, that God is vitally and comprehensively present.31

I have come to see that one of the fruits of the transformative union is in the depthing of my relationship to community. As the narrator I have seen that my way of being present to myself, to God and to others had changed. This was most notable in my stance as a spiritual director. In particular, my presence to others following this transformative experience included increased openness, confidence and freedom to be present in compassion to others. Writing on availability, Pembroke explores this aspect of transformation from Gabriel Marcel:

Marcel describes receptivity to the other in terms of permeability or “in-cohesion”. He uses the suggestive image of hosting a person chez soi to indicate that receptivity involves a communication of something of oneself. To receive a person chez soi is to bring her into one’s innermost sphere, into that home space where everything has the stamp of one’s personality. Marcel broadens the notion of hospitality to the other to include receiving into oneself the other’s appeal for compassion and understanding.32

This compassion had resulted from the transformative communion that I had experienced. It continued to live in me as I prayerfully attended to this ongoing gift of presence within.

Woolaver also discusses this gift of presence from the deep communion with God when speaking of our transformation: “The depth of willingness on the part of the director to be engaged in her or his own sanctification (transformation) is precisely the degree to which the director will be helpful to the directee seeking his or her own sanctification (transformation) in God.”33

31 May, Care of Mind, Care of Spirit, 121-122.
32 Pembroke, The Art of Listening, 51.
33 Woolaver, "Elizabeth of the Trinity," 16.
3. Listening Posture

In the first aspect of this chapter of literature review, the researcher has focussed on the deep and personal encounters, which the narrator experienced at the core of his spiritual direction session. In the second aspect he then reviewed the literature surrounding the insights about the narrator’s key transformations, which occurred during and following the spiritual direction session. In this third aspect the researcher will look at the findings around the stance or posture necessary, which can best co-operate with the Divine Other, for the core encounters of a spiritual direction session.

As discussed at the end of the previous section, the director needs to be engaged in his own transformation to be receptive, open and vulnerable to the directee. Primarily, the director seeks the love of God and hungers to remain in the presence of this love. As Woolaver states:

> It is to be hoped that the directee will experience something of this love in the director. Ultimately in the direction moment, the director is simply what the director always is – a seeker after God. From the point of view of the director, the direction moment is at heart what all moments are – a blessed and holy place of encounter and transformation… Preparation for a spiritual director (therefore) is breath by breath – a continual attending to awareness which does not cease simply because the director does not happen to be in a direction session.34

The spiritual director is to attend to this quality of awareness as well as surrender all expectations as to the outcome of any session. “We must be willing to let our desire be supplanted by the desire of God.”35

Barry and Connolly also discuss “the facilitation of the relationship between directee and God”36 as being central to the task of spiritual direction. They distinguish this art of spiritual direction from simple listening, pastoral care or therapy. They outline the manner of fostering

34 Woolaver, "Elizabeth of the Trinity," 17.
35 Woolaver, "Elizabeth of the Trinity," 17.
36 Barry and Connolly, Practice of Spiritual Direction, 43.
a contemplative attitude with some criteria for evaluating the spiritual dimension of that experience, and prescribe the boundaries and responsibilities that underlie the relationship between director and directee to ensure safety, respect and the effective practice of spiritual direction. These practical suggestions in helping directees and directors navigate toward the depthing of the contemplative attitude are noteworthy. They state that it is the task of the director to help the directee find ways to foster a contemplative attitude to listen more deeply to what is happening in his/her life and to encourage practices to help this deeper listening. Suggestions from these authors include: contemplatively listening to music; pondering art; nature; slow meditation of scripture; sacramental participation; asking for what they want from prayer time; and contemplating the Gospels. All of these suggestions are purely to help dispose the directee to a stance where (s)he is more open to listen to the movement of the Spirit of God in her/his life. This is part of the task of the spiritual direction session; to help a directee pay attention to the self-revealing God and to recognise their reaction and to respond to this God.

Pembroke identifies the following elements of listening: compassionate availability; confirmation; and presence that correlates with the contemplative stance and listening posture that facilitates transformation within a spiritual direction session. Pembroke’s appeal to Gabriel Marcel’s notion of ‘disponibilite’, translated as ‘availability’, is very illuminating. He demonstrates how availability involves a journey with varying levels of engagement with the O/other, identified as contemplation, belonging and fidelity. He concludes by saying that presence to the other is far more than passive listening, accurate understanding, or even empathy. It is a sense of belonging to the other, even to the point of exchanging one’s freedom with the other, so as to speak, and where one can be encouraged to be taken to where one would rather not go. This underlies how much an art is involved in developing the appropriate posture in spiritual direction, far beyond what can be learnt in a course, a book or
dogged practice. Borrowing from the words of Marcel: “Presence is fundamentally the gift of one’s self”… [that] “it is not so much the content of the communication of a person that is stimulating and revelatory, as the fact that she gives herself through that communication.”

For Marcel, “presence is not a skill one learns but rather a grace”.

Pembroke defines “confirmation” as valuing the uniqueness of the other person. He also refers to Martin Buber who understands confirmation “as extending beyond affirming the other in his uniqueness. He also sees the need to help her against herself as she grows into her potential.” Pembroke then concludes his work thus:

> Whatever difficulties there may be in appropriating healing techniques they are small compared to those associated with a living life of presence. A person with the requisite ability and diligence can master interventions in a few short years. It takes a lifetime however to even begin to grasp what it means to share in a real meeting with another human being.

