Time to Say Goodbye: Terminating the Spiritual Direction Relationship

by Anne Chrisp

“I am about to go away on sabbatical,” I said. “I will be back in just over three months’ time, and I will look forward to catching up with you then.” And then I added, without really intending to: “You might care to use that time as an opportunity to reflect on our spiritual direction relationship and whether to continue when I come back.”

The woman to whom I was talking, a spiritual directee, looked taken aback. “I’m not saying that I wish to stop,” I explained hurriedly. “Just it is an opportunity. Get in touch later in the year when I return.”

Several months later, I returned from sabbatical. No word from this spiritual directee, no telephone call or e-mail. That was not completely surprising, but once a new year had turned and there was still no contact, I began to wonder if there was more to the silence. Eventually, I received an e-mail—"I have slowly done a reorganisation of my personal supervision and spiritual direction arrangements over the last few months, after thinking and pondering on it for some time. (I think you began me on that before you went away on sabbatical: encouraged me to review and reflect a bit!) So, I'm making a change of director and supervisor."

My heart sank. The spiritual directee and I had enjoyed a productive spiritual direction relationship for nearly ten years. I enjoyed her company and respected her as a person. We had a good working relationship. Yet the ending of our relationship felt awkward and fraught. I wondered if she had felt uncomfortable for some time? Had I pushed to end our relationship too soon?

This ending reminded me of previous occasions when spiritual direction relationships had concluded. One or two people with whom I was engaged in spiritual direction spasmodically over short periods of time gradually drifted away with little acknowledgment. Another spiritual directee of long standing rather awkwardly confessed by e-mail to a growing disquiet with our sessions. The invitation to attend a final debriefing session was politely rebuffed. I had felt uneasy and that something remained unresolved.

I was left with some questions. Is there a best way and time to end a spiritual direction relationship? How could the ending of a spiritual direction relationship set the ground for the future? Perhaps, I pondered, there is an appropriate stage and time in life for spiritual direction.

Looking for Answers

I began looking for answers to these questions in my personal experience of receiving spiritual direction. Over the course of nearly twenty years, I have changed spiritual director only three times. On two of these occasions, the spiritual director concerned was moving out of town, and along with this shift, was experiencing a change in job circumstance also (one to retirement, the other to an increased role). Neither of these situations had felt awkward—they felt like part of the natural unfolding of life. In the third of my experiences, the conversation about ending was mutually supportive and beneficial. None of these spoke to this situation or helped to find an answer to my questions.

Resources on spiritual direction seemed to be the next appropriate place to search. A scan of past issues of Presence turned up nothing. A similar overview of the Spiritual

Zealand spiritual directors in training to explore in research projects.

Perhaps something more serious is called for, I thought, as I turned to textbooks used in spiritual direction training. In The Practice of Spiritual Direction, William Barry and William Connolly carefully describe the process of spiritual direction, the centrality of the religious experience, and key factors in the relationship between spiritual director and an individual directee. Difficult aspects of the relationship, resistance or transference, and the importance of supervision are stressed, but there is no discussion of how to conclude a spiritual direction relationship (chapter 6 from page 80, and chapter 11 from page 175).

Similarly, other authors discuss what spiritual direction is and how to foster a listening and responding attitude to God, to ourselves, and to others (Pickering). Some texts frame the spiritual direction relationship in heartwarming terms, such as "host," "teacher," and "midwife to the soul" (Guenther, 9–27, 42–79, 82–107). Beautifully, also, Susan Phillips proffers narratives of spiritual direction sessions that illuminate the art of spiritual direction.

Like these books, the training of spiritual directors, at least in New Zealand, emphasises the importance of forming a good working alliance with the directee, which is, of course, core to spiritual direction. Foundational skills are taught: how to listen well and how to respond with warmth. Practical matters of establishing a common understanding of what spiritual direction is, agreeing on the regularity of meetings, and the charge (if any) for a session are also taught. As with the texts referred to above, some discussion of problem areas in the relationship is raised. However, all are equally silent on the issue of concluding a spiritual direction relationship.

In Spiritual Friend, Tilden Edwards provides some useful tips of a practical nature. He talks about how to establish the relationship, suggesting a three-month trial period to begin with, a grace period in which a spiritual director and directee discern whether they will work well together. Once a relationship is established, a covenant is recommended, to include such matters as regularity of meeting and content. In this covenant, he suggests there be provision for periodic assessment of the relationship. These should not be too frequent, he suggests, but could usefully occur at an anniversary, the end of a year, or before a summer break (Edwards, 122–24).

