

The Gifts of Spiritual Direction  
at the  
Threshold of Death

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## **The Gifts of Spiritual Direction at the Threshold of Death**

### **A Personal Introduction**

My thesis focuses on the following key questions as important considerations for spiritual directors who choose to work at the threshold of death: How can a training in spiritual direction prepare one to be present for a dying directee and his or her family? How can a spiritual director offer her gifts in an embodied and incarnated way? What are the ways a spiritual director can support a dying directee to relax into her wholeness and sacredness in the challenges of the death journey so that she can have a more peaceful meaningful transition? Is it possible for spiritual directors to work co-creatively with the intelligence within nature and the subtle ecology of spirit at death's threshold? Could such co-creation bring more ease, joy, communion, even celebration to someone's last passage?

I believe that spiritual directors, especially those trained to practice in embodied and incarnated ways, have much to offer the dying and their families. Part One explores the ways directors can serve at the threshold. Part Two outlines three aspects of spiritual direction training that can best support a director to work in the field of death and dying. Working at the threshold has its own set of challenges, and requires a spiritual director to modify the traditional ways of working with directees. Part Three looks at some of these differences and challenges. The

rigors of death work mean that directors need to prepare and support themselves before and during their time of service at the threshold. Part Four discusses this kind of preparation. Part Five explores the key capacities and skills spiritual directors need in order to do their best work with the dying. The questions outlined at the beginning of this section are explored primarily in Part Two, but are woven throughout the rest of the thesis as a foundational inquiry and a personal effort on my part to re-imagine what is possible at death's threshold.

My individual approach to death work is informed by an inter-spiritual immersion in David Spangler's Incarnational Spirituality, Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practice, Anthroposophical training from Rudolf Steiner, and the Anam Cara work of the Ceile De Celtic Christian tradition. Though these paths are different in many ways, and span both Western and Eastern perspectives, they have at their core several common themes:

All of these paths are founded in a deep honoring of the Earth, the natural world and the elemental fabric of existence. They study how human consciousness interfaces with the seen and unseen forces of life here on this planet. They also explore the nature of consciousness itself and the possibilities present at boundaries or thresholds of experience. These shared inquiries form the basis of my own spiritual seeking and so I have drawn much from these paths of study and practice. They help shape and inspire what resources and what points I have emphasized in my writing. These ideas reflect my personal current interests and perspectives about death and may not represent every reader's views. It is my hope, however, that the paper will prove useful to spiritual directors who find themselves called to help a dying directee and her family, and to those who are interested in exploring the mysteries and possibilities present in death's threshold.

I have chosen to draw chiefly upon Incarnational Spirituality material, Buddhist teachings and resources on death and dying, my foundation in traditional spiritual direction

principles from Suzanne Fageol and Lorian's Soul-Friending and Spiritual Direction program, and writings from spiritual directors working with the dying. These resources have been the most helpful to me in exploring answers to the thesis questions outlined above.

I have emphasized working with spiritual direction principles from an incarnational perspective and through felt-sense and one's somatic experience in the body and have returned to this idea throughout the paper because I believe such a perspective can be a key contribution and tangible support to a person dying and for the families and loved ones left behind. Embodied spiritual direction practices which help one be truly alive, incarnated and an agent of blessing and healing can bring many gifts at death's threshold. This thesis explores these gifts and how such practices can support a dying directee to find as peaceful and sacred a transition as possible.

I have also emphasized what I am calling "threshold awareness," a foundational capacity that I find emerges naturally in spiritual direction work and is an important part of working with those who are dying. Threshold awareness opens one to the gateways of mystery, possibility and emergence in life and in death. I have found much in David Spangler's Incarnational Spirituality teachings to support my personal experiences with thresholds and co-creating with Earth and Spirit as an act of service and blessing. It is my experience that the Earth itself and other beings or forces – angels, devas, spirits of nature and place – can play a co-creative role with human beings as they cross over from the physical to the non-physical worlds at death. I am interested in this mystery and feel that there is great potential present for spiritual directors to work consciously with the Earth and unseen beings at death's threshold, as an act of co-creation and blessing for the person departing and for those left behind. Though this kind of interaction has probably always occurred at death's portal and is nothing new, I wish to bring attention to its promise in this thesis.

Such ideas are a re-imagination of what is possible at death. If spiritual directors can take part in such a re-imagination - by connecting with the larger ecology of life at death's threshold, and by bringing less fear and contraction, more ease and spaciousness to others as they make their transition - then the way we handle death and dying in this culture might change. Part of my re-imagination is to bring life, beauty, nature and community to the threshold of death as an act of healing and blessing. The personal examples and stories I include throughout the thesis express this wish and possibility and pay tribute to the mystery and transformative powers present in the portal where life and death meet in sacred communion.

## **PART ONE**

### **Chapter One**

#### **A Call/Summons to Spiritual Directors Today**

There is a real need for spiritual directors/companions to serve in the field of death and dying today. As spiritual director Margaret Guenther says in her article “*Companions at the Threshold*,” “despite the sensitivity and compassion fostered by the hospice movement, for many in the industrialized West...dying has become a lonely and impersonal business, sadly disconnected from living” (30). Most people will still die in hospitals, separate from loved ones and friends. Hospice provides remarkable palliative care and holding but cannot always offer adequate spiritual care. Even those fortunate enough to die at home often make their crossing without true spiritual help and guidance.

Today’s culture fears and denies death. This collective repression does little to ease a person’s passage or help the family who has lost a loved one. People do not spend time contemplating and preparing to die as other cultures do. In Western society death often takes even the most conscious person by surprise. People are catapulted into a contractive state of terror, resistance and struggle because they lack the spiritual understanding or support that can help balance the pain and suffering death inevitably brings. Spiritual directors can do much to help a person prepare to die. Every person can benefit from having at least one spiritual companion, someone willing to walk alongside him or her in the journey that unfolds at death.

This is especially so today, when many people are drifting away from churches and faith communities and are forging their own eclectic spiritual paths, woven from interfaith inquiries and the wealth of spiritual practices being made available to all. This expansive development is

exciting, but often it means people have no spiritual leaders or communities to call upon when they are facing the end of life.

One's longing for spiritual guidance and stability becomes paramount when preparing to die. Yet often traditional ministries do not fit an individual's evolving spiritual experience. There are countless people in this position today despite the great strides made in the field of death and dying. It is possible that spiritual directors can help alleviate these gaps and provide care and companionship for people crossing over and for the families and friends left behind.

Spiritual directors who are called will most often help dying directees - those who are embarking on the challenging psycho-spiritual journey at the end of life. However, there is an emerging need for spiritual care at the moment of death as well. Chaplains in hospitals are overworked, and nurses and spiritual caregivers within hospice are often not available for families in the active dying stage, especially if the death happens in the middle of the night. Spiritual directors now have the opportunity to join a pioneering movement within hospice to create "eleventh-hour" teams of doulas or vigilers - trained people who come into a home to help a person die or to help the family if they feel frightened and uncertain handling the death of their loved one alone. (Gross, *For the Families of the Dying* A1).

In addition, there is a growing opportunity for spiritual directors to offer their services after death, helping families create funerals, vigils and ceremony to support the passing soul and the family and communities left behind. This is an area that needs much attention and care, since society has abandoned sacred care of the dead and has turned over the rights and privileges of the individual or family to the impersonal and wholly inadequate funeral industry. After-death care provides an opportunity for closure and healing rarely possible within current mortuary practices. It too can be an emerging and pioneering work for spiritual directors at this time. As a spiritual

director, most of my current work at death's threshold is as a Certified Death Midwife and Home Funeral Guide, helping families who wish to care for their own dead at home and creating more sacred space and time around a person's last passage.

## **PART TWO**

### **Chapter Two**

#### **The Gifts of Spiritual Direction Training at the Threshold of Death**

A training in spiritual direction is a strong foundation and support for those who choose to work with the dying and their families. Spiritual director Margaret Guenther says that death is “all too often a silent passage: a lot of stories are never told, a lot of questions are never asked, a lot of words are never uttered. Yet the journey across the threshold deserves to be honored and celebrated. There is work here for spiritual directors!” (“Companions at the Threshold” 30). This thesis explores certain aspects of spiritual direction work that best support a director to work in the field of death and dying. If a director understands these aspects, he or she will be able to work with dying directees and their families in ways that can truly support them as they face the end of life. These aspects are:

**1. The Ignatian Concept of Principle and Foundation** - which establishes a structure and grounding in the spiritual or sacred dimensions of existence and provides a sense of meaning and purpose in life. A director can empower a directee to feel held and to rest in a sense of connectedness to Source, God or Ground of Being, or that her life has had meaning and purpose, so that death is a more sacred, peaceful experience and transition. A definition of somatic and body-based spiritual direction is included in this exploration.

**2. The Ignatian Concept of Desolation and Consolation-** which highlights the transformative nature of one’s spiritual journey and how one moves back and forth from feelings of separation to a sense of connection and union with “other,” and/or the Divine. This journey mirrors the alchemical psycho-spiritual journey each person undergoes before dying. A director, skilled in

navigating such change with others everyday, can be an able guide and companion to someone facing life's greatest transformation in death.

**3. Threshold Awareness** – an understanding of how to work at the boundaries between different dimensions of experience and how to help others meet and cross thresholds of change and transformation in life and consciousness. A spiritual director can be a gatekeeper, witness and companion for a dying person and offer ways to help that person and his family have as healing, meaningful and sacred a transition as possible. Threshold awareness views death as a portal between realms or states of being, and includes the mystery and possibility of working in a more grounded, incarnated way with the earth and other forms of life and intelligence to bring healing and blessing to someone's last passage.

#### **A Summary of Why These Three Aspects are Important**

Each of these aspects highlights the primary goals of a spiritual director – to empower another person to know and rest in the sacred or “whole” dimensions of his or her being and consciousness and to be able to return to this deeper awareness whenever he or she feels separate or cut off from this wellspring within. This is the spiritual journey a person can intentionally undertake in life. Life's journey is one of constant change and transition where the opportunity is always available to grow and transform one's consciousness, to expand to ever-greater realms of awareness and understanding, and to trust and rest in such realization.

Such opportunities to become more conscious and aware are “thresholds” in a person's life. A spiritual director can accompany a directee on this spiritual journey of realization and be present with him at these threshold times, whether this means lighting a candle and praying together or accompanying someone through larger passages like marriage, divorce and death. In these larger thresholds, when one is asked to grow and change, it is often difficult for a person to

meet such experience fully and in an embodied way and to remain rooted in deeper levels of awareness while doing so.

A director can be there as a mirror and a reminder of the directee's sacred and Original Nature. She can help a person be more present to what is happening and to return, again and again, to rest in a deeper and more expanded place of grace and freedom. Such work becomes the foundation and heart of what it means to help another person when he or she faces the most challenging and mysterious of thresholds: the gateway or portal between life and death.

## Chapter Three

### The Heart of Spiritual Direction Work – Principle and Foundation

The heart of a spiritual director's work is to empower another human being to find meaning for her life and to realize and rest in the radiance, wholeness and sacredness of who she really is. A spiritual director supports another to find abiding trust in and identification with deeper and more expansive realms of experience and consciousness. Such a realization helps one have a felt sense of interconnectedness and union with other human beings, with the natural world, with realms beyond the physical, and ultimately with what Spangler calls the "Generative Mystery" of life and existence (*Introduction to Incarnational Spirituality* 37). To help another person feel this interconnectedness is to practice the Art of Blessing (Spangler *Blessing* 17). Spiritual directors "bless" directees when they empower them to feel or realize their sacredness, their wholeness. In Spangler's words:

So in practicing the art of blessing, we are really practicing being connected...In that context, whatever form it may take, blessing is at the heart of any spiritual practice. For ultimately, all such practices are about remembrance, connectedness, wholeness, and being a participant in the flow of love that weaves the world together from the most numinous to the most material. (*Blessing* 17)

The art of spiritual direction is the art of blessing. It is part of the Great Work, a term used in the Western mystical alchemical tradition. The Great Work is, in Spangler's words, "the effort to bring into our human experience the liberation and creative power of the unobstructed spirit...the enlightenment of humanity and the upliftment of the world"(*Blessing* 69-71).

Each person is a unique human expression of this "unobstructed spirit," this "Generative Mystery." If he is conscious of this connection, he can manifest his specificity and gifts in life as

an act of service and blessing to the whole. A spiritual director can accompany someone on this journey of incarnation, manifestation, and service. The director can help discern with the directee the presence and movement of the Mystery and the sacred dimensions of life beneath or within the wonders and challenges of being human. When times of happiness and success arise, the director is there to witness and celebrate the beauty of the directee's life and purpose. When hard times or impending death happen, a director can be there as a mirror for the sacred foundation of existence. As an instrument and agent of discernment, a director is a constant reminder and voice for the presence and "unobstructed flow" of the Sacred, God or Ground of Being within a person's life.

In traditional spiritual direction training such as a "Grounding in God" (William Barry *Finding God in All Things* 33) is related to the idea of Principle and Foundation, as set forth by St. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, in the sixteenth century. The first Principle and Foundation is part of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, and is a prayer for praising, reverencing and serving God. (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.xii.i.html>)

Today 'P and F' (an abbreviation used interchangeably here for Principle and Foundation) is a term and concept used more broadly to describe a human being's spiritual yearnings and capacity to respond to revelations of the Sacred or God, or intimations of meaning and purpose in one's life. It sets forth an understanding that human beings are rooted in personal, transpersonal and transcendent states of being – that one's truest place of identity and refuge is a multidimensional wholeness, and this wholeness is what a human being really is. Humanity has myriad names for this wholeness, this true nature, this reality - Spirit, Grace, the Divine, Source, the Sacred, Generative Mystery, Atman, Buddha nature, Christ Consciousness, Love.

Spiritual directors encourage directees to trust in the Principle and Foundation of existence and to feel rooted and held by this holy relationship. In today's world, 'P and F' can simply describe that which helps a person find meaning, purpose, joy and affirmation in life (and death). This 'P and F' will mean something different to each person depending on his or her personal orientation and beliefs and experience of life's mysteries. There are those who will not call their Principle God or any other divinity of a sacred tradition but who will seek a 'P and F' that is love in action in the world, or that is rooted in the earth and nature, or in the wonders of being human. Others will find their deepest nourishment and holding (P and F) in making art and music, in creating sacred space in a house and home and/or raising children and family. These reflect an understanding that meaning comes from service to self and "other," and is a shared experience. Spiritual director William Barry says that in order "to ground a life and relationship (in God) one has to draw upon a "distillation of (personal) experience," and also "it has to be an experience that is universal, that is had in some fashion or other by every person who lives" (Barry, *Finding God in All Things* 34).

For many, Principle and Foundation is an experience of a Divine Order in existence, an Order that is conscious and aware and ever changing, moving and giving birth to new forms. This experience can be one of "perfect harmony," a "rhythm...too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance...(Admiral Byrd qtd. in Barry 35). A person aware of this harmony feels the potential for union and communion with mystery, with the all. Often such an experience includes a sense of great well-being, where people do not worry about themselves, their worth or goodness. They feel "right with the world (Barry 37).

This sense of great well-being is an important element in the work spiritual directors offer others, for it points to how one can navigate the twists and turns of the human journey from

a place of strength and resources. Such a sense springs from a deep trust and knowing that “all is well, and all manner of things are well” (Julian of Norwich), no matter what happens in life. Sue Monk Kidd, in her book *God’s Joyful Surprise*, writes about the gifts of being able to rest in God’s Love (Principle and Foundation), through a frightening time of illness and surgery:

God’s Presence does not lift us out of our difficulties. Rather he holds us up with the searing knowledge that we are loved in the midst of them...The journey into God’s love helps us move into the future with a new assurance – all will be well, no matter what...Through our “being” with God, we will come to know a love that sustains in suffering, evil and fear....(A love) that imbues our lives with the most difficult peace of all – peace in suffering. The more we find ourselves loved, the more we are set free. Free to face what is before us. Free to find joy, hope and meaning in spite of it (247).

A Buddhist interpretation of Principle and Foundation echoes Kidd’s words above. P and F, from this perspective, becomes one’s true nature of clear light and radiance, the Ground of Being, the place of liberation and deepest relaxation within. Being truly present and mindful with pain can bring “peace in suffering.” Accepting the reality of impermanence (the inevitable changing nature of existence) and the simple truth of what “is” in the present moment, which is all one really has, can bring freedom from suffering, liberation, and joy. The tensions of the body and mind unravel, and one enters the realm of Spangler’s “unobstructed world”(Blessing 70), which is this place of luminosity, ultimate well-being and ease.