Kay Lindahl offers specific reflections for cultivating the “spiritual” practice of listening: “effective listening is often conceived in technical terms that have little or no grounding in what is spiritual.” In promoting listening as a sacred art, she says it “is an awareness that not only are we present to each other but we are also open to something that is spiritual, holy and sacred.” She identifies the three qualities essential for this deep listening “as silence, reflection and presences”, she says work together in an organic process that create the context of the art of listening.

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40 Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 100.
The researcher found that the narrator’s suffering and sense of dereliction explored in the second narrative became an opportunity for growth. He discovered that during this time there was a surrendering to the greater presence of God whose companionship was experienced at the darkest moment. This, in turn, began to generate a greater capacity to be compassionate and more present to his directee in the third narrative.

David Augsburger illustrates this kind of presence well:

Presence requires an integration of self-awareness with an awareness of the other. The consciousness of being “with” another is not a superficial association but openness from the centre of one’s existence. As one is transparent to his or her own experience, the feelings, intuitions, thoughts, desires, resistances, anxieties, impulses, fantasies, and images that rise from the unconscious depths can be admitted into conscious awareness. Such self-awareness permits more complete attending to others and a willingness to perceive as much of the other’s experience as he or she is free to reveal. Thus one can talk of being only partially present or of being authentically present to the depths of one’s lived experience. Out of suffering, depression, and despair can come a knowledge of the dark side of experience, which, when claimed with healing acceptance, can open levels of communication and communion with fellow sufferers that is presence from the core of existence.45

This presence seems to facilitate greater self-awareness as well as a capacity to be silent and therefore help recognise in this movement a much deeper desire for prayer, which speaks loudly of a deeper sense of the Divine within.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, The Way of the Heart, speaks of suffering and the sense of dereliction as a place of possible growth, when he encourages staying with this solitude and silence. Nouwen is clear that this type of solitude is not just privacy but is a solitude wherein “I get rid of my scaffolding” … where I am “naked, vulnerable, weak… deprived, broken, and nothing else. It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, nothingness so

dreadful that everything in me wants to run." The researcher realised that this had been the experience of the narrator in his time around the encounter with the derelict. The researcher found that the narrator had been encouraged to stay in these places of silence and solitude in the face of fear. As Nouwen says, “as soon as I decide to stay in my solitude, confusing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies, and weird associations jump about in my mind like monkeys in a banana tree. Anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces… Thus I try again to run from the dark abyss of my nothingness and restore my false self in all its vainglory.”

The researcher found that the task for the narrator, both as director and directee, was to stay and persevere in the solitude. “That is the struggle. It is the struggle to die to the false self,” says Nouwen. Therefore both silence and solitude are the “furnace of transformation.” It is the task of the director not only to stay in this furnace of transformation themselves, but also to encourage their directee to stay in this place, which can lead to deeper union with the Divine Other.

William Shannon insists that “nothing exists apart from God. For God is the Hidden Ground of Love in which all reality finds its being, its identity, and its uniqueness. Once God chose to create, it became impossible to think of God without thinking of all of us and of all reality.”

This contemplative stance of silence and solitude also brings in union with the emptiness and fullness of God, which Shannon touches upon when reflecting on the work of Thomas Merton:

> We do not turn away from the world to find God; it is rather that in finding God that we discover the world in a whole new way. True contemplation involves a

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total emptiness (i.e. being empty of all separateness) and a total fullness (being at one with the source and ground of all things and at one with everything else in that hidden ground).  

The researcher found Shannon’s words in *Silence on Fire: Prayer of Awareness* most nurtured his growing desire to pray:

This is a time for letting go of all that clutters the mind and the heart. If we persevere in this way of prayer, things will begin to happen in our lives. What starts out as a brief segment of life devoted to “doing prayer” becomes, when consistently adhered to, a way of life that affects who we are, what we do, how we think. In the midst of problems, perplexities, difficulties, anxieties (both personal and social), one will find inner peace and silence beginning to grow. Greater gentleness and compassion will mark the way I deal with my sisters and brothers, as awareness deepens of my oneness with them in God.

The researcher also found that as the desire for prayer deepened, the sense of the remoteness of the true self, God and others changed radically to a deepening sense of intimacy.

Janet Ruffing explores this intimacy with God in her topic on mutuality. She advises spiritual directors thus:

This theme of mutuality with God has been well hidden. We have little familiarity with it and have not heard much about it. Yet, this insight and the self-God images that express it need to be more clearly understood and affect our practice of spiritual direction.

Ruffing believes that in listening as directors, without a recognition or understanding of this developing movement of relationship between the Divine Other and the directee, this experience could not only be missed, but the directee’s deeper exploration of the Divine presence and activity in their life could be hindered. The director needs to understand and be alert to something of this possible development in the spiritual journey, in order to contemplatively companion another.

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CHAPTER 3

When exploring the loving transformation that takes place in the spiritual journey, it has been good to be reminded that this is not something that is acquired but, rather, discovered.