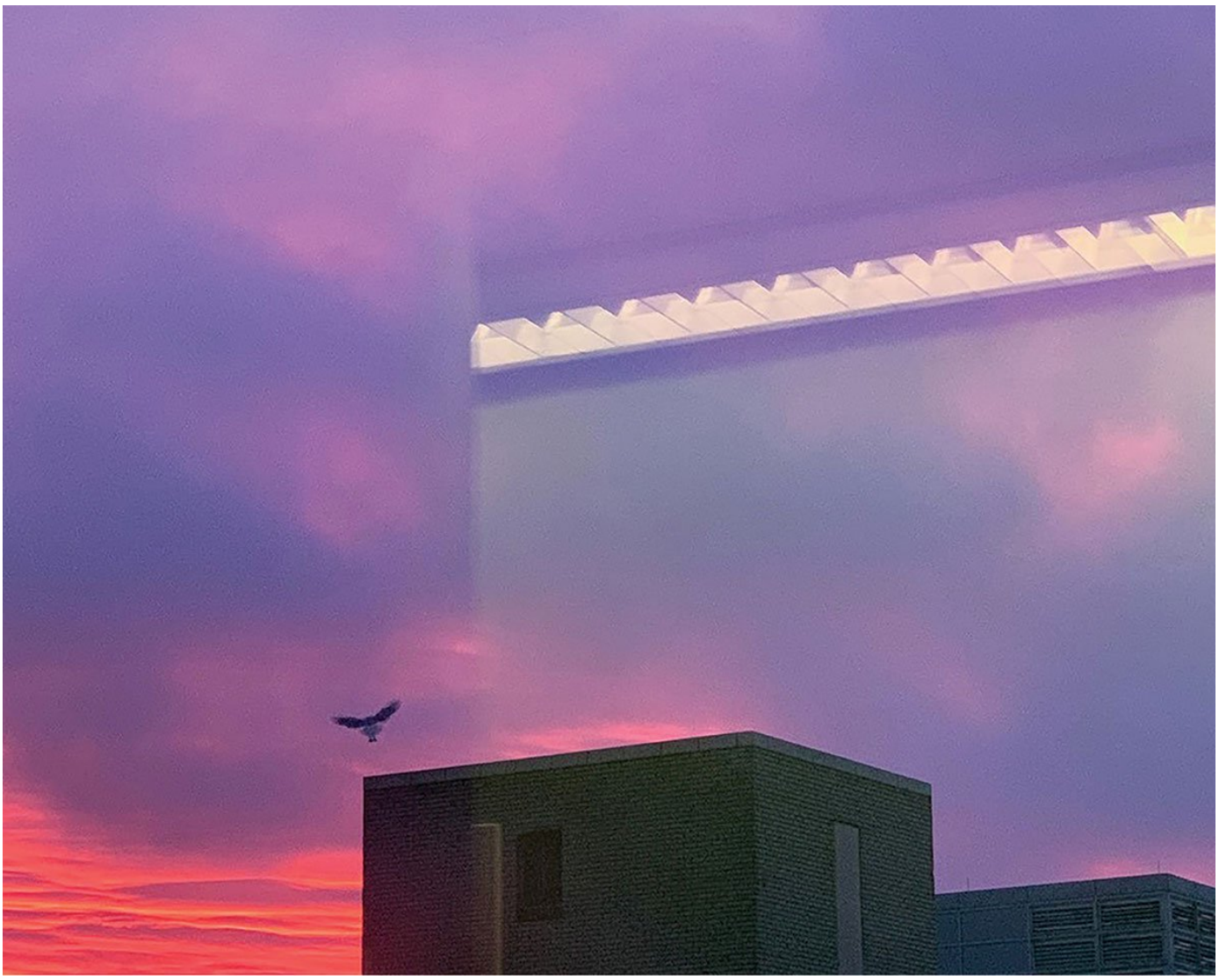
If provisions like this are agreed upon and used regularly in a spiritual direction relationship, the question of termination or continuing in spiritual direction becomes a regular part of the conversation. It might be a simple informal conversation, or something more formal, using a reflection sheet or questions to deepen consideration of the previous year. Either way, such a process would be very helpful in framing the

This kind of open discussion would clarify the nature of the relationship. It would become clear whether spiritual direction is open ended, such as an employment requirement; or issue-based, perhaps to support one navigating a theological challenge or the pains of growing in faith. If this is openly discussed, a clear focus and goal of the spiritual direction become apparent, and along with them, the possibility of discerning when the work is completed and an appropriate time to end has come.