It is important to note that an experience of Principle and Foundation emerges from a relational dynamic – “where two or more are gathered, there I Am.” Spangler emphasizes that the “unobstructed world” is a “state of relatedness based on mutual empowerment and

respect...a shared state”(Blessing 70-71). This shared state (of blessing) arises between a spiritual director and a directee in their sessions together.

Human beings need relatedness and a sense that they are connected and that their lives mean something to others. They have a hard time experiencing the “unobstructed flow” of life itself and are unaware or often forget the wisdom that their lives are sacred. People need help at times to remember that their true nature is Love and that they are held by Love. They need companions in joy and in sorrow. Spiritual directors can be reminders for directees when they want to retreat from life’s challenges (or ecstasies). If directees can fully face and experience what is happening to them, and bring full presence and attention there, this can be the very act that releases the person’s contraction and fear and uncovers the expansive dimensions and movement and voice of the Sacred.

A spiritual director’s presence and companionship can be a lifeline when a person is told she only has a short time to live and must begin the very difficult task of dying. A director, steeped in what it means to bless, to help a person open to the realms of spirit, to seek affirmation and gratitude in experience, and to live from that deeper place of grounding in the Sacred or P and F. can become a vital and needed ally and participant with someone who is facing the end of life in the body and the journey “home” to greater dimensions of wholeness.

#### **A. Working with Principle and Foundation in the Body**

The Lorian Center for Incarnational Spirituality’s training in Soul Friending and Spiritual Direction works with the idea of Principal and Foundation not only as the ability to feel held and connected to God or the Sacred but also as the ability to know this sacredness through the body and the totality of one’s incarnation. With such a focus, a spiritual director uses a “felt-sense” and a commitment to embodiment in the work she does with a directee. To have a “felt sense” is

to be able to feel a body sensation of tension or ease in the body and to apply meaning to that sensation (Stanley qtd in Fageol and Fowler 2). A “felt-sense” awareness of one’s body and full incarnation can be a potent vehicle for accessing, recovering, and resting in one’s Principle and Foundation or one’s Source or sense of the Sacred in the death and dying process.

When a director works with felt-sense, she is practicing what Sharon Stanley, a spiritual director, licensed psychotherapist, scholar and practitioner in somatic psychotherapy, has coined “Somatic Empathy:” an “attuned, resonant, dynamic relationship between director and directee. Using somatic empathy, a director can develop conscious awareness, focused intention, selective attention and clear boundaries. The process involves grounding and centering; it’s non-analytical, non-judgmental and non-confrontational. The director stays attuned to her own body while attuned to the other. (Stanley, paraphrased in Fageol and Fowler, class notes “*Somatics in Spiritual Direction*”2).

A director, aware of her own body tensions and contractions, can also sense or intuit where a directee is constricted or relaxed in his body through a session. Such awareness facilitates a perception of “movement” or “lack of movement or stuckness,” either physically or energetically. When shifts in awareness, “aha” moments of realization, release of emotions, and relaxation of the body happen, these can be seen as the voice or presence of Spirit or the Sacred emerging. Such shifts, movements and realizations can strengthen a directee’s individual sense of Principle and Foundation and what he can rest in and depend upon.

The idea of “Re-Sourcing” is key to the *Somatic Transformation* process and key to the idea of Principle and Foundation. “Re-Sourcing” is a somatic process using felt sense to restore a person to a calm and balanced state of being. Such a person is in the optimal arousal zone of the brain and body” (Fageol and Fowler class notes 2). Spiritual directors learn ways to “Re-

Source” themselves, and their clients, to a place of ease and relaxation and presence in the body by working intentionally with the autonomic nervous system. The director is discerning, with Somatic Empathy, whether the directee is experiencing a sympathetic (fight, fright or flight system) reaction or a parasympathetic (calming, rest and digest system) response. Knowing how to bring the directee back to the optimal arousal zone of safety and calm (neither hyper arousal – fear, anxiety, anger, excitement – nor hypo arousal – shutdown, collapse, freeze) is an embodied and incarnational way of helping a directee find and rest in her Principle and Foundation.

Stanley says that the *Somatic Transformation* method “seeks to restore... the aliveness of embodiment with a deep sense of resilience, calm and meaning.” “Somatic Transformation moves beyond therapeutic technique to an interactive art of restoration, healing and empowerment” (Stanley- <http://www.somatic-transformation.org/index.html>). This is another way of saying that it brings a person back to an embodied understanding and realization of Principle and Foundation.

### **B. Examples of Working with Principle and Foundation and Somatic Re-Sourcing with the Dying**

A director who understands the *Somatic Transformation* process, and who can “Re-Source” a directee back a state of greater calm and balance in her body and to a renewed trust and experience of God’s Holding (P and F) can become a great ally if that person is facing death. Having this kind of support can be invaluable to someone who is undergoing a lot of stress and pain in the dying process and needs physical and spiritual reassurance and holding.

For example: A dying directee believes in a guardian angel, and this presence in her life is part of her Principle and Foundation. One day the directee is in acute pain and anxiety, and she expresses a deep fear of dying and an inability to talk about it. The director, through felt-sense

and clearly listening to what the person is expressing, knows that the directee is in a sympathetic nervous system response to her illness and impending death. If she can help the directee shift to a parasympathetic response in the body, she is Re-Sourcing the directee to a place where she feels held and safe enough to work on transforming her experience.

The director, remembering that the directee believes in angels, asks her if she wishes to be guided in visualizing that her guardian angel is wrapping its warm and loving wings around her body, soothing her pain away, and reassuring her that all is well. Perhaps the directee can visualize that an angelic presence will be there for the directee's transition. The two people spend some time with this, allowing the directee to fully experience the angel's wings embracing and supporting her. The director holds the directee in this experience, quietly and attentively, until the directee visibly relaxes some of her tension and begins to breathe more calmly again. This is a sign that the directee is returning to a more re-sourced place, to the optimal arousal zone of the brain and body. From that place, the directee has a better chance to work with her pain and fear because she feels safer and contained by something larger than herself, something that can hold and guide her.

Finding prayers or mantras special to the dying directee, ones that can help him reconnect to deeper levels of awareness, is another potent way to work with Principal and Foundation and Re-Sourcing. The director can help the directee remember these practices or can recite the mantras or prayers for him if he is unable. Maybe there are meditations and breathing exercises that can relax the tension and tangles of the mind and body and help the directee reach a place of calmness and peace, a place where it is easier to meet fully what is happening, and thus to handle the challenges of his condition with less stress and suffering.

Christine Longaker, spiritual companion at death, echoes these words in her book *Facing Death and Finding Hope*:

Above all, we can encourage our dying loved one to identify a spiritual practice – a special prayer, meditation, hymn or scriptural reading- that inspires her with confidence and strength. Regularly doing an inspiring practice, especially if she is suffering, will focus the energy of her heart and mind in a positive way and help to rekindle her devotion and trust. The sacred inspiration of this continual prayer or meditation may begin to pervade her every waking and sleeping moment, and this is an excellent way to prepare for death (115-116).

When my mother was dying of breast cancer, she would sit by her window overlooking her woodland garden and read the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm over and over in the afternoons when she felt weary and afraid. When the cancer moved to her brain, and she could no longer read or speak, I would recite the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm out loud to her as she lay in the hospital bed we placed by that same window. By this time my mother was very agitated, and she would spend hours twisting and folding one handkerchief in her clenched hands, over and over, as if doing so would keep her tethered to the world. Hearing the psalm and being able to gaze out at the burgeoning green of May on the mountain calmed my mother. She would eventually let the handkerchief drop from her hands, lie peacefully back on her pillows, and find rest for a moment in the grace of the words, the beauty of the woods, and the love of her family and her God.

If a dying person's 'P and F' is not associated with a traditional spiritual path or organized religion, the director can help the person find experiences of connection and stabilization in what does matter most to him. For example: If the Earth and the natural world are a director's deepest foundation, the director can seek ways to bring this experience to the

person, so he can feel rooted in that Source. One young man, Nick, dying of cancer, was determined not to have the religion of his childhood be imposed upon him by his family. He found comfort and solace in tending a garden until he grew too weak to do the physical labor. Those who were companionshiping this man in his journey brought pots, soil and packets of seeds, and he found peace in working with the dirt and mindfully planting each seed. “Even as his physical body failed him, his spirit was fed each time he looked at his growing seeds (Bernard and Schneider, *The True Work of Dying* 45).

A directee may find that silence is the wellspring of nourishment and holding she needs in the long hours of inactivity and uncertainty of the dying process. If so, a director can spend time sitting quietly with this person, perhaps holding her hand so her body is comforted by touch and reassurance. Or if a person needs long periods of solitude and contemplation, the director can check in and go sit in a chair by the window, being there as holder and witness but giving the person the space and quiet he needs.

One of my directees exemplifies finding ‘P and F’ in silence. The beginning silence we have established and the periodic times I call for us to sink again into shared quiet are the only times she can truly stop, breathe and actually have a “felt-sense” of the presence and voice of the Sacred in her experience. Otherwise, she fills the sessions with rapid thoughts and talking. She told me recently that she wants to die in shared silence, that silence is where she feels more like her “real self,” where she feels most at home.

“The act of dying is the most powerful spiritual opportunity of a lifetime” (Singh *The Grace in Dying* 128). These are the words of a hospice spiritual companion, Kathleen Singh, who has helped hundreds of people die. Singh feels that each and every human being undergoes a psycho-spiritual journey of accelerated transformation from separation to unity, from “tragedy

to grace.” (Singh 100) Singh’s beautiful way of defining “Grace” captures the essence of this discussion on Principle and Foundation, and the essence of a spiritual director’s deepest aim and intention for another in the fullness of health and life or in the bare-boned starkness of illness and death:

Grace is the end of illusion, the realization of a far more expansive and complete sense of being, the peace that quite literally passeth understanding...grace has the connotation of a blessing, a quality of the sacred, and implies beauty, ease, and fluidity. Grace seems endlessly responsive to our longing for it... That source is Spirit, the Ground of our Being. Grace is the experience of finally, gratefully, relaxing the contraction of fearful separation and opening to Spirit as our own radiant splendor, knowing it, feeling it, entering it, as it enters us (110-111).

Singh’s words reflect a somatic awareness here. They are a description of what it feels like in the body to experience Principle and Foundation. Her words capture a director’s deepest intention and purpose and the heart of spiritual direction. To truly “open to one’s radiant splendor” is the goal that interweaves a spiritual director’s acts of service in life with the very profound gifts and opportunities available and waiting at the threshold of death.

## Chapter Four

### Working with the Concept of Desolation and Consolation

The concepts of desolation and consolation, like Principle and Foundation, emerge out of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola and are part of a traditional training in spiritual direction. Though formulated in the sixteenth century, Ignatius' concepts are still relevant and important to a spiritual director's work today. They can shed much light on the patterns of connectedness and disconnectedness with the Sacred a directee may experience in the course of his spiritual journey through life and especially at death. The transformative aspect of moving from desolation to consolation has interesting parallels with the psycho-spiritual journey of transformation each person in the dying process experiences. (It also mirrors the somatic process of moving from a sympathetic nervous system response (desolation) to a parasympathetic response (consolation)). Thus a training in desolation/consolation prepares a director for the journey a directee will undergo at death and strengthens the director's ability to be an understanding and capable companion for a dying person.

When Ignatius spoke of desolation, he asked the question: "What is it that leads me away from partnership with the sacred (God), or takes life away from me?" (Ignatius Spiritual Exercises, qtd. in class notes by Suzanne Fageol 2) Desolation, as defined by Ignatius, is "darkness of the soul, turmoil of the mind, restlessness, loss of faith, hope, and loss of love...separated, as it were, from the Creator and Lord (Ignatius Spiritual Exercises 130, qtd. in Fageol 4). "Desolation is the experience of...acting out of fear or compulsion (Fageol 4). Some of the feelings of desolation are "tumultuous, restless, troubled, anxious...discouraged, despairing, out of touch with our center" (Fageol 4). The "Sacred (God) is far off. Our thoughts spin wildly... Finally, spiritual desolation is any inner experience or state that prevents us from

seeing reality in its fullest context and from making balanced judgments” (Fageol 4). One can see that, in somatic terms, desolation can arise when a person’s sympathetic nervous system is activated by an experience, creating a level of contraction and tension in the thought processes of the mind and thus the body.

A spiritual director learns how to create a safe, sacred space and container to hold a directee in her feelings of desolation. As companion, a director is present to “what is,” and does not try to change the directee’s experience of separation. At the same time, the director strengthens her own intentional and conscious connection to the Ground, for this stability and steady knowing can act as a beacon or mirror to the one who has lost her way.

The director can hold an image or prayer in her heart for the directee’s return to consolation or re-connection to Source and can actively seek Spirit’s aid on behalf of the directee. Relying upon the inevitable reality of impermanence and the shifting nature of human experience, a director can pray for and uphold the directee’s potential to “return home,” or, in somatic terms, to become Re-Sourced again. She believes in a directee’s ability to change, grow and transform to a state of consolation and union or re-union with his Principal and Foundation, with God or Ground of Being or the Divine.

The Ignatian question for the concept of consolation is: “What is it that brings me closer to the sacred (God) or what gives me life?” (Ignatius Spiritual Exercises, qtd. in Fageol class notes 2). Consolation can be an intense inner experience, joy or sadness that brings one closer to God and to an experience of increasing faith, hope and love (Fageol 2). Consolation is the experience of connectedness, of “peace... gratitude, zeal and hope.” Other feelings are “alive, animated, blissful, buoyant, delighted, encouraged, radiant, relaxed, and thankful” (Fageol Vocabulary For Feelings class notes 1). Tears can also be a sign of consolation, tears of gratitude

or remorse, or released grief. These tears can signal that a directee is feeling a shift, a movement, a gift of grace, and a feeling of deep closeness to the sacred dimensions of life once again (Fageol 3). Again, in somatic terms, consolation is associated with a person's return to a calm and balanced nervous system response where one is working within the optimal arousal zone of the body once again.

#### **A. A Personal Example of Working with the Concept of Desolation/Consolation**

One of the most powerful experiences I have had working with a directee moving from desolation to consolation in a spiritual direction session occurred with a woman I will call Patti. Patti had undergone treatment for cancer and came to me to work on strengthening her connection to Spirit, saying she felt disconnected and adrift in her life, that she "should" be doing something more with herself, something "spiritual," since she had become so ill.

For several sessions we simply worked with Patti's feelings of flatness and confusion and desolation. One day, before Patti arrived, I felt guided to ask for help from an angelic presence that has always represented great joy and well-being to me. I invited its help to strengthen the unobstructed spirit of consolation I was hoping Patti could re-discover someday. I knew Patti had a huge capacity for joy and pleasure, and I upheld that she would feel her own beauty and wisdom and connection to joy and her source again.

The day I asked for angelic help, Patti arrived devastated. Her doctor had told her that, even though she was cancer free, the cancer would almost certainly reoccur. For the first time Patti wanted to talk about death, since the doctor told her this was a strong possibility. She began listing all the things she needed to do to ready herself and her family for the inevitable. She spoke in a panicked voice, breathed shallowly, and sat frozen in her chair, her hands clutched tightly in her lap.

I knew I wanted to shift Patti's spiraling tension and fear if I could. I also knew that I needed to rely upon something greater than myself, so I called on angelic help and on Patti's own guardian angel, asking inwardly what to do. I was prompted to suggest that Patti and I do a bit of conscious breathing together and then to sit in silence while Patti thought about the question: "If you have only a year to live, would you live your days differently now?" We did this breathing together and sat in silence for a time. Patti grew noticeably calmer in her body. I sat with her, praying that we could hold the potential for shift and healing. When Patti spoke again, her words were very different in energy and intention.

She spoke of all the things she would do to live from a place of love and joy - how she would take dance lessons, travel, spend more quality time with her daughters and husband, sit in the sun and plant seeds. She spoke for the first time of the moments when she knew she was connected to Spirit - what it felt like in her body and heart. "It feels like I want to feel before I die - like I do right now," she said. "When I feel joyful and grateful and when I feel most alive." I saw a somatic shift in Patti sitting there. As she talked, color came back in her face, she lifted her hands and unclenched them and spoke, gesturing excitedly about the things she loved. She breathed more easily and even smiled.