Gerald May explores this truth further:

It would be easy to assume that the realization of agape occurs as a stage of greater maturity than that of narcissism, eros and filias, that it is the next step in a logical sequence of learning loving. A number indeed maintain that agapic love or unitive experience constitutes the final rung on a ladder of human development.\(^{54}\)

However, he continues:

This might be true if human being had to learn “how” to generate unconditional love by learning how to generate the other forms of love first. But agape can in no sense be a ‘how-to’ business. Far from having its origin in individual psyche it is an expression of divine power in creation. It may thus be manifested through human beings but never by them. Practical experience bears this out.\(^{55}\)

In my personal experience as a spiritual director, I was invited to nurture and give space to the transformation occurring in the directee who was encountering fear and amazement at the movements and changes in awareness within. He was also invited to remain attentive in order to listen for the transforming prophetic edge. For this is an inherent movement of the Spirit in the spiritual journey, always calling one to further healing and justice, not only personally but in the whole of creation. Mary Ann Scofield insists that:

\[\text{[t]he only way we can remain faithful to the God who is always surprising us, always moving us towards the poor always stretching our boundaries is to become contemplative ourselves, to take, in the words of Walter Burghardt ‘a long loving look at the real.’ Our task is to pay attention and to nurture the in-breaking of the prophetic among us.}\(^{56}\)

\(^{54}\) May, \textit{Will and Spirit}, 168.
\(^{55}\) May, \textit{Will and Spirit}, 168.
Scofield promotes a listening stance of the director towards helping the directee stay alert to the invitation of the Spirit in his/her journey. This encourages awareness of the movement of God within the directee and thereby to the ever-present prophetic call of God on his/her life within. Abraham Heschel is quoted as saying: “The characteristic of the prophets is not foreknowledge of the future but insight into the present pathos of God.” These words describe something of the way the narrator came into a deeper awareness of the Divine in his own spiritual direction session.

This chapter has reviewed some of the key research literature examining the encounter and the ongoing transformation that is the heart of a spiritual direction session, together with the listening posture that best facilitates such encounters and transformation. The next chapter will identify more specifically the key implications from this research, to answer the research questions. These implications will be drawn from a critical dialogue between the insights gained from the researcher’s narratives and those from the literature review.

CHAPTER 4

This chapter presents the researcher’s findings from his critical engagement with his three narratives and the research literature, to answer the key research questions; namely, what are the encounters at the heart of spiritual direction that foster transformation, and what listening posture best facilitates these encounters and any subsequent transformation of the participants involved?

The final part of this chapter identifies several implications from this research for spiritual directors.

A. At the Core of a Session of Spiritual Direction

1. Encounter with Self

There was a moment when the researcher as directee felt that he stood naked in the truth of living on two ‘tracks’ which, in the face of his shame, had underpinned and coloured his life. At that moment he realised that he was not just admitting something to his spiritual director, but that he was speaking truth to himself for the first time. He knew this was a moment of painful and frank honesty, yet it was also a moment of freedom. Later on he acknowledged, ‘One part, highly respectable, was vital in showing my own sense of being important, acceptable and worthwhile’ while the other side was separate and running alongside the more public part of his life. This raises the question of why there was this seeming dichotomy where two sides of me were running concurrently with each other? On the surface I had a very successful public priestly ministry. On the inside this left me still seeking meaning and true identity. Although the demands and expectations of my public life continued to grow, who I was in private carried a lot more satisfaction. There was also a growing sense of longing to be in touch with the truer self which was not just responding to external needs and
expectations. Despite this dichotomy I was convinced that in these two parts of me I was one and the same person. This emerging truth was nothing short of a leaning into the very heart of the true self. There is a pivotal encounter at the core of a spiritual direction session, which is one’s encounter with one’s true self. What is it to encounter one’s true self?

In the narrative the researcher notes the great service which his spiritual director provided for him in the felt experience of safety through her listening posture which, in turn, led him to an unparalleled self-disclosure. The one who had been a refugee from his true self had finally found a home within. Douglas Steere highlights the importance of listening to another’s soul on his/her way to true self-disclosure and discovery: “To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”1 This level of listening is what the researcher’s spiritual director offered. As a result there was a loving movement towards truth, love and life, which began to gather momentum in the researcher’s life. This movement was not the fruit of some searching questions from the director, nor did she seek to analyse this duality in my life. I began to sense that I was being accepted for being who I am. Yet the full impact of this moment was not felt until many years later. The researcher found that being fully accepted just as he was, brought to light a hidden fear of shame at living on these seeming two tracks. This was only the beginning of greater self-disclosure and self-discovery which took a number of years and self-reflection to be fully appreciated. The true self had spoken and had been heard and held in the safety of the director’s listening posture. The researcher then began to forge a stronger relationship with his true self.

Shame, which had so often tempted the researcher to run away and hide from his truth, seemed at that moment, a distant presence. Pembroke asserts: “Shame arises when the self-

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evaluates itself as flawed, defective, and inferior. One judges that one has fallen short of a cherished ideal. One perceives a gap between the self as it really is and a desired identity.”

This explains something of what the researcher as directee was sensing as he began to feel his own truth overcoming the shame that had been affecting his life at the deepest of levels. In the person of the director this shame was not perceived as an enemy. It was rather seen as having a positive function. As Pembroke observes: “shame feelings… have a potentially positive function namely, moving him to a period of critical introspection, in which he may grasp a vision of a higher capacity for genuine presence.”

The director, through her posture of attentive presence, was able to hold both the shame and the emerging truth, enabling the researcher to discover the freedom to embrace and express his true self. This embracing and expression of the true self became a visible manifestation of the truth that began to exist in a new way. This true self was being generated at that moment even though its full manifestation happened years later. For the researcher, this was a transforming moment of true communion, at this stage not only with himself but with his director as well. Martin Buber calls this inner unitive movement the result of spoken “primary words”. He refers to the fundamental relationship as the speaking of the primary words of ‘I-Thou’. Buber says: “Primary Words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence. Primary words are spoken from the being.”