In many cases, however, spiritual direction begins in less carefully formulated ways, without a clear goal. Seldom, in my experience, has spiritual direction been started in order to resolve a particular issue. More commonly, the process is the key. Spiritual direction is entered into in order to foster a relationship with God or to engage more deeply and intentionally with one's inner life. Here spiritual direction is about an unfolding, a deepening life journey, which, as Edwards says, is a "slow long-term process" (162). In these circumstances, the work may begin with some kind of agreement, with perhaps an annual review to follow. With no clear goal, the ending is less clear and a dedicated formal review of the relationship seldom utilised.

Consequently, spiritual directors and directees may drift into relationships that are comfortable or continue in those that are less than satisfactory. The potential to fall into unhealthy patterns, or for dependency to develop, increases. Over a longer period of time, or with no review period, raising the question of whether to continue or not is not natural or may feel at best uncomfortable or embarrassing and at worst like a betrayal. The potential exists for a degree of unspoken discord and disquiet to arise within the relationship that interferes with the work.

Setting up a regular review and evaluation of the working relationship would go a long way to ensure that endings are always part of the conversation. Such conversations entered into with contemplative awareness may facilitate a deeper knowing both of the self and of the spiritual direction relationship.



“Arrival” — Judith Rayl

Time Frames

The question of an appropriate time frame for a spiritual direction relationship is an allied consideration raised earlier in this article. Given that each spiritual directee is different, with an individual life journey and needs, what is appropriate for one person will not necessarily be applicable for another. However, it seems probable that there will be times in life where spiritual direction is of more benefit than others. In times of life crisis, like illness or death, grief and bereavement, or the challenges of midlife turmoil and theological growth, or when discerning a new direction, the support of spiritual direction may be invaluable. Once the crisis has passed or the transition made, it could be useful then to evaluate the relationship and consider whether to continue or not.

At other times, spiritual direction may have a less valuable role to play. Certainly, spiritual direction enables one to pay attention to the life journey outside of times of crisis or change. Yet after a long period (years perhaps) of receiving spiritual direction, some spiritual directees may find that they have the skills and discipline to attend to their inner lives without the support of a spiritual director. Alternatively, some may find that a less regular engagement is required. Offering the freedom to change the terms of the relationship, altering the regularity of meeting from monthly to every three months, for example, may be an arrangement that supports such growth. Still others may find that a change of spiritual director is appropriate at this time to offer new challenges or insight.

As spiritual directors, it is part of our role to discern when a spiritual relationship is fruitful as well as when it feels stale and to note repetitive patterns and resistance. We need to attend to the feelings raised within us and take those feelings to supervision. Spiritual directors need the honesty and integrity to examine their motives, skills, and contribution to the working relationship. The spiritual director may wish to end a relationship because she finds it uncomfortable or boring. Conversely, she may wish to continue with a relationship for personal reasons: the spiritual directee reflects well on the director or enhances the director's sense of well-being. None of these on their own are good reasons to end or continue in the relationship.

With the support of supervision, the spiritual director is obliged to monitor the state of the working relationship in the best interests of the directee. From time to time, it is important to ask whether continuing in the relationship best supports the growth of this person. The spiritual director needs to be attuned to the growth of the directee and to any sense that the relationship is outgrown. We need to be attentive to a sense of fledging—that this spiritual directee is ready to launch into the world and may need a new companion for that journey. It is not our role to try to keep them in the nest, to inhibit this growth, for needs of our own.

The issue of time frames for spiritual direction, of whether it is right to continue in a relationship or to end it, is one that calls for careful attention. Regular reviews and good supervision are useful tools to employ. Once a decision has been made to terminate a relationship, however that decision has been reached, it is important to end the relationship well.

And so, we return to the initial question: How best to end a spiritual direction relationship?

Endings

In life, we know that good endings are important. Our lives are filled with loss and endings of many kinds. In work situations, we get a promotion or are made redundant; our children are born and leave home; loved ones die. We know that is important in funeral and memorial services: to say good-bye, to celebrate a life, and to acknowledge what has been. Religious and secular organisations and celebrants have access to a wide range of liturgies and resources appropriate to their settings. There are fewer tools to assist with other endings and losses of life, although some writers fill this gap—Joyce Rupp, Dorothy McRae-McMahon, and Ruth Burgess, for example.

It seems appropriate that a relationship entered into with care should be terminated with a similar degree of care. If a relationship ends well, a couple who have worked together will be able to meet again without embarrassment or a sense of unfinished business. The transition to a new relationship between these two people is facilitated. (This is important for all people, but even more so in a small country like New Zealand, where it is not unusual to meet again.) Both parties are left with a clean slate, a sound basis from which they can proceed to engage in future spiritual direction relationships.