Patti reached a renewed engagement and energy, if only for a time - a release of grief, and worry, a lightening of her spirits, and a memory of feeling connected to life and the sacred once again. I was humbled and moved by this energetic and somatic transformation and marveled that, by finally being able to speak out loud about death, Patti could feel and rest in consolation and so be truly alive.

This account illustrates how a spiritual director's understanding of desolation and consolation, and the ability to work with these experiences, can be helpful and valuable when

accompanying a directee who is dealing with illness or facing death. A terminal diagnosis almost always brings on a state of desolation. The list of feelings associated with desolation is the same list one might create in describing the myriad amount of emotional responses a person will feel when she is told she has only a short time to live. “Afraid, agitated, angry, anguished, bewildered, confused, despairing, helpless, horrified, morose, numb, panicky resentful, shocked, sorrowful, unglued” are words used to describe a state of desolation. (Fageol Vocabulary 2). These emotions are examples of a somatic sympathetic response in the nervous system and clearly arise in the psycho-spiritual stages of the dying process as well.

### **B. The Connection of Desolation/Consolation to the Psycho-Spiritual Stages of Death**

Understanding the psycho-spiritual stages a person experiences while dying can be very valuable to a spiritual director who is accompanying a directee on that journey. The stages speak of transformation, just as the shifting dynamics of desolation to consolation do. A dying person moves from “a perceived sense of tragedy (desolation) and culminates, after the arduous process of psycho-spiritual transformation, in an experience of grace”(Singh *Grace in Dying* 87) Grace here is synonymous with consolation, “ the experience of finally, gratefully, relaxing the contraction of fearful separation and opening to Spirit as our own radiant splendor, knowing it, feeling it, entering it, as it enters us” (111).

Singh’s stages – Chaos, Surrender and Transcendence - are related to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of dying, but Singh makes a distinction that Ross’ stages are “basically psychological stages that deal with the content of the mind, with human thoughts and feelings that relate to death as something outside of ourselves”(170). Singh’s stages of dying “chart the movement from the personal or psychological to the transpersonal or psycho-spiritual”(170). They map the journey from “defensive scrambling and strategies of our own minds...to coming

to know ourselves as the self who is the Witness”(170). This journey is a unique “opportunity in a human life. We each make use of that opportunity in our own unique ways, true to the particularity we were born to be”(171).

Singh relates our Western model of alchemy to the transformation that happens from tragedy to grace, from desolation to consolation in a dying person’s journey. Such a passage is alchemical, a “regenerative process...a psycho-spiritual reconstruction that follows a radical psychic deconstruction”(106). She relates this process to the Christian mystical purification (God’s cleansing) where “what is inessential is burned off precisely in the act of acknowledging and experiencing it”(106). A similar evolution of consciousness is expressed by the “Wounds of Love” spoken of by mystics like St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Meister Eckhart (107). Medieval Christians knew that the process of dying is a pilgrimage toward the truth...each experience of suffering ultimately leads to healing, integration and regeneration (171).

The task of the spiritual director is to be present to another through the raw and demanding days of chaos, pain, confusion and suffering, which are a person’s desolation, all the while holding a vision of the directee’s true self, which is free from suffering and at one with God or Ground. The director can maintain the conviction that the dying person will find his own way, in his own timing, back to a place of consolation, rest and relaxation, in an experience of God, Luminosity and Love, or some kind of meaning and completion. When the person is having difficulty accessing this Ground or God himself, the director can seek ways to “Re-Source” the directee toward a new or renewed felt sense of connection within. These offerings can be of immense help to a person who loses hope and direction in the chaotic moments and days of the death process.

More often than not, the circumstances that will bring a dying person to a state of consolation and grace are ones directors cannot foresee or plan. The director trusts, however, that his presence and availability will be part of the alchemical process and journey if needed.

Christine Longaker related an example of this kind of accompaniment in *Facing Death and Finding Hope*. Her story is paraphrased below:

Father David was accompanying an elderly, wealthy widow called Norma who was dying. Norma was suffering greatly and was filled with bitterness and emptiness. No one could do anything right – Father David, the caregivers, the doctor, and her children, who had abandoned her and whom she vowed to disown. Hers was a litany of complaints whenever Father David visited. This went on, week after week, and Father David wondered if his presence was doing any good at all.

Meanwhile Father David was also helping a young woman, Laura, with four small children, whose husband was killed suddenly at work. Laura's situation was a tragedy, and Father David was doing all he could. When he went to see Norma, the elderly woman, and heard her constant stream of blame, negativity and self-pity, he lost patience, and said to her:

“ I see that you are suffering and feel all alone...I wish I could make it better for you, but I can't...but I do know if you continue to think only of yourself, things will not change for you.” Father David told the widow about the young woman, and suggested that maybe she could start dedicating her suffering and pain to Laura and the children, to help ease their heartbreaking loss and troubles. He wondered when he left if he would ever be welcomed back to the widow's bedside again.

When he next entered Norma's room, however, Father David was shocked. Norma was like a different person – “a saint,” Father David called her, and he said he rarely gave anyone that

title. Norma told him she had been praying for Laura and the children all week, and dedicating her own pain and suffering and dying to the young family. Her face was transformed, and the room was suffused with radiance and love (78-79).

Norma's transformation from the desolation of bitterness and self-pity to a place of consolation happened when she dedicated her own suffering to help someone else far less fortunate and began to feel connected to something beyond her. "Everyone yearns to do "one noble act" before they die, something that brings a sense of fulfillment in life and a meaning to their dying" (Longaker 151). Father David's direction was the very thing Norma needed to shift her energies of negativity and find significance and purpose in her dying.

When spiritual directors can help steer directees back from the abyss of hopelessness or despair at death to a place of connection and participation in the life of "other" - in something greater than themselves - then they have given these directees the greatest gift they have to offer: a glimpse and taste of the Sacred, a safe haven, from which the dying have come and towards which they are returning in the end.

## Chapter Five

### The Art of Threshold Awareness

Spiritual direction offers ample opportunities to work with threshold awareness and to experience what happens at the places where boundaries interact. David Spangler describes the activity of boundaries:

What does happen at boundaries? (Or thresholds?) Information is exchanged in various forms; differences come together. There can be conflict and there can be co-creativity. Something new can emerge. The sacred can arise or be suppressed by what happens between us. We can be enlarged or diminished by what occurs across our boundaries in our encounter with others. (Spangler, *Introduction to Incarnational Spirituality* (43).

Boundaries recognize and establish differentiation, and differentiation “is an engine that powers the flow and interaction of energies.” Without boundaries, “there would be (no mode of engagement) no relationships, for relationships only take place where two or more things are differentiated from each other in some manner (i.e. possess a boundary).” (Spangler 42-43). Boundaries can be physical, like the differences in bodies, or the wall of a room or a shore that stands between land and sea. Or boundaries are more subtle and energetic, like the psychic interface of a human being engaging with the natural world, or the process by which a child separates from his mother as he grows.

A threshold is a boundary. The word is Old English for a plank of wood placed at a doorway to keep thresh or rushes inside, and to differentiate between the inner room and outside. To cross a threshold is to cross the boundary between one physical space to another or, metaphorically, from one psychological experience to another. For those who view death as a

transition in states of being, life's last threshold combines both – leaving one's physical body and also transforming one's consciousness.

Thresholds have also become synonymous with the opening that occurs at boundaries or between things. So a threshold is a doorway or portal. One can speak of birth and death as portal experiences in the journey of a human being's soul. This sense of openness leads to another way of describing a threshold, which is to speak of "limen" or "liminal" space, the space "between" a known and unknown experience or reality. When one is at a threshold, one is stepping from a known space across a boundary into the unknown. Since the unknown is a "new" experience or place, the term "threshold" is also now used to designate a beginning of something fresh or new, and distinguishes between something that has gone before, and that which is just emerging.

When a spiritual director is practicing "threshold awareness," she is engaging all these dimensions of meaning. In a spiritual direction session, to sit down with a directee creates boundary and relationship and opens a new energetic flow of possibility. Centering oneself and going into a deeper place of silence, peace or meditation opens a doorway within where one becomes present at yet another boundary, a threshold between normal, everyday consciousness and the deeper, more expansive layers of awareness each person carries within. Lighting a candle and saying an invocation or prayer is also an opening, an invitation to the Sacred. A spiritual director's awareness is poised at this boundary or threshold between worlds or states of consciousness - listening, watching, and waiting for the presence of the Sacred to emerge.

Being able to stay present and aware and able to practice "holy listening" when liminal (betwixt and between) spaces appear is an art and skill one can develop. It is a matter of intention and of paying attention, of being mindful. For example, directors learn to notice and observe when their consciousness drops or expands into a different state and they are operating from a

clearer, more encompassing and/or focused awareness. And they also learn to recognize, in somatic terms, whether they are inhabiting their body and felt-sense so they can distinguish areas of tension and relaxation. This enables them to know how to shift these physically and intentionally to have greater access and connection to what arises in the moment.

A director is also paying attention to changes in the directee, noticing shifts and movements: when a person's expression grows lighter and more relaxed; when he sighs and lets go of some inner tension or pain; when tears flow, or laughter bursts forth spontaneously; when understanding dawns or an experience of true connection arises; when a feeling of numinous grace and peace suddenly fills the room. These are the gifts of being aware and mindful in the threshold of each present moment. Again, this attentiveness is "holy listening" and the art of discernment, because one is listening for the voice of Spirit to manifest when boundaries shift and occasions for change, growth and transformation happen. These capacities create threshold awareness.

Most spiritual directors will be asked to expand this threshold awareness to encompass larger occasions of transition and change in a directee's life. These larger events – like birth, marriage, loss of a job or partner, illness, and death – can also be seen as "openings" between worlds or realms of experience. It is often in these times of openness and shifting states of being that one can "be enlarged or diminished by what occurs...(at our boundary)" to use Spangler's words again. (Spangler, *Introduction to Incarnational Spirituality* (43). A person can expand in consciousness and forge a deeper bond with the Sacred or wholeness, or he can shut down and begin to inhabit much more limited and diminished states of being.

When a threshold is a significant change and transition in life – like being told one has a terminal illness – the stability and familiarity of a known ground or way of being disappears.

One is forced to set out into the unknown, forced to navigate what is often tumultuous and disorienting territory, until one can “cross over” and land in a new place, literally or figuratively in psychological terms. One has to learn to acclimate and integrate the resulting changes. If one is successful, one grows and transforms in consciousness. One has an even greater awareness and connection to the Sacred or one’s wholeness. One feels more alive and incarnated. If not, a person shuts down and does not fully experience or integrate the experience. Over time, this can lead to feeling blocked or numb in body and emotions and less connected to life and others.

It is quite common for a person to respond to transition and change from a place of disorientation, fear and contraction in mind and body. This is associated with the experience of desolation discussed in the previous section. One feels cut adrift, separated from former moorings and grounding. In spiritual terms, one may feel betrayed by God, or lose trust, and feel lost and separated from a former sense of union with the Divine. This “shutting down” can become habitual, so that a person’s tensions and limited perceptions of self and world diminish her experience of aliveness and enthusiasm and joy for living.

A spiritual director can be a watchful and listening presence at the crossroads between the known and unknown in a directee’s life – to ask and hold the directee in these questions:

How can this threshold experience open one to even more wonder and awe and reverence for life? How can it deepen one’s true intimacy and connection to all sentient beings and to the sacred? How can one avoid shutting down in contraction, alienation or despair? How can one grow ever more alive and resilient when things happen, instead of becoming diminished and shuttered, simply enduring the life changes that one encounters? How can one be empowered rather than disempowered by these experiences? How can one find soul growth and increased meaning and richness despite hard times and struggles? And how can one reach places of

appreciation, and gratitude, and elements of beauty, joy and celebration, even in the midst of crisis, loss and pain?

Again, in somatic terms, the director, by working with the directee on these questions, is helping the person to find calm, balance, ease and relaxation, even joy and celebration, despite the pain and suffering and the stress and challenge of the transition.

Nowhere is this kind of threshold awareness and way of working more important than at the threshold of death. Receiving a terminal diagnosis is usually a devastating event that takes away the foundation of one's life, and this time one does not have the choice to cross or not cross the threshold presenting itself. One's only choice is how one is going to be while making the great passage at the end of life. This is where working with a director and being spiritually prepared can make all the difference. Such preparation greatly improves one's chances of having a death that is rich with meaning, deep feeling and connection, acceptance, freedom and even joy.

The method by which a spiritual director can help a person be prepared at threshold times often follows a certain pattern, which can be helpful to articulate here. Preparation is threefold in nature.

1. To release energies and patterns that are holding one back from movement, growth and transformation and to find a sense of greater aliveness, connection and freedom in doing so.
2. To achieve a sense of completion, affirmation and integration, with the accompanying gifts of greater meaning, gratitude and joy.
3. To do this work within containers of energetic and physical holding and blessing, and within a context of something greater than one's self – one's Principle and Foundation.

A spiritual director can be this container of holding and blessing in times of transition and threshold crossings. Strong and loving connections with family, friends and community can be a vital container as well. Turning to nature and the earth for grounding and sustenance can be a blessing. Art and ritual are intentional physical and energetic containers that nourish a person and facilitate transformative release, completion and integration.

Such threefold preparation can be an invaluable support for a directee who is facing the threshold of death and wants and is able to address what director Joy Carol calls “healing for dying” (Carol 37). Directors can encourage or simply be present for directees to work on end of life goals in whatever way possible so that when the moment of death arrives, they feel more ready to make their passage. (It is important to note that such “healing for dying” work should optimally happen long before the chaotic and stressful days of the dying process. Once someone is very ill, it is a much harder task to achieve. A spiritual director’s “healing for dying” work with a directee ideally should happen throughout life, as a preparation for death whenever that moment arrives. (Carol 35-42)).

Part of spiritual care of the dying is to gently offer the following objectives, but to understand and know that such work may or may not be possible for the directee, and to hold that person anyway, in whatever capacity she has for the journey:

To intentionally face death; tie up loose ends and feel a sense of closure and completion; to work with healing unfinished relationship issues, to be able to forgive, feel forgiven, and to let go; to strengthen sustainable connections of love and holding; to find spiritual practices and prayers that help one ground and rest in the Sacred; to find ways to celebrate the rich incarnation of one’s life, the things one has loved, the gifts one has given others, the wonder of who one is and has been. Finally, to reach or come to a place of grace, which is also gratitude and

appreciation, so that one can face death with more fearlessness and openness, more ease and blessing.

### **A. Examples of Healing for Dying at the Threshold**

#### **Forgiveness and Letting Go**

Working with issues of forgiveness is a good example of a “healing for dying” threshold work. Spiritual directors encounter issues of forgiveness throughout their journey with directees. Many people in spiritual direction eventually gravitate around a core question and concern. Will God forgive me for what I have or have not done in my life? And can I forgive myself? These directees are driven by either a conscious or unconscious fear that they have “sinned” before God and that they are not worthy of God’s forgiveness and mercy. This is a collective experience, especially for those who were brought up in religious traditions that make sin and forgiveness the cornerstones of their teachings and practices. Such fear and self-judgment can keep a person from feeling at one with God or can prevent him from being able to rest in the idea of a loving God who holds and loves and protects him, no matter what happens in life (P and F).

One can see how such beliefs can cause deep spiritual pain when the end of life draws near. Suddenly there is not enough time or opportunity to heal old wounds and grievances, to “come clear” with God or with the people one resents or feels harmed by, or with the victims of one’s own life actions and deeds. Working on self-acceptance and letting go of things also pales before the onslaught of medical treatments and the sheer energy and focus it takes to handle physical pain and the necessities of daily life when one is weak and ill.

Yet entanglements of the heart, mind and soul can cause much confusion and can deeply influence the dying process. There are countless stories of people dying who are suffering and hanging on beyond any reasonable length of time because they have not been able to clear

something with a loved one. If that person can do something to clear the past and experience the release forgiveness can bring, she can then find more peace and the ability to let go and move on from a different place within.