For Martin Buber the generating of truth into existence is strongly tied to the expression of these primary words. Upon reflection, the directee’s own expression of this tentative inner voice also brought into sharp existence the full truth of what he had been living.

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He had been living a life that seemed to be absent to the full knowledge, presence and relationship to the true self. As the directee was being held in the safety of the director’s listening posture he began to grow in a deeper awareness of his true self. That spiritual direction session was like the first sentence of a new chapter of a brief autobiography which had brought me to the present moment.

At the very core of spiritual direction, the emergence of the true self is the very foundation of the directee’s intimate relationship with God, self, others and the whole of creation. The director’s posture of attentiveness and respect enabled the directee to explore areas in his life that until that time had been left unattended. Her patient acceptance made it easier for him to believe and trust the tentative voice of truth at that moment. Engaging with the true self opens one to the mystery which underlies the core reality of true self-identity.

2. Encounter with the Presence of the O/other

The second encounter which emerges in this research centres on the presence of the mysterious Other in a spiritual direction session. In his narratives, the narrator both as director and directee frequently alludes to a growing sense of the presence of the mysterious Other. This was the fruit of prayerful attentiveness, continuing spiritual direction and contemplative reflection over a long period of time. One of the first areas where this mysterious presence emerged was when he reflected upon the manner of listening by his spiritual director. The quality of the presence by the director to the directee was one of empathic listening and loving holding of all that was being expressed. Douglas Steere elaborates regarding the O/other:

Is it blasphemous to suggest that over the shoulder of the human listener we have been looking at, there is never absent the silent presence of the Eternal Listener, the Living God? For in penetrating to what is involved in listening do we not
disclose the thinness of the filament that separates persons listening openly to another and that of God intently listening to each soul?5

This listening and holding was a true expression of incarnate compassion. The mysterious Other became most evident in her posture of loving and grounded attentiveness. The narrator as directee, from the same reflection, was able to recognise that the mysterious living Other was also present behind the small voice of truth that spoke to him from within. This was a voice of discernment which was able to recognise the movement of the heart towards and away from love, truth and life. It was also, above all, a movement towards the presence of the One who lies at the very heart of all Mystery.

In the second narrative, the narrator found himself in a place of dark despair. He recalls how he comes face to face with an experience of deep dereliction wherein a quiet voice invited him to “come to me”. It is in this experience of abandonment and dereliction that the narrator experienced another moment of communion. It was a brief but deep encounter that happened in the inner place of the true self. Without words, it was the experience of dereliction itself that united the narrator and the derelict on the street at that moment. Upon reflection this communion not only connected with the night before but began to illuminate a new way of being. It was an encounter with the true self marked with a new freedom to be at home within his own inner self and able to be responsible for his own truth and actions. He was able to own his humanity in a way that spoke of deeper integration and wholeness.

This experience, however, left the narrator in a state of awe. The narrator had somehow found the Divine Other incarnated in this experience.

5 Steere, "Gleanings", 83.
The researcher understands this as a unitive encounter with the mysterious Other as hidden. In the first narrative as a directee he experiences the Eternal Listener in the interaction with the director. In the second narrative he experiences the Divine Other who meets him in the derelict. He is awakened to this presence of the Mysterious Other when he reflects upon his encounter with the derelict, which felt unitive. The surprise of such an abiding awareness slowly begins to dawn on him that, in this communion, he has met the same living, inviting God from the previous evening, during his deep sense of abandonment. While mystery and awe shrouded this deep awareness, it remains pivotal in the emerging sense of his true identity. The researcher realised that having encountered the mysterious Other at his deepest and truest self left him changed.

Martin Buber comments on these momentous encounters which generate a new way of living:

> It is the phenomenon that a man does not pass, from the moment of the supreme meeting, the same being as he entered into it… In that moment something happens to the man… The man who emerges from the act of pure relation, that so involves his being, has now in his being something more than has grown in him, of which he did not know before and whose origin is not rightly able to indicate.\(^6\)

The ‘act of pure relation’ is an apt description for the lingering sense of connection that the researcher felt as a result of his encounter with the mysterious Other.

This deep connection is also evident in the third narrative where the researcher as director encounters his directee. In what way is the Mysterious Other encountered when the researcher is in the chair of the spiritual director? His attentiveness as a director is held in a posture of a deep listening and openness to his directee and an awareness of the mysterious Other in him. He finds himself listening beneath the words spoken by the directee. Not only

\(^6\) Buber, *I and Thou*, 139-140.
is the director aware of listening to the mysterious Other within himself, but he also finds himself listening for the Mysterious Other in his directee. In this place, he finds that so much is communicated in silence. Silence takes on a new importance in helping to reverence what is spoken, especially in those moments when the directee shares from his deepest pain. The silence also becomes a sacred holding space where communion with the directee’s truer self becomes possible. Thomas Merton describes this depth of communion thus: “The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concepts.”

The researcher was able to be present at these moments not only to the directee, whose inner self was emerging, but also to the mysterious Other whose presence facilitated this communion. “There had been darkness, aloneness and a deep self-loathing which paved the way (for the directee) to this moment of deep self-revelation… Again, no words had needed to be spoken and yet I had felt a deep sense of union with him.”

