

Can Spiritual Directors Help?

An edited article By Andrea Cooper that appeared in the New York Times, 13 January 2021

“Spiritual companions” offer to connect clients to the divine in their everyday life.

Last spring, after a divorce, Qadeera Ingram needed someone to talk to. Specifically, she wanted to be able to speak about spirituality and the bigger picture of her life. Ms. Ingram, a 33-year old government contractor in Goose Creek, SC hired Susan Pannier-Cass, a spiritual director, to talk about what she was experiencing, including raising her 6-year old son in a pandemic at a time of widespread unrest.

In some of the virtual session, Ms. Ingram talked about her dreams, and Mr. Pannier-Cass would help her analyze them. In others, Ms. Ingram discussed elements of the natural world, how they made her feel closer to God. Ms. Pannier-Cass would encourage her “to go outside more and take my shoes off,” Ms. Ingram said, “put my feet on the ground, just to reconnect with my center and what brings me peace.”

Spiritual companions, also known as spiritual directors, are guides whose purpose is to listen deeply to clients and help them explore their spirituality. What they offer is not therapy; according to Spiritual Directors International, a nonprofit in Bellevue, WA, the goal of meeting with a spiritual companion is to take a “meaningful step to help you find wholeness and balance in life, not to mention a sense of connection with God . . . Which connects us all.”

The practice has roots in many faiths, including Catholicism. Contemporary spiritual directors come from a variety of religions. One-quarter of American adults in an April 2020 survey from the Pew Research Center reported that their religious faith has increased because of the pandemic.

Alissa Ballot, 65, a retired lawyer in Chicago, was already a member of a synagogue when a retreat introduced her to spiritual companionship. She has found greater self-understanding by writing poetry at her spiritual director’s suggestions. Spiritual direction is helping her “become the me that God intended and created me to be.”

Lucinda Clark, a spiritual director in Charlotte, NC, said that in her experience, more Black clients are seeking spiritual direction after George Floyd’s death and the anger and protests that followed. “Some people are coming because they’re hurt. They don’t know how

to move forward.” In her sessions she often asks questions to help clients reflect on what they’re experiencing, from a hard day at work to a disconnection in their relationship with God.

Andrea Metz-Nicholson, 59, believes the practice has given her greater self-awareness, an ability to voice difficult emotions, and a more intimate relationship with God. She has endured several family tragedies in recent years, and seeing a spiritual director “just brought clarity. It brought me peace.”

Others come to spiritual direction for guidance in reconciling their past faith with what they believe now, or merging their interfaith beliefs into a cohesive whole. Rabbi Adam Levitt, 38, in Providence, RI, who provides spiritual direction likes to bring creativity into his sessions through activities like art and writing. “The more people take pleasure in the process, the easier it is for them to hear their life, their soul, speaking to them.”

Emily Malcolm, a clinical psychologist in Philadelphia who has worked with a spiritual director, noted that while therapy “can provide expert help with healing from mental health symptoms,” spiritual direction “focuses on your relationship with God or the divine” through prayer or reflection.

Silas Bergen, 33, a statistic and data science professor at Winona State University in Winona, MN describes his self-reflection process. “Where have I been? Where am I at with whatever I’ve been experiencing? That encourages me to check in with myself, to maybe name the ways in which I’m noticing the divine in my everyday life.”