A spiritual director can help create a situation at the deathbed where this kind of release can happen if at all possible. Such resolution and healing actually has a tangible and physical effect on a dying person's body and felt sense of things. "Today it is possible to measure the benefits of forgiveness on the human body. As the brain's limbic system squirts beneficial neuropeptides into the body, along with a release of negative emotions, the act of forgiveness has a salutary physiological effect"(Groves 46). This is the traditional "deathbed confession," where "Verbalizing, or even admitting on paper the wounds of a lifetime, can cause a noticeable change in a person's state of mind as well as immune system"(47).

Clearing things with people face to face can have a particularly potent effect in shifting a blocked transition. Christine Longaker, in her book *Facing Death and Finding Hope*, tells of a man, George, who lingered on in hospice, unable to die, even though no one around him could imagine how this was happening. George had been a terrible alcoholic and had abused his wife and children. It was not until a spiritual director contacted George's ex-wife Sheila and asked if she would come to George's bedside that things shifted. Sheila came, reluctantly, but she found when she arrived that she was glad she had come.

George was able to tell her he was sorry and to ask for her forgiveness. Sheila forgave him and they sat in painful but grateful silence for a long time together. Then Sheila felt called to remind George of the better times, when they had been happy and he had helped the children learn to ride bikes and had tried to be a good father. Her forgiveness helped George release his guilt, and her reminder that he had been different and a giving person in former times gave

George a sense of meaning (P and F) within which he could rest. He died peacefully that very night. (Longaker 142-143).

There are many times when situations do not allow a dying person the chance to work on or resolve forgiveness issues face to face with someone. The need is still very present, especially the need to forgive one's self or to feel forgiven by God. The task of reassurance, guidance and offering forgiveness has traditionally fallen to the minister or clergy if they are called. In today's world, however, many people will die without such a person beside them because they no longer go to church or synagogue, or such aid is not the kind of help a person can admit he needs. Also most people will now die in the hospital, where there may not be adequate spiritual care and companionship. Spiritual directors may be able to fill this void of need, for they have the necessary tools and training to be an agent of blessing in another's life.

Spiritual director Margaret Guenther says "in spiritual direction with the dying, we will hear confessions, regardless of our tradition and our ecclesial status"(*Companions at the Threshold* 34). She speaks of the blurring of roles between spiritual directors and clergy when death is imminent. She says that often people just need to be heard and witnessed without fear of condemnation. Guenther realized that "all baptized persons have the right, indeed the obligation, to declare God's forgiveness to the truly contrite"(34).

Guenther is an ordained priest, so her perspective is spoken within the context of Christianity and the spiritual view that there is a God who will forgive. As an inter-spiritual director, it can be helpful to also work with other spiritual perspectives, especially ones that help a person forgive himself and come to self-acceptance and the cessation of judgment and negativity whether directed toward self or other.

“The Buddhist teachings explain that, in truth, everything and everyone is interconnected and interdependent. Thus, everything we do to others is actually being done to ourselves” (Longaker 94). Forgiveness begins with one’s self and is an act of self-responsibility. How shall one respond? “Forgiveness does not mean we condone or accept another person’s hurtful acts; rather we release our reactions of hurt, anger, or fear (we respond rather than react) . . .A harmful pattern continues when everyone keeps playing the same part; thus when we let go of our reaction and finally respond with forgiveness and love, we are able to break the pattern and free ourselves. . . That’s the secret: forgiveness frees us” (Longaker 93).

Buddhist teachings also ask one to go within, if standing in judgment of another and to examine one’s own actions, motivations and state of mind. If this is truly done, one will see clearly one’s own transgressions, acts of aggression, selfish patterns, and weaknesses and faults. Seeing this helps one realize “we are all in the same boat, acting and reacting most of the time from a state of confusion and fear, rather than the clarity and compassion of our true nature”(94). Such understanding helps a person reach forgiveness of others more easily.

David Spangler also speaks of the interconnected nature of human existence from an Incarnational Spirituality perspective. In his book *Blessing*, he explores one’s individual responsibility to “become unobstructing” with other beings in the web of life by uncovering the “obstructedness of our attitudes, feelings, images and habits, whether directed inwards towards ourselves, or outwards towards others.” (73) “It’s the work of freeing our internal energies that are stuck in habits and divisive perspectives. It’s the work of personal reflection and honesty. It’s the work of seeking out and learning from the flow of unobstructedness. . .” (74).

Working with issues of forgiveness can heal and release a person to find flow, acceptance and freedom at the end of life. Spiritual directors can help a dying person reach for this place of

ease before death, so that the process of letting go is easier and more blessed. If a dying person can release the barriers keeping her from feeling connected to the interdependent web each and every person is together, and from knowing she is one with the unobstructed, spacious dimensions of the Sacred, she can more clearly hear the “melody of the Source” (Spangler 75) and thus be more relaxed and more prepared to make the journey across death’s seas of change.

### **B. Finding Meaning, Gratitude and Joy at the End of Life**

Richard Groves, former Roman Catholic priest, hospice chaplain and author of *The American Book of Dying*, found that issues of “meaning” are as much a cause for spiritual pain and suffering as issues of forgiveness are at the end of life (43). People need to feel that their lives have mattered and that they have been able to contribute something worthwhile during their sojourn on earth. If a terminal diagnosis is sudden, people can fall suddenly into depths of despair, feeling time has run out, and it is too late to do anything important or life-giving for one’s self or for others. If there is a lot of pain and suffering in their dying, the dissolution can also take away a person’s sense of meaning and ability to see their life in any positive way.

One can recall the example of the elderly woman Norma, (in the section on desolation and consolation) who was bitter and miserable until she began dedicating her own suffering as a prayer to aid another young woman. This gave Norma’s life meaning, even if it was only in the last weeks before she died.

A dying directee can focus on what brings her personal meaning, and/or the meaning she derives from her spiritual pursuits and her connection to God or the Divine. As discussed in Chapter Two on Principal and Foundation, spiritual directors in traditional spiritual direction work will have directees whose spirituality or quest for meaning happens in relationship to God or a Higher Power of some kind. But, in contemporary times, directors may find themselves

accompanying many people whose spiritual path is much less defined, and who are not comfortable with the idea of God, or any being outside themselves, and who are more concerned with an existential search for meaning in life.

Jurgen Schwing, a spiritual director who works with many different kinds of directees, emphasizes that all human beings need spiritual support and meaning at the end of life, even though they may call themselves “humanists, atheists or agnostics.” (Schwing, *Sharing Sacred Stories* 108). His suggestions are helpful for directees who seek only personal meaning, though the questions below certainly also apply to directees who rest in a connection to a Higher Power as well.

We help (the directee) to find answers for questions like these: “Was I true to myself?” “Did I love well?” “Will anyone remember me?” “Did I accomplish anything of lasting value?” We help by being a witness, by celebrating his accomplishments and successes, grieving his losses, and helping carry his regrets. We affirm the love he has shared and witness the special moments that carry deep meaning. The director can ask careful questions leading the directee to reflect on the legacy he wants to leave...With this perspective, even losses and disappointments become lessons he can impart to the next generation. (Schwing 112)

A directee following a more Buddhist path in life may find meaning in whatever arises in the present moment and in compassionate service to all sentient beings rather than needing to focus on her personal story. Others will find much comfort in telling their sacred stories, writing important passages in a beautiful journal, or dictating to someone who can write thoughts and impressions down. There are ethical and spiritual wills available now, where a person can think about and compile certain wisdoms he has gained in life and designate it for future grandchildren

and generations to read and keep. Feeling seen, heard, honored, and appreciated is a powerful aid in helping a person feel closure and completion before dying. This is another example of the “holy listening” necessary at the end of life. Spiritual director Margaret Guenther, who describes herself as a holy listener in her book of the same name, writes: “In a way, not to be heard is not to exist. This can be the plight... of the dying – literally no one in their lives has time or patience to listen” (*Holy Listening* 143).

This paper has already emphasized that a spiritual director strives to affirm a directee’s beauty and purpose and unique contribution to other beings. David Spangler calls those who help another person fulfill her greatest potential and creativity “agents of incarnation.” An agent of incarnation is “someone whose mindful presence in the moment enhances and enables the incarnation of others” (Spangler Intro 22). This is someone who holds “the potential of spaciousness” for another person – which is another way of saying that someone upholds all the richness and complexity and possibility inherent in a person’s life, all that person might generate himself as a source of the sacred by being human and alive on the earth (22).

Though this definition of an agent of incarnation is explored in terms of helping a person live life to the fullest, it is also relevant to work with the dying – perhaps even more so, if the directee is having a crisis of meaning while facing death and has lost sight of her own worth and gifts and purpose in the throes of illness and suffering. Practicing ‘holy listening’ to a directee’s stories, and helping a directee clarify and celebrate his unique individual self and the radiant splendor of what he has given the world, can bring much meaning and significance at the end of life. And, because each of us is also interconnected and interwoven with every other living being, such celebration can help others who may be having difficulty facing the loss of someone they care about and love.

It can be a wonderful gift and blessing to celebrate a person's life and contributions *with* the dying person before they die – to create time and space for that person to share the things she loves most, to laugh and cry and reminisce with friends and family and community. This is also sacred work for spiritual directors and a powerful way to aid someone in finding affirmation and completion before making her transition across the threshold.

One of the most beautiful examples of this happened recently in my community. Michael, who was a well-known musician and beloved patron of the arts on our island, learned that he had melanoma and only a few weeks to live. The community, in conjunction with Michael and his wife, organized two gatherings where people could come and celebrate Michael's life and all he had given to others and his contributions to the arts. In one gathering, Michael and his wife danced together while others looked on and cheered. They then stood in a receiving line and people lined up to look Michael in the eye, hug him, offer their love and friendship and tell him good-bye. This was a remarkable community experience of embracing death consciously together.

The next night, there was a public concert where all Michael's music students, from children to adults, played beautiful pieces to honor him, and his symphony orchestra performed his favorite music in tribute. At one point, Michael hobbled up to the stage and we all stood up and applauded our friend and his beautiful life. There was not a dry eye in the house, and there was incredible joy and celebration at the same time. As we were clapping, Michael and his wife walked up the aisle silently, embraced by the warmth and farewell so tangible in the room. He was gone within two days of his great honoring and celebration.

Working individually with the same qualities of gratitude and appreciation can be a very potent way to help a dying directee feel his life has been meaningful. It can also bring balance

and healing to someone who is caught in negativity and stress and fear. It is a powerful way to work somatically to Re-Source a person, and to shift a tense or frozen nervous system reaction back to a relaxed and balanced one again, so that a directee feels able to work with whatever is happening to him from a more receptive and conscious place.

It is almost impossible to feel a contracted state of negativity or fear if one is truly experiencing a moment of gratefulness and appreciation. Such feelings open the heart in expansiveness and lift a person's vibrational energy and mood immediately. This can become an intentional daily practice. Indeed, it is the natural stance and attitude of someone who is able to experience the psycho-spiritual stages of the dying process with some form of acceptance, surrender and grace. (Grace and gratitude are words that come from the same root meaning and source (Singh 110). Expressing gratitude is infectious and can have an accumulative positive affect over time, creating a field of happiness and well-being – a field that a dying person and others can rest in.

When one of my clients, Bob, was dying, he made a point to speak often of how grateful he was for all aspects of his life, even though he was not very old and was deeply concerned about leaving his wife and two young children alone. Such an attitude was very potent. It had a healing affect on all those who came to his bedside. I watched it happen over and over. People would come in with heavy hearts and contracted body language, and their energy was often full of pain and sadness. But, in just a short time, after talking with Bob, they would be smiling and joking with him, and when they left, they looked considerably lighter in countenance and energy. They were there to support Bob, but they were actually the ones who went home transformed.

Finding joy at the end of life can be just as transforming. Joy can arise easily and spontaneously if one pays attention to the simple beauties of being alive in the present moment.

As a director companioning someone dying, it is a delicate dance to know when expressing joy is appropriate. Obviously, if someone is truly suffering and needs the director's compassion and care, the director needs to be sensitive to that person. Dying patients often voice a deep longing, however, for directors, friends and family to "be normal" with them, to continue to see them as whole despite their illness, to express deep appreciation and gratitude for the joys and beauties of life. In atmospheres where sorrow and grief are prevalent, this seeking for joy can be a healing and powerful antidote and remedy for the patient.

I remember sitting with my mother as she lay dying in her upstairs room overlooking the forest she loved. We could not communicate with words, but as we gazed out the window together I could sense the deep field of joy and comfort such moments brought my mother, even though she was suffering and in pain. We could see the many forest birds landing on Papa's feeders, and the cat, Harvey, stalking them in the bushes. A sudden movement, a door slamming, a child running up, and all the birds would rise like one being, swiftly, into the sky. Gone. I watched this happen, over and over, and I knew nature was teaching Mama how to die. I looked for these moments throughout my mother's dying, and though I could not speak of it to others, I knew it was a part of being a spiritual companion with her in her near-dying days.

This idea of recognizing and expressing joy, something a spiritual director can mirror for a directee, is akin to David Spangler's art of blessing and his idea that each person is a generative source of the sacred. In his teachings about blessing one's self, and others, he says:

Mostly, I ask you to seek out joy... Joy is not a product of anything else (like happiness can be, dependent on external conditions); it's a creative power and a vital energy in its own right. It is a part of the spirit of blessing, for joy is the essence of the unobstructed

world. It is itself a spaciousness, and it opens us up to the universe and its underlying Source as nothing else can (*Blessing* 120-121).

A capacity to generate joy can be a most helpful ally to a spiritual director who wishes to empower another to know spaciousness and Source within. Spangler says “You can’t be on a serious spiritual path without discovering the joy of the sacred. It is like the pulse of all things...a primal ecstasy...moving through the whole of creation...a person on a spiritual path...on the path of blessing...needs to put himself or herself in “joy’s way”(121).

A person dying can also gain much from placing herself in “joy’s way, “ if this is possible. At the moment of my mother’s crossing, I experienced profound joy, like the deep down green gladness of a May morning. I wondered and hoped that all the moments of quiet joy I consciously tried to cultivate in the weeks preceding her death might help create an energetic ‘boat’ or resonance she could draw upon, maybe even delight in, as she passed into the unknown waters of the after-death state. That was at least my prayer, and my intention as her spiritual companion.

### **C. Working with Death as a Portal**

For those who work with the idea of a dying person’s consciousness transferring from the physical to the non-physical realms of existence, death becomes a portal between worlds, an opening. For those who are not certain that this transference is real, death can seem very final, a door closing, a definitive end to life. If a directee feels that death is an opening or portal, she can ask a director to serve as “gatekeeper “ or “watcher at the gate” – someone who shows up, is present, who listens and observes and acts as companion to the dying person as the veil between worlds grows thinner.

Tibetan Buddhist teachings call this time the “bardo of dying.” Bardo is the Tibetan word for ‘transition’ or the ‘time and space between the completion of one situation and the beginning of another “ (In other words - the threshold state) *Bar* means ‘in between’ and *do* means ‘suspended,’ or ‘thrown’ (from Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p.102).

Spiritual directors can develop an intuitive and heightened sense of this bardo period and when the gateway or portal of death draws near. When my mother was dying, I discovered that I could actually feel or intuit the gateway of her death opening and closing in the last month she was alive. I learned that a person’s gateway can open and close many times before actual death, and that people practice crossing over and coming back into their bodies, much like how a mother practices giving birth by having labor contractions and Braxton Hicks weeks before a baby is born.

My mother almost died on a full moon in May, waited a month, and made her final crossing on the full moon of June. My sisters and I and one of my mother’s life long friends were able to sense the times when the veils between worlds shifted and stood open for my mother and when they closed again. We were not always clear, especially in the month between, when the caring of my mother was such a raw and intense experience for my whole family. However, the alignment of my mother’s death with the phases of the moon became significant to our experience. In the end, it helped us know when she would make her final crossing. (I have made notes of other deaths, and they often occur on or near the full moon, as if the pull of that planetary body and its relationship to the earth and human life is also a kind of portal or threshold and can be an aid in helping someone loosen his hold on physical existence.)

When Bob (previously mentioned) was nearing death, I sat down with his wife Cary and a close friend of the family, and we spent some time in shared meditation and quiet listening within. Afterwards, we were greatly surprised to find that all three of us “heard” or sensed that Bob would probably die in about three weeks time and that his threshold could coincide with a sacred gathering of his men’s circle, as well as with the gateway of Candlemas or Imbolc, which is a threshold in the wheel of the earth’s year.