Due to the deep quality of the silence between the directee and the director, the director created the safety necessary for him not to go into hiding again. Truthful honesty had broken through for the directee and brought him into a freedom to give expression to these unpleasant and hidden aspects of his life. For the researcher, the question remained as to who the agent was that somehow generated such deep encounters. Mary Ann Scofield asserts that “if [as spiritual directors] we are attentive, we literally experience a similar stirring in the presence of God and in the telling of the God-story by the directee.”

The researcher as a director found that the movements that were happening in both himself and the directee paved the way for a much deeper awareness of the One who was inviting the directee to reveal his inner truth. It was at this time that truth resonated and was discerned from both

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8 Mary Ann Scofield, “Waiting on God” in Buckley, ed. *Sacred is the Call*, 53.
director and directee and became a true place of encounter. This enabled the directee, through the posture of silent and deep listening presence of the director, to come to a deeper self-acceptance and truthful awareness of his true self. These movements of deep healing, acceptance and the ongoing revelation of the inner true self, indicate the presence of the One who engenders truth, love and life.

**B. Radical Transformative Changes**

In reflecting upon the three narratives within the context of his wider life, the researcher recognises that radical transformations had occurred as a result of these encounters. Firstly, he gained a newfound freedom to be himself and to be in relationship through the unveiling of his true self and facing up to his shame and poverty. Secondly, his understanding of God became more incarnate as he grew in his capacity to be more present to his true self. Thirdly there was a deeper connection with others, especially those who had suffered in the same way.

One key factor that arose from the spiritual direction session in the first narrative was that the directee became present to his inner true self, to the Divine Other and to his spiritual director. Through the invitation of the One who was present and enfleshed in the posture of the spiritual director’s non-judgemental listening, encouragement, love and hospitality, the directee was enabled to speak his truth. This was a turning point which gave him greater freedom to be and to accompany others who struggle in their self-identity.

This realisation of the true self and the awareness of the Divine Other within was strengthened in the experience explored in the second narrative, when the narrator encounters dark dereliction and aloneness. It was noted that although the narrator was strongly tempted not to face his devastating situation, he was graced to somehow freely embrace it. In this experience the researcher recognised radical transformation, but it took ten years to
appreciate the full implications of this momentous change. Out of this transformation, a new habit of trust and of casting himself into the present was born.

Part of the radical transformation that the researcher found was the presence and voice of his true self. Not only could he speak the truth about the way he lived out of an exterior set of references, but he had identified and measured his success in terms of fulfilling these external expectations. This transformation led to a newfound freedom to be truly present to others, without needing any external bolstering. This honesty with the true self swept away fear and much of the shame that had paralysed him in the past. This transformation also brought with it a new confidence to handle mystery and the unknown with a confidence from an uncluttered presence of mind and heart. This was accompanied by a new sense of the presence of the Divine within. A greater self-knowledge changed the manner of his listening to the heart of others. His sense of identity was now open to Mystery and to rely on this attentive presence in order to listen to the various movements of the heart, whether that applies to his own life or the life of others. The focus is on being present and fully alive and responding to the inner movements in himself. This focus was not self-centred but is O/other-centred. Security now was based on a deeper sense of being present to the moment and to the O/other in the moment.

The researcher found that he now enters the present moment differently. He finds that he enters with a deeper confidence in the One who is present within. The pre-conceived idea and the need to perform now give way to openness to the Mystery of the Other. This deep inner confidence, which is hidden within, results from this inner sense of the true self, which is free to respond to any new situation without being dictated to solely by the expectations of others. His success as a public figure is not as based on how well he ‘performs’, nor is it driven solely by the external demands of office anymore. He is learning from his experience of
dereliction and the unitive experience with the Divine, that even in the midst of his sense of emptiness he is never alone.

Part of the transformative change involved the way in which the researcher knows God. At the heart of this change was the experience of union and oneness. This experience of love now shapes from within the researcher’s inner movements and desires and has become the measure by which he can now be available to others. He has also found that loneliness is becoming an inner solitude where he is ‘at home’ with his true self. It is from this place also that he finds greater disposition and openness to listen to others in a manner that communicates both faith and hope.

This gifted presence of God – this union and oneness that the researcher experienced – has left him with a deep sense of living in the present moment, free to be who he is, and to walk with others in the same way. Janet Ruffing speaks of transformation on the journey in terms of mutuality with God. “Few of us quite grasp that the process of mystical transformation gradually overcomes this sense of the utter Otherness of God in favour of a radical mutuality with God.”

This mutuality imbues a sense of freedom in the individual to be himself/herself as a result of experiencing a deep union and oneness with this Divine Love. Gerald May portrays this transforming unitive experience as *agape* love:

In *agape* we realize we actually *are one*, along with the rest of creation, and with the rest of creation, we are *in* love and *of* love. Narcissism says, “I need you to love me.” Erotic love says, “I need to love you.” Filial love says, “I love you because I understand you. Agape – if it could speak – might say “I am you *in* Love.”

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9 Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction*, 126.
10 May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*, 167.
One of the deepest realisations for the researcher was that radical transformation cannot be measured, controlled or contained by short-term expectations, either by the director or the directee. The changes that had happened in the life of the narrator were the fruits of great reflection and attentive listening over a number of years. They were never predictable and were accompanied by many surprises. It was important both as director and directee to enter each of the encounters with great humility of heart and expectant faith in the One who is always faithfully present. Trust, faithfulness and a deep ensuing gratitude became hallmarks of such radical transformation.