Good endings are facilitated by good communication. One party or the other needs to openly state that he would like to end the relationship. This would preferably take place at a face-to-face meeting, but if that seems too difficult, correspondence by e-mail or a telephone conversation would suffice. Once the parties have come to the decision to end the relationship, some kind of closure could be helpful.

Here are some suggestions of ways in which to end the spiritual direction relationship well:

- An examen of the time spent together: What brought the most joy? What brought the most challenge?
- Space at the end of the final session, to acknowledge and appreciate what has been gained from the other.
- A review of the learnings and growth that have occurred.

- An overview of the life that has been accompanied over the months or years of this relationship.
- An honest appraisal of what has worked between spiritual director and directee, as well as those aspects of the relationship that each has found stretching.
- A spiritual direction session focused on closure, with the opportunity for each party to acknowledge what this experience has brought. If planned ahead, each party could consider answers to questions like these:
    - What have been the joys of this time?
    - What have been the pains and sorrows?
    - What has been gained through this relationship?

- A ritual of closure could be planned, which could include:
    - the lighting and snuffing of a candle;
    - spoken thanks;
    - a time of silent reflection;
    - making an altar and laying on it items to symbolise the time spent together;
    - the gift of flowers or a card to the other;
    - writing a prayer or blessing for the other;
    - offering one another a blessing on the ongoing journey;
    - prayer or anointing with oil.

Every relationship is different, so what is appropriate in concluding each one will also vary. These are suggestions only; there are many more possibilities that could be offered.

It is important to note, too, that our need as spiritual directors for closure may be different to the need of the directee. The reasons for ending a spiritual direction relationship are many: from a growing personality incompatibility at one extreme to developing a closer friendship at the other; tension over differing theologies or the desire to work with a new spiritual director or the need for a fresh approach; shifting home, job, or town. In not all cases will a formal closure be warranted or even welcomed. To conclude the relationship in the ways suggested requires a degree of maturity, openness, and vulnerability that not all spiritual directees, or directors, possess.

In situations when the needs for closure of spiritual director and directee are not compatible, the director may need to find some ways to attend to her own sense of ending. The ending of a spiritual direction relationship, as with many other close relationships, can carry with it a sense of loss, even grief. It is important to recognise this and to allow space for the feelings to crystallise and to be felt. Attending to one's own soul, to what arises, is good self-care. The ending provides a good opportunity to reflect on one's practice as a spiritual director. Even in the absence of feedback from the spiritual directee, we can ask ourselves what we have learned and how we have grown in and through this relationship. We observe ourselves, noting the impact of this spiritual directee on us, recognizing that each directee affects us differently. Questions like these may also provide helpful reflection:

- Who am I without this spiritual directee?
- How do I feel as the relationship ends?
- How has this relationship impacted my practice?
- What have I offered to this relationship?
- What have I gained from it?
- What does it tell me about myself?

Some relationships come to a rough end. A spiritual directee may finish without explanation, or in anger and accusation. There may be misunderstandings, with no easy resolution. Such situations are likely to be rare, but despite the conflict and

disquiet that may be involved, they still provide fruitful ground for self-examination and further growth. In these situations, supervision would be a very helpful place in which to explore what has happened.

Conclusion

Spiritual direction, like any therapeutic relationship, works best when expectations are clear and boundaries are set. A covenant that outlines the basics of the relationship —the frequency of meeting, costs, and mutual expectations—and most importantly provides terms of periodic review and evaluation and grounds for concluding the relationship will preempt many problems and facilitate a transparent and healthy working arrangement.

In situations where such clear guidelines have not been set, and even in those where they have been, careful consideration of how best to end of the relationship honours the time spent together. Finishing well respects the parties' individuality. It acknowledges strengths and gifts received. It will facilitate increased self-knowledge and prepare both parties to more freely enter any future spiritual direction relationships.

This article began with a story. In the e-mail informing me of her decision to end this spiritual direction relationship, the directee added: "But I can't conclude our relationship of so many years just by e-mail, so wonder if you'd like to meet me for a coffee so I can say thank you in person? If you're comfortable with that…?"

Meet for coffee we did. But that was before this article was conceived, pondered over, and written. If I had the opportunity to finish the relationship with that spiritual directee all over again, I would suggest a more formal process to our ending. I would wish to honour our relationship in regular reviews as well as in a closing ritual, to affirm this person's gifts and steadfastness of faith, confidence, and strength. I would wish to offer thanks for the trust, love, and friendship we had shared. I would remember laughter and tears. This was a sacred time, holy ground, which I will treasure always.

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