It was difficult to actually believe or trust in this guidance from Spirit or from Bob’s soul. He was not talking by that point, but we chose to proceed with our intuition. The timing turned out to be exact. Bob died on the eve of Candlemas, and his consciousness left his body while his men’s circle was in sacred ceremony. A ray of intense sunlight poured down into the center of the men’s circle directly on the coffin the men were intentionally blessing for Bob. This happened the very moment their friend died.

The portal of death is filled with mystery for those on this side of the veil. One can only experience and observe what happens in the liminal space and share those observations with others. There are countless stories from hospice workers, nurses and doctors about dying people’s growing ability to see deceased relatives and friends or to feel and see the presence of angels or deities or inner allies as the person’s consciousness transforms. It is as if the transforming consciousness of the dying person is the vehicle or dynamic that actually creates the portal between the realms of form and formlessness - indeed *is* the portal itself, opening between worlds. Spiritual directors who walk alongside a dying person can at times experience this opening themselves, and they can be supportive witnesses for the directee, affirming the person’s visions and experiences.

Kathleen Singh, hospice worker and spiritual companion, speaks of this work:

“Many times I have witnessed the joy and comfort expressed in the demeanor of a dying person who was perceiving a presence imperceptible to me. I have watched hands reach to hold the hands of a presence I cannot see. I do however hear the sigh of relaxation and solace.” Singh goes on to say that she can at times, from a meditative state, perceive the images herself, especially as the person gets closer to death. She speaks of visions of Jesus glowing with radiance, arms outstretched and welcoming, and the Divine Mother, soothing the worn and damaged body of the dying person. She says that the images correspond to the dying person’s religious tradition and spiritual path or to aspects of life that hold great meaning for the person. She can at times sense or “see” these images merging into the being of the dying one, “coinciding with the space occupied by the awareness of the one who is dying” (241).

Singh emphasizes that the main importance of this kind of awareness is in helping a person find ways to relax into surrender and transcendence. (One could say this is a core part of spiritual direction work all along.) A person who sees Christ standing in the corner of the room, or their deceased mother holding out her hand, is entering the deeper and more expanded levels of awareness and being – what I have called the place of Principal and Foundation and which Singh calls the “transpersonal realm of being” or the Ground (206).

Singh believes that a dying person’s ability to see visions, dreams, and images is the result of a consciousness where “the contraction... of a separate sense of self is melted, purged, cleanses away, dissolved...in short...(it) profoundly relaxes” (Singh 206). It is this profound relaxation in consciousness (found in meditation and in dying) that opens the portal between worlds and allows a person to see and experience the more transpersonal levels of being. It also allows a person to rest in ‘what is’ and to align with the process of dying (and living) in a more re-sourced and peaceful way.

Singh tells of a man who had a waking dream or journey of flying on the back of an eagle, an experience he described as so real he could feel the hard structure of the eagle's wings and how it felt to sink into the eagle's feathers. The eagle took him to the Pacific Northwest, a place full of meaning for the man. The clarity and "rightness" of the experience brought the man to his P and F - "the deep sense of calm and trust and safety in which he died" (210).

Spiritual directors, as gatekeepers, can listen and be present at the threshold of death for these kinds of transcendent experiences with their directees. This transcendence is the potential sacred awareness directors have always upheld for a directee throughout the person's life, and so a director can be someone who affirms such union and awareness when it emerges at death. "Awareness enters more subtle, more enlivening, deeper levels of our own ever present Origin," Singh writes, relating countless stories of dying people never feeling so alive, filled with awe and gratitude, experiencing the presence of God, of increasing radiance and light, or the experience of love (210-211). "Love appears to be the last connection the dying have with the world of form" (211). It is this Love that a spiritual director can offer to a directee when he is traversing life's final passage across the threshold.

## Chapter Six

### Working Consciously with the Earth and Nature at the Threshold of Death

#### A Personal Inquiry

The training and experience of a spiritual director, particularly in traditional religious contexts, is usually oriented towards the transpersonal and transcendent realms of being and experience. The earth itself and the complexity of nature is often seen merely as the backdrop against which one plays out the dramas of life and death, and one's relationships to God, the Sacred, or to Ultimate Meaning. Indigenous traditions and emerging contemporary expressions of earth-inclusive spiritualities (like David Spangler's Incarnational Spirituality) proclaim a connection to spirit inherent in the world and the planet as well as in transcendental realms.

It is my experience, both personally, and as a spiritual director, that nature is more than just a stage setting; it can be a partner and potential ally for all that we do in life and in death. I would like to explore what it might mean for spiritual directors to add such a planetary perspective to their work, and to include a deeper awareness and acknowledgement of nature and its spiritual power in their toolkits. This thesis has expressed how a conscious connection to the earth and nature can add greater dimensions to an experience of Principle and Foundation, and that seeking out special places in the natural world can shift a person from desolation and feelings of separateness to consolation and feeling connected and held by something larger than one's self.

What gifts and blessing can emerge if a spiritual director develops a conscious and co-creative partnership with the earth and the intelligence of nature as part of her threshold awareness? Could the spirits of place where a person dies offer aid in the death transition? Can such conscious work on the part of the spiritual director be a way to support both a dying person,

and loved ones left behind, to experience a more meaningful, beautiful and even joyous transition? These are the questions that I wish to explore here.

I offer this chapter in a spirit of open inquiry and freedom, not one of “beliefs” or suggestion that spiritual directors must work in such a way. This chapter explores the possible gifts a spiritual director might find in co-creating with nature and the interdependent web of life to help support and ease a dying directee’s passage. It includes stories from my personal experience, ones that have actually deepened my questions rather than offered any answers, and have increased my awe and respect for the role nature can play at death’s threshold. It is my hope that these stories and reflections can be an inspiration and support for spiritual directors who wish to explore working with dying directees and their families in this more inclusive and interdependent way.

I have had several encounters where nature and the elemental forces of life made an appearance in the portal of death. When I listen to stories from other people, I hear similar tales – how a butterfly follows a young girl for weeks after she has lost her mother; the regular appearance of owls, dear to a departed person, everyday at mid-morning for a week after his funeral, and so on. It does seem that the soul making its passage can often communicate through the natural world to loved ones left behind.

A young friend, Evada, died suddenly in a car crash at the age of thirteen. Her death was a shock to everyone – her mother, father and sister and her Waldorf class and community. Evada seemed to reach through the veil of her passing to continue communicating with loved ones. One way was in the choice of flowers everyone chose to bring to her funeral. A friend and I stopped at a roadside flower stand on our drive up to Bellingham, and we both felt drawn to bring Evada huge golden sunflowers. When we arrived at Evada’s shrine and handed her mother

Heidi the flowers, she laughed aloud and turned so we could see the rest of the room. There, in every corner, stood tall vases of every kind of sunflower imaginable. It seems we were not alone in our strong urge to bring Evada's favorite flower. Everyone else had as well.

And the most interesting thing of all was Heidi's own story. She walked out into the garden of the house where Evada lay in state to smell the roses and be alone for a time. There, right in the middle of the rose garden, towered a huge radiant sunflower, nodding at her as if in greeting. Heidi asked the woman of the house if she had planted the flower or if it was a volunteer, and it turned out that no one had ever seen it before that day.

My strongest experience with nature's presence at the threshold of death happened when I asked and chose to be a spiritual companion for my mother as she lay dying on her land in Alabama. When I arrived home, to help in the last weeks of my mother's life, it seemed the whole of our mountain, with all its intricate life, was drawing near to watch and wait and witness the passing of one of its own: red oak, hickory, beech and sweet gum trees bowing to the woman who greeted them daily on her walks down to get the mail; native plants Mama painstakingly transplanted to avoid their destruction elsewhere – bloodroot, trout lilies, trillium, ginseng, Solomon Seal - all listening, paying tribute, giving their benefactress thanks; every tiny wood rat, spider, tick, and tree frog - watching, waiting for our mother to let go.

I also felt the strong presence of angelic and faery beings around my mother, particularly in the fluctuating portals of the two full moons. My mother and I both feel a kinship with the parallel evolutionary realms of angels and faeries, and I could sense them arriving to help escort her from the physical world. I asked the creatures and beings of the woods and mountain and the nature spirits and angelic presences of that place to co-create with me to help my mother have as peaceful and beautiful a transition as possible. Throughout my time there, I experienced the land

bodily as ally and partner and kept invoking strength and courage and guidance in the difficult days of care-giving with a family who was deeply grieving the loss of a wife and mother.

My particular story within the family centered on my desire to keep my mother's body for a time after her crossing. This was a way to support her soul longer in the threshold doorway and to bring a different and more healing experience of death to my family in our log cabins up on the mountain. This was my choice, rather than calling the funeral home and turning my mother's body over to strangers right away. No one else in my family wanted a home funeral, so I tried to relinquish my attachment in the weeks before my mother died. But deep down, I still prayed for the opportunity to bathe and anoint my mother myself and care for her body, to create our own coffin and to have the chance for my father and siblings and the grandchildren to be with Mama in ways that would sustain and nourish us all.

Moments after my mother died, a great storm blew up over our mountain. A flash flood that has never occurred in that mountain hollow before or since created a wall of water twenty feet high that poured from the hidden mountain springs and rushed down the ridges and the lane leading back to our cabins. Cindy, the hospice nurse who was coming to declare our mother dead and to call the funeral men, turned into the lane at that very time. It was twilight and difficult to see. She looked up to find a wall of water rushing towards her. The wave hit her car and swept it into a raging brook. Cold water rose up to Cindy's chest before she could fight her way out of the car and climb to higher ground. She almost died that day alongside my mother. All my mother's death papers were washed away in the flood. Hours later, the phone lines were still down and the roads were impassable, so Cindy could not call into town, and no hearse or van from the funeral home could get through. Although still recovering from shock, Cindy looked at

me and grinned. "See, Lucinda," she said. "Things have a way of working out, especially if God and your mother want it that way."

I got my wish to keep my mother's body; my father got to sleep next to his wife of fifty-four years one more time; and the next day my family could decorate my mother's coffin, put poems and letters from the grandchildren inside with her, and surround her body with herbs and wildflowers from the garden. Instead of strangers, my father and all the men of the family carried my mother from the cabin porch. As they walked, a wood thrush - my mother's favorite bird - sang its heart out in the cedar tree, sending a farewell to the woman who had stewarded our land for so many years and who had co-created with all the beings there with so much dedication and love.

To this day we do not understand the flash flood that appeared in my mother's threshold. Nor can we explain the presence of the same storm re-appearing on a clear cloudless blue sky day a year later - exactly at the moment of my mother's death - as my sister and father and I sat upstairs and read tributes to Mama by the open window overlooking the forest where she died. The same elemental forces appeared again and brought my mother's presence back to us, finally convincing my skeptical sister that a person's consciousness can perhaps survive death after all. (She had asked Mama for a sign that morning.)

My mother's threshold story remains a mystery, as does Evada's story of the sunflowers appearing so many times around her death, but these are experiences that I feel are worthy of attention and care. Sharing in such encounters has expanded my sense of what is possible at death's threshold. Such experiences invite a deeper look at how we might be fully present as spiritual directors when someone dies. It has also revealed to me the multi-dimensional levels of who we are as human beings and the nature of our incarnation here on earth.

David Spangler speaks of each human being's life on the planet as an "Incarnational Web or Field" (Spangler Intro 63-68). This concept suggests that our incarnations are not just our single individual bodies and souls, although this particularity is very important. We are also part of a larger holism of life, an interwoven web of interactions and relationships – with the environment around us and the natural world, with family, friends and co-workers, with the greater world at large. Our lives and our deaths are creative expressions of "connecting, engaging and emerging" within this field. (32).

Spangler defines the Incarnational Field as a sphere. "Part of it extends into nature and the earth and all the spiritual forces that work with the earth; the other part extends into what we usually call the spiritual or "higher" realms of angels and spiritual guide and teachers, and the realm of the Soul." This view is not a picture of the Sacred as up or down, but something that "fills and holds the entire sphere." Working with this part of the Incarnational Field is, in Spangler's terms, working with Alliances, or presences and intelligences in the Field who consciously partner with human beings to be of service in the world (67).

In Spangler's book, *Blessing*, he speaks of the limitations of the human sensibilities and imagination if we are not open to the larger dimensions of nature and life beyond ourselves:

In a way we are always looking in a mirror at ourselves. What we see can be stimulating, but it's ultimately self-referencing. We do not learn how to see beyond ourselves. What we find in nature, though, is the continually evolving and often surprising and unexpected product of another imagination altogether. We find what is not ourselves and not human, and in doing so we find ourselves and our humanity in liberating and expanding ways. (Spangler Blessing 101-102)

So many of us have a very human and narrow concept and imagination of death – one that is constricted and bound by collective fear and avoidance of mortality and loss. Death is often a heavy burdensome event, full of dread and sorrow and tension for most people. I wonder if the constricted ways we imagine and deal with dying or losing a loved one could be eased or transformed by working in a more conscious and inclusive way. Perhaps we can begin to bring a fresh imagination to death, one that is sourced in a conscious interaction with the full dimensions of our incarnational fields – with outer communities of friends and family, with inner communities of allies within, and with the Earth and the natural world and the co-creative alliances possible there.

I experienced nature as bringing enormous healing and blessing, both in Evada's death and with my mother's passage. Nature is, and has always been a source of blessing to human beings, even if they are unaware of it. When I consciously asked the natural world and unseen presences I saw as angels and spirits of place to help me be an agent of blessing for my mother and family, these beings showed up in ways so surprising and expansive I could never feel the same about death again. Though losing my mother was painful and I suffered and grieved, I was also filled with the freshness of deep down things, a sense of huge potential and possibility and uplifting energies of joy and celebration, even in the midst of mourning. Such a perception and re-imagination of death informs every aspect of my work now as a spiritual director and certified home funeral guide.

I have shared these stories and ideas in great detail because I know this area of exploration may be breaking new ground for many spiritual directors. Hearing first hand experiences can be helpful when encountering unfamiliar territory. Because I feel that this inquiry could offer an area of significant potential and assistance to spiritual directors who wish

to work with dying directees and their families and communities, I have spent some time on it here. I also continue my personal experience and story in Chapter Eight, when I explore how an attunement to one's body and the earth can be a significant part of a spiritual directors self care and service at death's threshold.

## **PART THREE**

### **Chapter Seven**

#### **How Working with the Dying Differs from Normal Spiritual Direction**

Spiritual director Margaret Guenther says that “prayerfully attending the dying has its own distinctiveness” (“Companions at the Threshold” 30). Directors who feel called to work at the threshold of death need to understand that their normal way of working with clients in one-on-one regular monthly sessions will be different; they will be asked to be present for situations they may never have encountered before in their spiritual direction practice. Guenther says that one must keep the “ministry of prayerful presence” intact and yet adapt other components of one’s work to the very specific needs brought forward with a directee who is dying.

One distinction is that “spiritual direction with the dying has its own time frame” (30). Suddenly the director and directee are faced with the fact that they do not have years to unpack resistance or to clarify what the directee really feels about God. They have only months, maybe weeks or days. Working with a directee long-term becomes “an impossible luxury” (30). The time is shorter, but the need to prioritize spiritual matters is intensified as a directee faces the end of life. “The meetings may be brief, just a few minutes of conversation, prayer, or shared silence, but there is an intensity of focus that is absent from more leisurely, traditional direction” (30). Working with this dynamic is one of the challenges a director will face in the threshold of dying.

Guenther suggests that directors be prepared to meet more frequently with directees – weekly, perhaps even daily, if that is possible (30). She cautions that a director must be aware of the brevity of time, and yet not influenced or pressured by it, instead adopting an energy of spaciousness, calm and an intentional lack of pressure or haste. Creating a sense of spaciousness

may “simply be a matter of posture...sitting down at a bedside instead of hovering...slower speech and breathing...(such body language) implies that there is plenty of time (31).

Working with the dying is an “embodied ministry”(Guenther 37). The health and declining physical resources of directees will often dictate when and how a spiritual director can be present and of service, and often the sessions will have to work around how a directee feels, whether he has enough energy or presence of mind to do any kind of conscious work. Sessions may be interrupted by medical or health care workers and other physical necessities may arise that cannot be postponed. The director needs to have greater flexibility in her schedule and the ability to be present at moments that work for the patient, as well as being willing to let plans and expectations go when needed.