Notwithstanding these insights into various aspects of transformation, the researcher does not linger with the need for further analysis or intrigue about his experience. At the end of such reflection on this transformation the researcher is simply left with a deep sense of awe and gratitude for the abiding sense of the unutterable Mystery that encountered him.

The next section addresses the secondary research question; namely, the kind of listening posture that best facilitates the transformative encounters at the heart of spiritual direction sessions.

C. Listening Posture in Spiritual Direction

The director’s listening posture, which enables the possibility of a depth encounter, is generated by a contemplative stance. This stance lays the foundation for genuine incarnate compassion. This section outlines the various elements that make up this contemplative stance and posture. Some of the principal elements which facilitate such a contemplative stance are: compassion; self-awareness; safety; contemplation; and reverence.
C.1 Compassion

Compassion is the heart of true hospitality and open availability, as a deep connection begins to happen. The researcher found that the director’s readiness to enter into his inner darkness with compassion helped foster the trust needed to share his pain. Henri Nouwen affirms: “Listening with compassion means to enter another’s dark moments. It is to walk into places of pain, not to flinch or look away when another agonises. It means to stay where people suffer.”11 Compassion is of primary importance in the listening posture and is vital in a spiritual direction session. In the narratives the researcher found great freedom to share and to listen to his inner self intently because of the director’s compassion. Ilia Delio describes compassion as “the ability to ‘get inside the skin of another’, in order to respond to another’s suffering.”12

A distinctive quality of compassion is the stance of being able to welcome the other. The other conveys that something is unknown; however compassion speaks of a willingness to be available to this mystery, especially in the willingness to share the pain, fears and limits of the other. In his treatment of compassion Pembroke, referring to scriptural texts, explains:

Availability involves receiving the other and her hopes and fears, her joys and sorrow chez soi. In the case of compassionate understanding one draws the pain and distress of the other into one’s innermost sphere.13

In the directee’s narratives, the director’s welcoming and genuine care helped to overcome his shame and cautiously share from his own brokenness. There was also a sense of meeting the Divine Other that upon reflection later became more of a felt reality to him in the meeting

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13 Pembroke, The Art of Listening, 52.
with the derelict. This enabled the narrator to hold his directee’s story with greater respect and compassion, which will be developed later.

C.2 Self-Awareness

Self-awareness forms part of the primary interior preparation through which the director becomes available and is able to listen to the directee. The researcher recognised that what aided the directee’s self-awareness was his willingness to engage in careful and prayerful reflection. This was especially the case when, in the first narrative, he had shared of living on two tracks. This prompted a deeper awareness of his true self. That was most transformative in his journey. This self-awareness was also accompanied by a deeper sense of the presence of the divine Other.

Self-awareness has continued to happen since then. This presence and union of the true self and the divine Other precipitated the experience with the derelict. As director also, the narrator’s self-awareness became a firm basis from which he was able to listen with openness to whatever emerged from the directee’s own inner self and truth.

Augsburger associates deep self-awareness with presence to the other when he affirms that “Presence requires an integration of self-awareness with an awareness of the other. The consciousness of being ‘with’ another is not a superficial association but openness from the centre of one’s own existence.”14

Beside this readiness to embrace the diversity of the directee’s inner world the narrator as director showed a willingness to accept uncritically the directee’s image of God. This open

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14 Augsburger, Pastoral Counselling across Cultures, 37.
welcome to the o/Other was the result of being grounded in the emerging knowledge of the narrator’s own true self, as well as recognition of the Divine Other within his own life.

C.3 Safety

Safety refers to the boundaries which are established and maintained by the director around the spiritual direction session, which convey to the directee that he/she can be secure in what is shared. Safety is a common priority for most professional helping services. Confidentiality around what transpires between directee and director in spiritual direction, is paramount. The narrator as directee felt this security when he began sharing his story tentatively. He was greatly encouraged to share an area laden with shame, through the open and non-judgemental attitude of the director. In her non-judgementalism, she also became the bodily face of the Other whose presence was also perceived as safe. In this safe environment silence is very important in providing an essential space for the directee to feel the freedom to reflect and draw from his own inner self. The directee found that this important spaciousness was created and maintained mainly due to the director’s ability to not interrupt or interpret what the directee was beginning to reveal about himself. Nor was there any sense that she was shocked or amazed at what he shared. The directee felt the encouragement to let out the truth as it was being generated at that moment from his true inner self. The director’s use of the directee’s own words in reflecting back what was shared, ensured that the directee remained focussed, attentive and expectant on what was being brought to the light at that moment. Both patience and acceptance remained the lasting hallmarks that formed part of the gift of safety.

C.4 Contemplation

Gerald May states: “It is my belief that the primary task of spiritual directors is to encourage within themselves… moment-by-moment attention towards God as frequently as possible
during spiritual direction sessions.”\textsuperscript{15} This attentiveness toward God calls for a heart that is contemplative before, during and after a spiritual direction session. A number of times the director found himself in this stance of open listening to himself and the O/other in the narrative. The researcher found that the narrator, both as the directee and the director, was engaged in looking at the other with equal compassion, silence and acceptance, thus reflecting his own experience of the Divine Other. This open stance rises out of a heart that has been awakened in the contemplative gaze to the mystery of his true self. This was evident in the first narrative when the narrator was awakened to his truth of himself living on two tracks.

The director’s listening posture in the first narrative was contemplative inasmuch as she held the directee non-judgementally, which facilitated his further leaning into the mystery of his own truer self and his deeper relationship with the mysterious Other. This journey was uninterrupted by questioning or any other irrelevant concerns from the director. Gerald May makes the point that a spiritual director cannot be limited in his/her perspective by concerns that would draw the director into a narrow focus. The director was not hampered by any limited interpretations or perceptions that in any way distracted her from being drawn into the deeper mystery behind the story unfolding. This contemplative stance of a director thrives in silence, which is attentive and poised unto the O/other. Upon reflection on the nature of the encounters as both director and directee, the researcher found that attentiveness and silence formed a firm basis for a deep contemplative stance. He found that a director chooses to be there for the directee’s interests alone and thus prepares beforehand, by shutting down all other “voices”, interests and distractions, waiting in contemplative stance for the directee to

\textsuperscript{15} May, \textit{Care of Mind, Care of Spirit}, 116.
arrive. This contemplative stance is not a blanking out but rather a preparation to welcome the o/Other as the important guest.

Reflection is vital to deepen this contemplative listening posture. The readiness to look back was vital for the directee, in order to have a deeper perspective of the session.

**C.5 Reverence**

Much of what has been mentioned so far in defining the listening posture can be summed up in the word ‘reverence’. The heart of this attribute is the sacredness of being present. In the Hebrew Scriptures God is identified as “I am who I am”. This sacredness, of being present in a spiritual direction session, encompasses being present: to God; to the directee; to oneself and to one’s call. An important part of this reverencing includes the embracing of mystery or the respecting and holding of paradox in the sharing of life experiences.

**C.5.1 Reverencing the Presence of God**

Neither director and directee are alone before, during and after a spiritual direction session. Buber asserts, “the extended lines of relations meet in the eternal Thou… the inborn Thou is realised in each relation and consummated in none.”\(^{16}\) A spiritual direction session is unique and necessarily open-ended to the mysterious O/other. Reverence is a deep acknowledgement of this truth and forms part of the preparation, duration and the reflection that is so essential to every spiritual direction session.

An essential part of spiritual direction is the raising of awareness of the presence of God, the true self and others. This awareness holds the key to the true reverence that enables those who participate in a spiritual direction session to stand in awe of God within. Barry and

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Connolly elaborate on this presence of the One in spiritual direction, when they state that the task of the spiritual director is “to help people experience God’s action and to respond to God.” They are quite firm in defining the art of spiritual direction within the framework of presence in relationship and response to the dynamic action of the Divine.

Respecting the mystery of God becomes difficult for those who do not grasp that this is the heart of a listening posture, which calls for a fine sensitivity to the Presence, palpably felt but escaping all other definition.

In the third narrative the director enters reverently into the presence of the mysterious Other as he is poised unto the directee, when he asks: “In what way, and by whose enabling, could we both have such a deep encounter?”

This same question arose from reflection upon what was spoken by the true self in the first narrative. By implication, such an event brought with it the realisation that the true self never emerges alone. This is another way of reverencing the mystery of God who is ever-present where truth, love and life are found. This reverence for the mystery of God grounds the reverence of the other.

C.5.2 Reverencing the Directee

A critical point in the third narrative was that the director needed to become present to the directee before the session started. Part of the preparation before meeting the directee may involve recalling the story shared thus far. This recalling is done without presumptuousness of what the directee might share in the upcoming session. This reverencing of the directee is marked by an open inner disposition that puts no limitation on what could be shared by the directee or the movements of the sacred Other.

17 Barry and Connolly, Practice of Spiritual Direction, 43.
This kind of preparation goes beyond the expectations of what may be required in a typical counselling situation. It calls for a deep reverent silence whose primary concern is to be totally available to the O/other. With this respectful, silent listening in the third narrative there was a growing sense in the director of communing when, ‘The silence as he looked down… seemed to convey a sense of connection between us which brought closeness with it.’ It was important to preserve this expectant silence if there was to be true reverence for the directee as he unfolded his story.

In a sense this reverence comes from the recognition that within each person there is a deep mystery of his or her true self, as well as the presence of the Divine Other. Reverence then holds these mysteries with a sense of awe and expectant communion. Augsburger highlights this point:

> When one is truly there for another, a depth of communication occurs that is beyond words or style, or technique, or theory or theology. It is the presence gifted by Presence… The consciousness of being “with” another is not a superficial association but openness from the centre of one’s existence… Such self-awareness permits more complete attending to others and a willingness to perceive as much of the other’s experience as he or she is free to reveal.\(^{18}\)

**C.5.3 Reverencing One’s Call**

The heart of reverencing one’s call is the recognition that human beings are not created to be alone. The fact that they are being ‘called’ denotes that there is a primary Caller whose words generate being. It is also clear that in some way every call is a calling to be for others in love, since the One who calls is Love Incarnate. Towards the end of the third narrative the director noted, for instance, ‘I had felt a deep sense of union with him.’ This became a moment that invited the director to a deeper sense of his calling that was beyond any exercise of skills or talents. This gratitude arose from being present to the directee’s own experience of his

\(^{18}\) Augsburger, *Pastoral Counselling across Cultures*, 37.
deepest truth. Such profound communion was a sheer gift of grace which left the director with a loving sense of what he had been called to be for the directee: a clear demonstration of incarnate compassion. This call, once accepted, evokes a deep commitment, akin to the call to loving awareness that becomes a way of life. This call is an invitation to become attentive, open and responsive with all the intensity that has been given as gift.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the dynamic mysteries at the core of a spiritual direction session. The methodology of autoethnography was used to explore three of the researcher’s particular experiences around spiritual direction. Each narrative was examined to explore the core encounters of a spiritual direction session and its consequences.