There will be days when time may seem to last for hours, where very little is said or “accomplished.” Very sick and frail people often speak slowly, and the slightest effort taxes their strength. It is the director’s task to listen carefully without revealing impatience or restlessness (31). Other times, a directee may feel renewed energy or an urgency to work directly with issues he has been avoiding for months or years. A director needs to be flexible in his role – sometimes working as “director,” but taking on, more and more, the role of “companion” instead. Spiritual director Jurgen Schwing underscores this in his article “*Spiritual Guidance at the End of Life:*”

It is especially important to stress the “companionship” aspect of our work. The word “companion” comes from the Latin *cum* (with) and *panis* (bread). A companion is someone we break bread with. Our first task is simply to be a friend, to be there, to sit with, and to accompany. (110)

This emphasis can be found in spiritual direction as well, but takes on specific meaning and application when working with the dying.

## **PART FOUR**

### **Chapter Eight**

#### **A Spiritual Director's Preparation for Working at the Threshold of Death**

Working with the dying will bring up a director's own fears and avoidance of illness, suffering and death. It may be quite challenging to be around someone who is experiencing the very illness one secretly fears or dreads developing one's self. I recently worked with a woman, exactly my age, who developed a rare cancer suddenly and was dying rapidly. She had a daughter the same age as my daughter, and she was deeply concerned about leaving her girl behind. I thought I had prepared myself well for my work with this client, but the similarities between our life circumstances undid me. I had to do a lot of emotional work before seeing her again. I cared for this woman's body after her death. Choosing to handle a body riddled with cancer and to do so with intention and blessing was a gift to me, for I faced my fears of cancer in a very graphic and embodied way. I know that such work will stand me in good stead in my work with future directees.

Because working with death can be so challenging, it is very helpful for spiritual directors to intentionally prepare themselves beforehand, and continue to do their own inner transformative work and healing during their journeys with directees and their families. Working at the threshold of death forces one to go within and face one's own attitudes and fears about death, and to establish a strong and steady spiritual practice that can be a source of stability, clarity and balance when one is confronted with so much pain and loss and suffering. One must be able to ground one's self in a strong sense of one's own resilience and aliveness and remain embodied and connected to the earth while in the challenging liminal spaces of death. And one

needs reliable networks of community support and allies in order to do one's best and most effective work at the threshold. These forms of preparation are explored in greater depth below.

### **A. Learning to Face and Accept One's Own Mortality**

The Tibetans have a saying that one must live each day with the little bird of death riding on one's shoulders and that one must be aware of its call in every moment. This saying encourages one to "practice dying" and to be prepared – to not be taken by surprise when one's own death or that of a loved one arrives. For over three millennia, societies have left teachings and maps that implore others to practice dying every day, and to be prepared during life for the gifts and challenges death brings. Egyptian, Celtic, Gnostic, Tibetan and Medieval Christian Monastic Books of the Dead reflect this universal theme (Groves and Klauser 21).

Yet what does it mean to "practice dying?" Today's culture and society in the West do not offer such teachings and guidelines. Indeed, the prevailing attitude toward death is one of fear and denial and avoidance. People are not encouraged to engage with the question of death, and they rarely do so, until death comes suddenly, like "an unexpected storm" (Carol *Healing for Dying* 36). This element of surprise and not "being ready" add to the dimension of uncertainty, dread and fear so many people feel when contemplating their own demise.

Facing and accepting one's fears about death is part of the practice of dying. One of the best sources for a spiritual director wishing to work with personal fear and being prepared for death is Joan Halifax's new book *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death*. Halifax has worked with the dying for over forty years and has trained hundreds of professionals in health-care and chaplaincy work. She is a trained Zen Buddhist priest, but the advice and meditations she offers are applicable to anyone of any faith. They are extremely helpful. There are meditations to work with one's deepest fears, imagining worse-case

scenario death situations, as well as crafting the best and most ideal death one could have (6-8).

Halifax says accepting the impermanence of existence lies at the heart of being able to accept our deaths:

If we start training ourselves to observe the changing nature of our everyday situations, we can be on our way to freedom from suffering. Accepting impermanence ...calls us to 'practice dying' – that is to let go, surrender, and give away, in the best of worlds, to practice generosity... We can do this now, at any time...and if we do, we might also start to perceive the interdependence of suffering and joy – that life and death are not separate but intertwined like roots deep in the earth. (47-48)

Life brings one many chances to embrace impermanence every day, to feel the grief and suffering of loss, and to practice acceptance, surrender and the ability to let go. Facing loss and change consciously, and with as much grace and presence as possible, is one way a person can practice dying. This is a transition and threshold work, for every change and loss is a passage to some other way of being.

Anne Stein, founder and director of Wilderness Rites, has discovered that participating in vision quests and rites of passage is a practice in dying. In her words:

As a ceremony, this process gives people an opportunity to consciously and with intention, go through a change and practice letting go. People are afraid of leaving their families and all that's familiar behind. On the wilderness quest...people take only what they have harvested, what I call self-love. Death also has to do with what people have to leave behind. On the wilderness quest people really get to see how they are going to be when the moment of death comes (qtd in Rasberry and Watanabe *The Art of Dying* 8-9).

Using art, creativity and ritual are very helpful ways to practice dying. These tools are agents of transformation and help one navigate the changes and challenges of any transition in life. Art and ritual can help one intentionally “try on” death from a more emotional and somatic/body response and experience. A person can by-pass mind and thoughts more easily, which can often help unconscious fears, denial and avoidance surface and become known. (Rasberry and Watanabe 11-12). Contemplating one’s death while weaving a death shroud or building one’s coffin, and using what one has created beforehand in life, can be direct and powerful artistic ways to embrace one’s own mortality. Putting one’s affairs in order, drawing up living wills and planning one’s funeral are also ways of facing death with preparation and awareness.

Spiritual director Joy Carol calls such preparatory work “Healing for Dying”(Carol 37). This is a helpful way to view any conscious work one does in life to be ready for death. Carol works as a spiritual director to help others be more prepared for the end of life, a work she calls the “art of dying well” (37). She suggests “we begin to practice how to die early in life, so that these skills are learned long before one is sick, weak, or dying” (37).

Carol has a list of questions for reflection and for achieving practical goals in preparing for one’s own dying process. This list is “designed to assist spiritual directors to look at their own mortality openly and realistically.” (It also provides spiritual directors with tools to use with directees who wish to do this same work) (39). One important question addresses relationships and important people in one’s life. Part of practicing dying is remembering to tell people how much one cares about them on a regular basis; making sure one spends time with those who matter; and doing the hard work of sorting out unresolved issues – acts of closure and completion, ways to forgive or be forgiven, ways to let go in life - so that one is not attempting

such healing work in the fraught pressured time of impending death (39) (See also Chapter 5-Section A).

Consciously preparing for death offers many gifts. When one lives in relationship to death while alive, the quality and nature of daily life is imbued with far more meaning and beauty and preciousness. One is less likely to take life for granted, and this attitude makes enjoyment of life and being of service to others a greater priority and choice. Alan Jones, an Episcopal priest, speaks of the gifts he receives every day by engaging in a practice of conscious “contemplative dying:”

In my tradition we try to practice dying every day so that we may be fully alive. What I understand of my prayer life is to place myself on the threshold of death, to participate in my dying, so that I may live each day and each moment as a gift. What I cultivate is a grateful heart; each moment then becomes a new thing. My gratitude comes from the sheer gift of life itself (*Graceful Passages* 31).

### **B. The Importance of Establishing a Daily Meditation/Prayer Practice**

An established daily spiritual practice (contemplative prayer or meditation) is foundational to a spiritual director’s life. It is a steady vehicle that enables her to understand and feel confident in the transformational journey of consciousness to ever more expanding and integrated states of awareness and connection with the Sacred, God or the Ground of Being. Daily practice can create a meditative or prayerful container of stability, a knowing experience of one’s true nature, and the sense of being deeply held and supported by something greater than one’s self - all of which constitute one’s personal Principle and Foundation.

These are the foundations a spiritual director draws upon in his work with others. These foundations are especially needed when one’s work is to help another person die. A calm, steady

consciousness and presence is one's truest ally while engaging with the death process. This stability emerges out of a daily, regular spiritual practice that helps one feel connected and grounded in the flow and movement of the Sacred and, in the case of mindfulness practices, in clear and attentive awareness of the present moment where the Sacred is made known.

Accompanying another person in her journey of dying will bring up every grief, fear, anxiety and lack of readiness one has about death. Being with dying and all that this entails – suffering, the body's dissolution, pain and anguish, every emotion possible in human life, the turmoil and grief of family and friends – means a director needs his own strength, inner centeredness and steadiness in order to be fully present for another. With the aid of spiritual practice, one can be a compassionate witness for someone else or a stable ballast for one who is undergoing the demanding transformational psycho-spiritual journey of the death process.

Meditation and contemplative prayer is a transformative journey in consciousness that mirrors the transformative journey of death. Kathleen Singh, Buddhist practitioner and long-term hospice spiritual companion, writes of this connection between meditation and dying:

Understanding the path to the transpersonal realms is the key to understanding the dying process. The path to the transpersonal realms, which the saints and sages of every age have known through the practice of meditation and prayer, appears to be the same transformative path each of us traverses in the process of dying. (Singh *The Grace in Dying* 18)

Singh goes on to say:

Meditation can be seen as the attempt to simulate “the mind of somebody facing death.” Recognizing this, the path of meditation has intuitively sought to replicate many of the special conditions of the dying process, so as to accelerate the realization of our inherent

potential and inherited destiny...the presence that is unchanging, that simply is as it is, the spaciousness that goes beyond birth and death. (123-4)

Those with a strong spiritual practice develop a deeper and clearer understanding of what it means to truly live and to die, and so can become real allies for a person who wants to face death with as much presence and preparation as possible. A practitioner, like a dying person, is engaging in a transformative process that brings one ultimately to a direct experience of the “spaciousness” of God or one’s true nature.

Establishing a meditative or prayer practice is not easy for one embarks on a journey that “uncover the contractions of desires, attachments and fears that block us from the experience of our Original Nature” (124). One of the hardest tasks in life is to keep saying yes to spiritual practice, to keep showing up on the meditation pillow. Yet it is essential work for a spiritual director and, because it is so interwoven with the process of dying, one of the most important ways a director can prepare and be ready for work at the threshold of death.

Transformation in consciousness only happens when a person is willing to “take the one seat.” (Joseph Goldstein qtd in Singh 125) “The Path of Return is managed – sourced and sustained – through the consistent and deliberate application of our attention. In the midst of life, the mechanism through which we can achieve that application of attention is a spiritual discipline or practice” (Singh 125).

Singh goes on to say:

Make the choice of a practice and keep it. A spiritual discipline is not about ending uncomfortable, often turbulent, feeling states. A spiritual discipline is about the act of returning one’s self, time after time, to the one seat...On the one seat, the meditation pillow, we enter the transformative fields known in the symbols of the cross and the

crucible. On the one seat we are held. We can picture the desert fathers and mothers, sitting for years in the merciless sun, murmuring over and over, endlessly, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”(125-6)

Ironically, dying directees will know far more than a director does about “taking the one seat” (whether consciously or unconsciously). Singh says that “with terminal illness, the dying process, the “one seat” chooses us...Dying picks the pillow for us...reverses the momentum of our lives...demands of us: “Don’t just do something; sit there” (126). Dying people “develop stability in the capacity to just sit, to just be...they let go of knowing...and enter being...On the one seat, in the bed of dying, we develop stability of practice. We simply experience what we experience...we enter the present” (126-129).

If a spiritual director is to help a dying person at all, she needs some understanding of this transformative shift in priority and awareness, this capacity to be in the present moment. This will be further explored in Part Five, which discusses the capacities a director needs to work with the dying. The essential point here is that a regular daily spiritual practice in meditation or contemplative prayer is the very tool one needs to develop this capacity and to trust and rest in the “deathless” place, the present moment, where the Principle and Foundation or the Ground of Being and Love is known.

Another spiritual companion and hospice worker, Christine Longaker, underscores this point:

A daily meditation practice connects us with our wisdom nature again and again, so our familiarity and confidence deepen. Meditation can inspire our heart and mind with profound love and compassion, and it is this we bring into the room of someone suffering and dying. (Longaker *Facing Death and Finding Hope* 222)

"Meditation connects us evermore reliably and profoundly to a natural, effortless awareness, in which there is a deep relaxation and spaciousness, an unbounded gratitude, and an all-embracing, joyful compassion" (Longaker 36).

Here are the very qualities a spiritual director wants and needs to have to hold another person in his journey of transition and the qualities one would wish for a dying person to have and experience, amidst the pain and suffering of the journey toward death. Such qualities are a direct result of a stable and established spiritual practice of meditation or prayer.

### **C. Finding an Embodied Spiritual Practice, Aliveness and a Co - Creative Connection to the Earth and the Natural World**

The stability of a regular meditation or prayerful practice is essential for a director working with death and dying. However, even such a stable practice will be tested and challenged at death's threshold. It is very important to have spiritual and mindful practices that connect one with the body and the earth and to regularly practice effective energy hygiene and self care when one is working with the very powerful energies of death.

Finding embodied and/or earth-centered spiritual practices and ways to work with the dying in grounded ways is not as easy as it may sound. This may be especially true for those working in ministry and spiritual direction and spiritually oriented professions in a culture where religion and spirituality have for centuries demonized the physical dimensions of existence. Both Eastern and Western spiritual paths have a long-standing collective and pervasive tendency to want to transcend the human condition. This subtle orientation, often not even consciously known or embraced, makes it extremely difficult to be truly incarnated.

Despite a recovery of indigenous and earth-based spiritual paths in contemporary times, the wisdom of the body and a sustainable relationship with the earth is still not a central or

integrated focus for many spiritual seekers today. Western culture makes it hard for people to feel at home with their bodies and the earth, and to know true aliveness. The stress of living in the modern world, with its hectic, fast-paced scheduled way of being and its mind and media-based focus and emphasis, makes grounded, embodied living elusive and difficult to achieve.

This is a great challenge for anyone, but it can be especially problematical for those who choose to work in the field of death and dying. It is often difficult to remain grounded when encountering the liminal energies of death's doorway. Having a spiritual practice that includes a somatic felt sense of one's body and a living connection to the earth can be an invaluable tool for someone who needs to stay tethered to the physical dimension and grounded in one's own self and incarnation while being of service to the dying.

David Spangler's *Incarnational Spirituality* is a pioneering work in addressing what it means to be truly incarnated as human beings. His teachings and exercises provide concrete and specific ways to inhabit and celebrate the totality of existence, which is both infinitely vast and uniquely particular. One learns to trust the body and the somatic felt-sense as a great source of understanding and wisdom and to draw support, nourishment and guidance from a conscious connection with the earth and the natural world. (Spangler *Blessing* 139-267) and (Spangler *Basic Exercises* 1-36). Such focus can greatly enhance a spiritual director's work, and becomes especially useful if a director is working at the threshold of death.

Spangler also speaks for a spirituality that is continually emerging now, in the present moment, rather than advocating simply returning to the past and the teachings of the ancient traditions. His *Incarnational Spirituality* is part of "the phenomenon of emergent spirituality" (*Intro.* 82). In Spangler's words:

Emergent spirituality is more than new forms of spirituality appearing.... It is the realization that spirituality is itself an emergent phenomenon... Spirit lives in the emergent moment...(and we cannot predict how sacredness should reveal itself)...Emergent spirituality is a realization that spirituality emerges from us and from our capacities and nature as a source. It is not something just passed down to us... it places the emphasis on who we are and what we are doing in the moment...it makes spirituality person-centered as well as God-centered. Each person holds the power to determine whether the sacred will emerge through his or her actions and presence each moment or not (82-82).

One of David's inner colleagues told him once that even though human beings often feel "too incarnated" the real problem was that we are "not incarnated enough!"(82) Discovering what incarnation really means, and how one can serve and bless by being an incarnational agent and source of the sacred in the world – this orientation is part of the emerging spiritual work and inquiry Spangler is teaching today.