These narratives and their key insights were brought into engagement with the research literature in order to depth, enlighten, challenge and confirm these insights; including understanding more deeply the interaction between director and directee. These insights pointed towards certain transformations which occur during and following spiritual direction. I discovered the freedom to be present to my true self, to God as the indwelling Mystery and to others in their true self and to the indwelling Mystery within them. In the literature review, especially in Buber, Pembroke and Scofield and later in Gerald May, the importance of presence, besides other aspects of listening, became a much more important theme. It helped me identify and further recognise the all-embracing reality of the mysterious Other’s transformative presence at the deepest level…

In the uttering of the twin tracks I now realise that I had a choice between two possibilities. One was the possibility of becoming present, relational and inwardly directed. Alternatively I could choose the possibility of dwelling in the past which meant continuing to live in a way of being non-relational. This choice was also between living in the present moment and engaging with life or succumbing to the inertia of a life not lived out of the true self. The work of Buber, May and Merton in particular have helped me realise and recognise the futility of giving credence to the self that was controlled by shame and self-centred fulfilment.
CONCLUSION

I realised further that transformation in a spiritual direction session is best facilitated by a listening posture which is contemplative. Both Scofield, Lindahl and Shannon have helped to illustrate in a powerful way the importance of such a contemplative stance in enabling true listening.

The encounter with the true self is closely aligned with the locating of one’s own inner authority. A spiritual direction session remains a significant way through which one’s true self can emerge and be brought into deeper communion with the indwelling mystery of God. The awareness of one’s true self begins to form a solid basis upon which one can discern one’s direction in life. I discovered that this inward movement can form a true basis from which I can sift and choose that which leads to life or away from it. The experience of the Divine Other also, can be enhanced and depthed within the framework of a spiritual direction session. Although the presence of God is mystery it does beckon and desire a response in love.

I also discovered that transformation comes from the willingness and decision to surrender to the mystery of one’s circumstances in life and the willingness to be guided by the emerging presence of the true self and the Divine Other. The fruit of such transformation is the presence of a new freedom. This freedom can facilitate a person’s willingness to be in a more intentional relationship with one’s true self, others and the wider community. This journey is open-ended and, in its unfolding, keeps encountering a deeper mystery that calls for greater faith and hope rather than control and final achievement.

Finally, the manner of seeing through the eyes and heart of God places a distinguishing mark on this ministry of spiritual direction. This study has highlighted the way that this stance can promote greater reverence towards the Mystery that lays within our lives. It also ensures and recognises the importance of this journey with self, others and God unfolding within the
mystery of relationship. The contemplative stance helps those engaging in such a journey to be attentive to the prompting of the Spirit’s ever-present movements and guidance.

This thesis has given me the opportunity to recognise how the truth has been broken open in my life that the unfulfilled desire within me for God, love and relationship with others was far from satisfied by the busyness of my life as a priest. This deeper hunger led me further to discover God’s own desire for me particularly as I discovered myself in the poverty of dereliction. It is through the art of spiritual direction that I was enabled to come to this vital discovery and hold it in a way that it continues to transform my life. At every step, these discoveries that emerged from the research seemed to be inwardly directed by an unfolding Mystery. I was led to the body of literature with a deep desire for the emerging true self and a deep hunger for connection with God and others. I found myself resonating with people like Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and Maryanne Scofield among others, who attempted to communicate such deep mysteries that lie within all of us. I was encouraged that what I was hungering for could only come from an ongoing awareness and embrace of the true self and of God’s inner loving presence.

Embedded in the art of spiritual direction this journey of this ongoing awareness becomes safer, more grounded and provides ongoing continuity. My research into what happens at the heart of a spiritual direction encounter has helped to highlight the necessity of providing safety. This would be most evident in the respectful way that both director and directee are held in a genuine listening posture which establishes a truly compassionate encounter.

As a result of this journey as a directee, director and researcher I find that my ministry as a spiritual director has been transformed. My life is now lived in a much more contemplative way. Silence and prayer are priorities. There is an inner stillness that is becoming a greater part of me. As a director I am able to enter a session with a deep hope that the directee will
come to their own inner stillness and thereby locate their own deepest desire. I am also able to hold with attentive and compassionate respect all that begins to emerge from the directee. I also find that there is a growing freedom to be truly present. I now have a greater freedom in being present to mystery, pain and to facing the future with a certain hope and serenity. As I am learning to savour my life, this contemplative stance helps me to have a deeper awareness of the movements of love and life as gifts. I am more readily aware when these gifts are absent.

As I come to the conclusion of this thesis the words of Martin Buber “the act of pure relation” is an apt description for the lingering sense of connection that I feel as a result of my encounter with the mysterious Other, my true self and the other. Buber has said “it is the phenomenon that a man does not pass, from the moment of the supreme meeting, the same being as he entered into it… In that moment something happens to the man… The man that emerges from the act of pure relation that so involves his being has now in his being something more …”

\(^1\) Buber, *I and Thou*, 139-140.


Holt, Nicholas L., "Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story"

http://www.ualberta.ca/%C2%ACiiqm/backissues/2_1final/htm/holt.html.