It is interesting to note that another spiritual teacher, Reggie Ray (an American who has studied, practiced and taught Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhism for over forty years) is contributing to the emergent spirituality of this age, and the need to be embodied, by bringing a similar yet unique perspective to Buddhism. Ray's teachings have come to a clear focus in recent times and now have at their core the establishment of an unshakeable connection to the earth and the importance of claiming our essential personhood and humanity as a grounding place for spiritual practice.

After years of teaching meditation, Ray today realizes that many students are still subtly disembodied in their practice. He feels that most people are still transcending the body and the

personal and somatic experience of their lives in their spiritual seeking- thus missing their greatest source of transformation and awakening to whom they really are. (Ray, *Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body*). It is remarkable how similar Ray's teachings parallel what Spangler has been teaching for years. Spangler's Exercises in his book *Blessing* (139-267) have strong parallels with Ray's most recent offerings. (Ray *Touching Enlightenment* 341-382)

A somatic awareness (like the Somatic Transformational process of Dr. Sharon Stanley explored in Chapter Three) can also become a potent tool of self-care and nourishment for those who find themselves in the chaotic and stressful arena of death. Being able to monitor one's own levels of anxiety, stress and tension and to find ways to re-source one's self back to a more optimal place of relaxation, calmness and balance in the body means a director will be able to take care of herself, as well as be present for others in a more alive way in stressful situations.

As Spangler says, the most helpful tool of all is to know and affirm that our bodies are our allies and that they are inherently an "organ of grounding" in themselves. If we can learn to truly and deeply trust the body as an Intelligence that knows how to receive, distribute, assimilate, integrate and release energies, that Intelligence works as an ally for us (Spangler *Basic Exercises* 18).

I recently witnessed and experienced a powerful example of the gifts a spiritual director can receive by trusting the body as an intelligent ally while working with death. I was a spiritual companion for Cary, the wife of Bob (the man dying of a brain tumor I have already mentioned). Cary and I consciously opened to what our bodies were telling us as well as engaging the spiritual aspects of her husband's passing. Many of her women's circles of friends did this conscious work as well alongside us. The experience was very moving.

We believe this focus made a tremendous difference in creating a field of ease and flow and blessing around Bob's death. As a spiritual director working in such a field, I had a distinctive felt-sense of what it means for a person to face the death of a loved one from a re-sourced trusting place in the body and what it meant for me, as spiritual director, to accompany someone in the same somatic rooted way. I was able to care for myself and remain grounded for the entire five days of the journey. I felt relaxed and supported by a collective field of energy shaped from people's willingness to truly engage and be present with whatever arose. Someone was always cooking good nourishing food, giving massages and back rubs, smudging the rooms regularly, creating quiet and sacred spaces where one could retreat, encouraging each other to go outside, firing up the hot tub, checking in with the family about their needs in the moment. (These are examples of important self-care and energy hygiene practices one can do). In the wife Cary's words: "This is very, very painful, but I am not suffering. I am remarkably relaxed, held by the Love that is in everywhere."

I noticed that focusing with the body meant that all kinds of emotions could arise, be experienced, and then allowed to pass in a very real and yet efficient way. This was particularly true of Cary, who has done a lot of body and emotional work. She was often able to be present to her feelings, allow them be there, experience them and let them go. And this was true of others too. This capacity created a strong sense of realness, safety, intimacy and connection amongst everyone involved – a tangible field of holding and blessing for Cary and Bob and their children. I was able to do my own emotional work as well. Though I did this away from the family at home, I felt held and supported by the larger collective intention of our group effort.

There seemed to be a wellspring of energy and aliveness that everyone could draw upon, even though what we were experiencing was so laced with pain, loss and sadness. I was struck

with how open and resilient and fluid things felt energetically. Several of us felt as if a more expansive life force or energy was literally being poured into our thoughts and feelings, transforming our rigid concepts of what death was supposed to feel like and be. The normal constriction and tension and shutdown nature of endurance I often sense and feel in people who are at death's threshold was rarely present with Cary and Bob or their closest friends. If such moments came, which they inevitably did at times, people were able to shift fairly easily back to a more fluid place.

There were of course, other factors contributing to this ease. Perhaps much of this clear loving field was a gift from Bob, who was a man of great optimism and clarity and had faced his death with grace and presence. I feel Bob's rootedness in a spiritual faith and his own remarkable Incarnational Field -which was expansive and included many friends and allies - created much of the energetic field of blessing everyone experienced. Cary and I both concur, however, that much of our own experience of balance and ease came from letting our bodies be the "organ of grounding" and the wisest ally at Bob's threshold.

The question of what it might mean for a spiritual director to work intentionally with the earth, the elements and the natural world in death's threshold was explored in Chapter Six when I shared my personal experience of accompanying my mother as her spiritual companion. I wrote about this from a place of wonder, potential and mystery more than any solid knowing, but I return to it here because it is another example of how a spiritual director might consciously prepare herself for death work. It is possible that one can draw strength, sustenance and tangible guidance from a co-creative relationship with the earth and the land where one is working, and the dying and their families can benefit from this same support even if they are not consciously aware of it. This intentional connecting with earth and nature might support a director who

wants to re-source herself to a place of greater balance and ease, as well as resiliency and aliveness, in order to most effectively help others at death's threshold.

My effort to try and co-create with the spirits and land at our home in Alabama gave me a surprising amount of energy and resilience in those hectic painful days with my family. I felt it tangibly, like the wellsprings of energy I also felt around Bob's death. In Alabama, I could at times rest in a gratifyingly re-sourced place of knowing that "all was well," even though outwardly things did not feel that way within a family stricken with grief and the rigors of caring for our mother. This sense of well-being and even abiding joy present even in the hardest days arose from my daily efforts to connect with the land and ask for its blessings, and a faith that my soul and spiritual link with my mother rested in a living Christ Consciousness that was not separate from the earth and the natural world around us.

I would go, every chance I could, into the woods to make offerings to the beings of our land - sprinkling cornmeal and tobacco beneath persimmon trees and cedar to honor the spirits of the native people - the Cherokee and the Chickasaw - who inhabited that place before they were forced to leave during the Trail of Tears in the 1830's.

We have a natural spring next to the cabins, and I would take flowers to float on the tiny pool of water - often dry in the heat of summer yet emerging in times of rain. I sang songs to the spirits of the underground springs and imagined what the faery folk of the mountain might look like, as a way to connect with them should they happen to really be there. I saw them clad in tattered leaves from the forest floor and smelling of leaf mold and limestone caverns, gathering on the front porch of the log cabins at night, swinging from the railing as they eagerly awaited the chance to escort our mother across the veil. I would also lie on the limestone rocks and soak

up their ancient strength and sustenance before heading back into the tension and fraught atmosphere of suffering that pervaded the cabins. Such practices sustained me.

I know my father and sisters and brother also walked the trails of our mountain when things got too much to bear. Nature is my family's refuge and solace and the place we go when life gets hard. I really went to the woods to ease my own pain and suffering for the most part, but I was also consciously asking for help and guidance for my mother because I sensed she was having a very hard time leaving us and her mountain home. I think my whole family felt supported by the mountain and its inhabitants in the month it took my mother to die.

I offer these examples in some detail so that spiritual directors have a more vivid picture of what is possible when one can prepare and work with the Earth and the body at death's threshold. The self-care and energy hygiene tools Cary and her friends and I used at Bob's death are examples of what spiritual directors can focus on for themselves and clients. I offer these as a brief example, since the subject of how to care for one's self energetically and stay grounded physically is extensive and beyond the scope of this thesis section.

#### **D. Creating Communities of Support**

Spiritual Director Margaret Guenther says, "those offering spiritual direction to the dying are in special need of support" (*Companions at the Threshold* 38). Having one's own spiritual director is a pre-requisite for a director's ministry anyway, but it becomes an imperative if one is working with the dying. As Guenther says: "we need a safe place to talk and pray about the joys and burdens of our work. It is false heroism to think we can carry everything...Our spiritual director and our spiritual friends can help us let go without ever abandoning the trust that has been placed in us."(38). Joan Halifax, Zen priest, echoes this, saying "I don't think we can sanely do the work of being with dying outside of some form of community"(102).

It is most ideal if spiritual directors who work with death can create networks of support from people who also work in the field and who understand the physical and spiritual demands of accompanying the dying and working with their families. A director may wish to contact other directors who are working at death's threshold. Perhaps one could form a group spiritual direction circle or a peer supervision support team where one brings cases and situations and the group listens within for guidance and clarity, and can support one another with feedback and inspiration. Since death work is so emotionally draining, it is important also to have family, friends and circles where one can cry and let down and feel held physically and emotionally.

In my work caring for the dead and their families with home funerals, I depend greatly on my Tibetan Buddhist sangha of women (a sangha is a spiritual community or circle who study and practice together). We began caring for our own dead together many years ago, and I decided to become trained and certified to do this work as part of my spiritual direction and companioning of others. I don't know what I would do without my sangha's feedback and support. I can bring deep soul and spiritual concerns to them, and we take those concerns into group meditation and contemplation and discussion. I can also debrief and work with them on technical questions and concerns in interfacing with the funeral industry, since after death care is a pioneering work, and we have had to learn how to proceed simply by doing the work and gaining experience.

Caring for the dead and their families is a social work as well as one of spiritual care and direction. I can spiritually companion the dying person, or a family member of someone who is dying, but when I do the after death care, I always try to have a partner or apprentice or helper who can help me with the demanding physical elements of the job, who can help me track the larger picture and details, or just be there for moral support and companionship.

Even if one feels that he can be a spiritual director without a partner, it is wise to have someone to rest in and get feedback from, since the energies of death's portal are always full of surprises and unexpected situations one may not feel comfortable handling alone. Death work can also be profoundly lonely at times, especially if one is a single person. Being able to work alongside someone or to arrange to not go home to an empty house after one's work can make all the difference in staying healthy and in being able to give of one's best to the job long-term.

Joan Halifax, in her book *Being with Dying*, emphasizes that spiritual companions called to be of service at death's threshold need to see themselves part of a larger "jeweled net," her metaphor for building community around a dying person and those who are companioning him. Halifax speaks of "relationship-centered care-giving," a human-to-human net formed from the question: "For whom does this (death) matter?" "Who is showing up, who cares? (*Being with Dying* 101) When someone is facing the end of life, the ideal situation is to create this "jeweled net" of different kinds of caregivers.

It is essential that spiritual directors know they are only one jewel in the net and that their role is to be present for the spiritual needs and concerns of the dying directee. Having an established web of support in place around a dying person is an enormous help to a spiritual director because it helps to clearly define and delineate her role. This clear understanding is important. Often when this net is not in place, and a spiritual director is present as a caring and holding presence, the directee and her family may look to the director for physical and emotional support that goes far beyond what the director has agreed to do or is capable of handling. Being able to establish strong boundaries is more difficult at the threshold of death, since everyone is working at a greater level of intensity and need, so clarity is helpful.

It is surprising how often this situation can arise. Because people today are not prepared for death, they have not established these webs of support and holding beforehand. People are also very isolated today and may not be or live close to family. Community is something many people only dream about, and spiritual networks are even less available since churches and faith communities are not always meeting a person's needs today. A director can be of greatest spiritual support to the dying if the directee and the family have the "jeweled net" already in place, and the director is simply one part of the "healing team," as spiritual director Joy Carol calls it in her article "Healing for Dying" (38).

Most spiritual directors will also have some form of inner community of support while working with directees. This community will be unique to each director, shaped from his or her spiritual path and perspectives, and from the cosmology and deities and spiritual beings of his or her particular map of consciousness. David Spangler teaches that each person has what he humorously calls a "Pit Crew," which is a team of inner beings who "are directly involved, concerned, or familiar with our specific incarnation" (Spangler, *Creating Inner Alliances online class* 67). Spangler sees such an inner dynamic as part of "the organizing principle of our individual system of life" (*Alliances 2*) in relationship to other intelligences and forces. His teachings help a person learn to work consciously and co-creatively with this pit crew, as a way to engage life more fully, to effectively manifest one's unique radiance and gifts, and to be an agent of blessing in the world.

Working with such inner allies is, in the very nature of such inquiry and exploration, a threshold work, opening one to other dimensions of consciousness and being. Such understanding is finding its way into much of contemporary spirituality today. This kind of intentional co-creative work can be a very helpful aid and support when one is companioning

someone at the threshold of death. Therefore, learning to know one's inner allies, and gaining experience with how one can work together to be of service, can be a powerful preparation tool for directors who are accompanying the dying and the dead and their families.

For example: In my spiritual direction work, I call upon the Archangel Michael, the Christ, and the Divine Feminine, as a trinity of inner alignment and support for myself. The Archangel Michael is known to be a guiding force in transition times and has always been called upon to shepherd souls over death's threshold. Christ is the "I Am" and the Love and Radiance of the Heart I wish to bring to each situation where I am serving, and the Divine Feminine and the Earth, with the evolutionary impulse of the Christ, are the matrix and foundation of my life and incarnation. I experience such inner alignment as an energetic support I can rest in. I also sense that such an alignment means my capacity to hold and bless others is expanded and more potent and effective – greater than if I try to be of service by myself. The creatures and spirits of nature on our Alabama land at my mother's death were also my inner allies, and I drew upon that web of life for strength and sustenance, and as it turned out, tangible help. I have learned that calling on an inner community of allies connects me to my deepest potential and wholeness, and it is from this place that I can most effectively serve.

## **PART FIVE**

### **Chapter Nine**

#### **The Capacities a Spiritual Companion Needs at the Threshold of Death**

There are several key foundational capacities that are helpful to spiritual directors working at the threshold of death. These capacities form the core of any spiritual direction work, but are especially helpful when one is accompanying a dying person. Probably one of the most central capacities a spiritual director needs is “holy listening.” This capacity has been discussed throughout the section on Threshold Awareness instead of being explored here, though it is important to note that “holy listening” is a thread in all the other capacities discussed in this chapter. Together these skills and abilities help a director practice the delicate art of discernment and balance - to show up, be prepared with tools that may be of help, yet always to inhabit the larger gesture of holding and blessing within a context of openness and not-knowing, and a willingness to let go of any need to help or fix. In short, to simply be present to what emerges and what is.

#### **A. The Capacity to “Not-Know”**

Although there is a need for spiritual directors to bring their training and skills to the threshold of death, it is important to clarify that a director should offer help from a place of “not-knowing” rather than a place of feeling that they are the experts on spiritual care of the dying. Since this is how one operates in normal spiritual direction settings, a director should be practiced in allowing the directee to lead the way. When a directee is very ill, however, and is not herself, it might be tempting to want to lead in more direct ways. Spiritual director Rose Mary Dougherty says that one must still “cultivate a don’t -know mind.” She adds: “truly, if you give yourself to the mystery of (a) person with you, you don’t know...you have to give yourself

to the moment and to grace”(“Being Present interview 21). Joan Halifax, Zen priest and end of life spiritual companion, makes this “not-knowing” the first of her threefold tenets for being with dying:

For me, living with the three tenets of not-knowing, bearing witness, and compassionate action has been like a key that opens many doors, doors that have led to the same place – the unknown, the inconceivable, the place of simply being present for the truth of what is happening... These tenets help me remember with some humility how I can be more intimate with and transparent to whatever is unfolding in the present moment. They help me act more skillfully as I spend time with those who are suffering. They guide me toward inclusiveness, and toward the contemplative practices that are the heart and bone of being with dying (*Being with Dying* 199).

Halifax speaks of the shadow side of spiritual companioning a person at the threshold of death. She says that one can become “spiritually inflated,” acting as the role of Priest and feeling that one “knows what is spiritually right for the dying one”(120). This “knowing” can live in one’s heart, and in one’s best intentions for another’s well-being. It can surface in one’s cherished beliefs about what a “good death” is and the “best” way to die. People who are dying, and their family members, are often vulnerable and afraid and will tend to look to someone they think has answers or guidance. It is important that directors do not become the “role” someone else projects onto them or begs them to be. Otherwise, they might subtly manipulate or coerce a dying person and his family into actions that are not aligned with the directee’s truest needs and wishes.

“The antidote for this role is simply not-knowing... opening our hearts and letting go of our concepts. Can we be truly compassionate with our selves when we fail to be flawless

caregivers, and with the dying person when she fails to die in the way we think she should?”(Halifax 121).

It is possible that the soul and incarnate personhood of a dying person is in some mysterious way orchestrating exactly what happens at her passage across the threshold. This is a challenging premise to maintain, especially when a person’s death is filled with negativity, struggle, pain, or brutal senseless violence. Holding such an idea as possible, however, helps one remain open and curious about a person’s unique soul journey in life and in death. Most importantly, such a stance helps a director rest in and trust, first and foremost, the dying person—his inherent natural wisdom and the integrity and sovereignty of his individual incarnate life and dying process. Spiritual director Margaret Guenther concurs:

The dying are in a place where we have not been. As spiritual directors, we approach them with reverence and respect...we are the neophytes here because the directee knows more about dying than we possibly can... Our directees permit us to go with them in compassion and imagination to a place that is still beyond us. They are our teachers (*Companions at the Threshold* 31-39).

Spiritual director Rose Mary Dougherty expands this thought, saying that working with the dying “has opened (her) to a much greater sense of what spiritual direction is about – that deep trusting in the Spirit’s presence in a person (*Being Present* 16). This thought underlines what a director’s true task is – to trust the presence and movement of Spirit or the Sacred in another’s life and death, to accept and trust what is, even if what shows up might seem like a horrendous journey to everyone on this side of the veil. One needs to simply bear witness and to stand in the mystery of that which emerges in each and every present moment.

Joan Halifax tells of companioning a young man dying of HIV who wanted to take his own life. As a Buddhist, Halifax was not comfortable with this request but she felt as if she could not advise him against it, for it was his choice. She says that “Being with the dying often means bearing witness to and accepting the unbearable and the unacceptable” (154). The man went out to his sister’s farm; put himself on the land he loved, and took his own life. Halifax realized afterward that the man’s ability to be mindfully present at his own death, instead of sinking into unconscious oblivion and dying in a way that was abhorrent to him, was a very important last act for this person. Halifax knew as his spiritual companion that she simply needed to bear witness to this choice, for his sake, and though it was very difficult and painful for her personally, she remained present for the young man (154-155).

### **B. The Capacity to Be Present and Mindfully Aware**

To bear witness to someone else is to be fully present for that person in the moment, without judgment or conceptual ideas about what is happening. This is also a definition of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the skill of simply looking at what is happening without grasping it or pushing it away; it is simply paying attention. Many practitioners have found that this awareness is facilitated by anchoring attention physically in the rhythm of one’s breath. “Concentrated awareness (or mindfulness) synchronizes body, speech and mind, bringing our full attention to the immediate situation” (Halifax 11).

To be mindful is to be present and aware. When one is fully present, ones’ physical and subtle bodies are working together, and this produces ‘wholeness,’ where one’s consciousness is both expanded and focused. One feels greater specificity and greater expansion at the same time. One notices things in much greater detail though one’s awareness is also more spacious and vast.

An important aspect of being present is having mindful awareness of “other.” One could say that to be present and aware has a threefold quality – within, without, and between – a sacred Trinity. One is aware of self within and of ‘other’ without. One is also aware of the flow of the Sacred – the energies that live and move and breathe in the spaciousness between, or “where two or more are gathered, there I Am.”

A spiritual director can try to listen and be present in this threefold way. He may do this by consciously attending to his own breathing and where he might feel tense or relaxed. He might listen to his feelings within and ask: Am I peaceful, anxious, stressed, distracted, calm? Where are my thoughts going? Can I still my mind and truly listen to the person who sits before me? Can I sit with a soft, vulnerable, open heart? Can I notice and understand what my body and felt-sense are telling me? Am I grounded? Can I be unattached and non-judgmental? Can I accept what is happening before me without trying to change it?

Answering these questions can help center a director, so she is better able to concentrate her energies and attention on the directee in a way that is supportive and allows the person his freedom to be whatever he needs or wants to be. The director can also notice what happens in the space and spaciousness “between”- generated by their dynamic. She can look for a flow of energy where the Sacred is revealed or is made known in the situation. In this way she is practicing presence and can be an agent of blessing and a mirror of the Sacred for the directee in that moment. David Spangler calls presence:

“the wholeness, integration, and power that we share with another in the act of blessing.

This presence is in itself a manifestation of our connectedness and our sense of belonging and participation. It is an expression of the coherence we have inside ourselves and with

our world that allows spirit to flow within and from us in unobstructed ways...Presence... does not dominate; it embraces (*Blessing* 194-195).

Our mindful presence “unveils and reveals (our) essential Good Heart, the fundamental goodness and kindness that are our real nature”(Sogyal Rinpoche 61-62). Rinpoche goes on to say, in his forward to Longaker’s book *Facing Death and Finding Hope*:

As we will discover for ourselves, the more we can embody the spiritual teachings, the more natural and more effective we will be in giving spiritual care to a dying person.

*How we are* is so much more important than what we say or do. Our presence, by itself, can reassure a dying friend, and evoke in him or her fundamental confidence and trust, a sense of hope and meaning. (*Forward* in Longaker xi)

The kind of presence a spiritual companion needs with the dying – mindful watchfulness, awareness and witnessing, without the need to fix or change - is beautifully illustrated in the following story:

A hospice nurse and spiritual companion sat with her mother in the last days of her life. The nurse had seen many peaceful deaths and was expecting that her mother, who had always been a cheerful person, would also have a good and peaceful death. But as the mother grew nearer her threshold, she became increasingly agitated and began screaming in uncontrollable anger. The daughter was deeply shaken. But, choosing to remain present, she tuned into her own body and awareness and felt from her deepest core that she must really listen to what was happening, really pay attention to her mother’s process and let it be. She knew she had to simply bear witness to her mother’s rage, as hard as it was, without responding or fixing it.

At the end of four miserable days, her mother suddenly relaxed, smiled and died peacefully. The nurse told Joan Halifax later that her mother would have been medicated out of

her anger if she had been in a hospital or other institution. She felt her mother's rage came from feelings that had been pent up in her body for a lifetime. "The look of relief and release on her mother's face as she died were all the daughter needed to see in order to know that she had done the best thing for both of them" (Halifax 152)

### **C. The Capacity for Equanimity and Compassion**

The above example also illustrates the hospice nurse's capacity for equanimity, being able to stay present and stable amidst the fury of her mother's final release of anger and rage, and to simply accept what is rather than try and change things. The quality of equanimity is stillness and calm in the midst of a storm. Directors "sit like a mountain," as meditation teachings say, while clouds and sleet and rain whirl around (Salzberg *The Kindness Handbook* 34). One holds a steady abiding presence with someone who is locked in pain, sobbing with grief or railing against the injustice of cancer. One is not impervious. One extends love and holding in those moments, but from as clear and rooted a place as possible within. One even practices equanimity when joy enters the room, cherishing it completely, delighting and sharing, and then letting it go, like a fragile flower or fleeting sunshine.

When one is relaxed and at ease in awareness one can be more present for whatever arises. One knows that all experience – suffering and freedom from suffering - arises and falls, and that impermanence and change are inevitable. One rides those waves of change by practicing steadfastness and resilience. "We feel everything, without exception, and we relate to it through the strength of our awareness, not through habitual reactions" (Salzberg 34). This is not detachment. Equanimity is the "state of being non-partial – not impartial, but non-partial. We hold all beings with the same heart, equally accepting of suffering and joy"(Halifax 44).

One can see how helpful the practice of equanimity can be for those who sit with the dying. The process of letting go of the body and one's life creates these rising and falling waves of change, often in raw and shocking ways. The psycho-spiritual stages of letting go into death are rarely easy, and it is challenging to be a witness and companion for this journey. Joan Halifax, after forty years of being with dying, admits that "the tender balance of equanimity" is easily lost, even with the most practiced care-givers. She says that the profound quality of equanimity must be "nurtured from the compost of our many failures" (44).

Knowing this, one still tries again. Keeping equanimity as one's "North Star" when one loses the way develops "strong backs to support tender hearts" (Halifax 44). Sometimes one can experience an "alchemy of gratitude and well-being"(44) even amidst pain and suffering. Directors can quietly be this potential for a dying person. This means directors are holding both suffering and freedom from suffering in their hearts at the same time. The director may be the one managing to do this as companion. Or the person dying finds her way to this awareness herself. "Just one person seeing both the sorrow and at the same time the great heart of who we really are can open shuttered eyes and let the light shine out even before the moment of death" (Halifax 86).

Halifax tells a story of sitting with a patient who was riddled with depression and irritability. She maintained an inner stance or allegiance to an affectionate joy with the man, and gradually her own energy influenced the man to let go of his complaints and actually smile at his unhappiness. Halifax says that such "altruistic joy" can absorb and transform suffering – anger, self-pity, depression, resentment, woe. "It is an expression of compassion in action that is naturally free of narcissism and thoughts of one's self."(41).

Equanimity and compassion go hand in hand as a practice and capacity. The word “compassion” is derived from a Latin/French/Middle English combination where *com* means “with” and *pati* means “to bear or suffer” or “suffer with”(Awakened Mind 16). Compassion is the willingness to “be with suffering,” to face the nature of suffering itself, without turning away in avoidance or denial. To cultivate compassion is to choose consciously to live with a heart broken open. It is also to live “with a keen awareness of the interdependence of all...living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved with one another “ (Thomas Merton, qtd. in *Awakened Mind* 16). Compassion helps one know fundamentally that suffering is universal and pervades all existence, that one is not separate from the suffering of others. A spiritual director is “with” and a part of a person struggling with terminal illness, even if he sits beside the directee in health and well-being. To recognize this as so is to be compassionate.

Longaker distinguishes between ordinary compassion, which is limited and conditional and comes from a dualistic perspective – “me” feeling compassion for “you,” and profound compassion. “Profound compassion is limitless, unchanging, and free of any bias...based on the recognition that from the viewpoint of our true nature, all other beings are in their essence, the same. And since we are all connected, all beings are worthy of respect and love...”(*Facing Death* 61). “May all beings be free from suffering, and the causes of suffering” lies at the heart of Buddhist prayer and meditation. Longaker, who has worked with unimaginable suffering in her years helping others face death, says that each of us has the same needs when we are suffering:

We all need to have our suffering and emotional pain validated. We need to feel safe speaking about and expressing our pain, and to trust that others will understand our

feelings. We need to feel that no matter what our experience or circumstances, we are respected and unconditionally accepted...we all need basic human kindness...(54).

Longaker's book is a good resource for spiritual directors who are seeking inspirational and practice ways to cultivate compassion. Though a Buddhist practitioner herself, she always translates everything she offers for people of all faiths and traditions. Her concrete portrayal of how to respond to the suffering of others is invaluable (54-59). Her core emphasis underlines what we already know as spiritual directors:

No matter how painful the circumstances, or how disturbing the physical appearance you will encounter, remember that your friend has, at the core of his being, an innermost essence of wisdom and compassion. Your role, then, is not to rescue him, or give him your solutions, but to help him recall and turn toward his own inner resources (56).

#### **D. The Capacity for Holding and Blessing**

“Holding is the foundation of Blessing”(Spangler *Intro.* 58). The act of holding generates blessing. It also creates a Space where love, comfort, healing and transformation are possible (59). One of Spangler's Basic Exercises is to sit down and physically experience being a Lap; one practices feeling how being a presence of peace, love and strength can be of service to others; how one's mind can “hold and be a lap;” how one can be grails and chalices for one's self and others; and how one's presence can hold and radiate blessing (60).

To be a grail or chalice for a dying person is something a spiritual director can consciously choose to do. The art and capacity to bless can be one of the finest ways a director can offer aid and sustenance at the end of life. To be able to rest in ‘a blessing place,’ as one struggles to come to terms with terminal illness or terrible loss; to know one has support and holding from another person all along the way; to be able to feel these energies of blessing

through the chaos and confusion of letting go of life is a gift indeed. Spiritual directors can be these “agents of blessing.” They can learn to create ‘containers of holding’ for the dying and their families.

The idea that one can ‘hold’ and ‘create containers’ has entered the collective field of consciousness more in recent times. These are concepts that many spiritual directors are using in their practice today. One ‘holds’ a directee in her spiritual inquiry or in her journey toward death. The concepts are also becoming part of our everyday language. “You didn’t have anyone holding you – that’s why it was so hard.” “I will hold the gathering.” And so on. This more common use of the word perhaps suggests that people are gradually and collectively opening to working more consciously with subtle energetic fields. Human beings have always operated energetically. But people are more articulate and more intentional now about such awareness and behavior.

Container is also a word used more often now. It is part and parcel of holding. “We don’t have a strong enough container to make that project happen.” “I felt safe because the container created was so powerful.” These are not physical containers but containers of energy one person, or a group of people, shape and form out of themselves and their own willingness, hard work, dedication, commitment and presence. When one holds and creates a container, one is keeping a task or a person in one’s heart and mind. One is consistently tracking, staying current, paying attention, remembering to show up. One is setting in motion and sustaining a certain energetic space that has a discernible shape and form that one can feel, and most important, another can feel and rest in. This is an incarnational act, for it engages one’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual bodies as a totality. One is being and creating what Spangler calls “a blessing place” (Blessing 248).

Spangler's definition of Holding as a foundation of Blessing supports a spiritual director to understand these concepts in even more refined energetic ways. Spangler unpacks what it means to hold and bless by describing each person's individual life and incarnation as a Cup and Space. The Cup is one's uniqueness, particularity, and personality and Space is one's universality, wholeness and sacredness. Spangler says that "the secret of (one's) sacredness" arises because "unique space has the capacity to hold the essence of wholeness, of all space"(18). "Cup serves Space. It incarnates Space. Space is the "Intelligence of Holding, of Love, of Roominess, of Spaciousness, of Possibility, of Growth and Evolution, of Emergence" (*Introduction* 19-20).

Many people are taught or believe that they are just Space, just Spirit. The importance of one's Cupness, one's personhood and personality is an essential focus of Incarnational Spirituality. This is analogous to Light being both Particle and Wave. This, to Spangler, is the Intelligence of Incarnation. And it is with the Intelligence of Incarnation that one holds and blesses others (*Intro* 20-21). A spiritual director stands in her unique individual strengths and gifts (Cup) and consciously partners with God and the Cosmos (Space) to hold and bless another in her unique gifts and difference as well as shared Sacredness (23).

To offer one's individual gifts as a source of the Sacred for someone while they traverse the rocky terrain of dying is an act of holding and blessing. Yet what does this really mean? It means discovering and standing in one's unique and individual way of helping others at the threshold of death. It means trusting that if one intentionally chooses to be an agent of blessing, one will be shown how one's individual gifts can become a chalice and vessel that are offered up in partnership with God or the Sacred. Such a co-creative act can become a director's

special way of serving the dying and their families in a field of Love and Inspiration (Spangler 23).

A personal example may be of help here. I know that the creative, ritual and threshold work I did as a festival maker for families and children for twenty years is part of the unique gift I now bring to my work as a death midwife and home funeral guide. My work with families who are losing a loved one draws upon all the skills and understanding I gleaned in those years: how to “hold” families and groups; how to listen at the gateways between the physical and nonphysical realms; how to co-create with the natural and archetypal worlds and to trust the potentials of that kind of alliance; how to bring art and beauty and ritual to nourish souls in a time of transition; how to create transformative experiences that help people grow, heal and feel more connected to each other. Helping families discern what is important to them spiritually when a loved one dies, accompanying them as they care for their own dead, and helping them create meaningful soul and spiritual rituals that offer true closure and an affirmation of life – these are some of the ways I can offer my own special incarnational gifts and blessings as a spiritual companion at death’s threshold.

### **E. The Capacity to Create Sacred Space**

When a spiritual director sits down with a directee and listens with an open heart to all she wishes to share, he is creating and inhabiting sacred space and time. Perhaps he lights a candle or rings a bell to begin their hour together. He invokes silence, to let the flurries and tensions of the day fall away. Together, the two relish the hush and ease of slowing their breath, quieting their minds, allowing voices from a deeper part of themselves to surface and be made known. Both know that this hour is different from the hours the directee has just spent getting the children to school, driving through rush hour traffic, going to the grocery store. This hour is

intentional sacred time, and the room where the two sit together is intentional sacred space. It has been crafted by the director, as an energetic and physical container of holding and blessing for the directee. It also becomes more sacred when the directee adds her own energies of listening and connection to the container.

When a spiritual director works with dying people and their families, he needs to expand the capacity to create sacred space to embrace environments and situations that are very different from the quiet small room where he meets one-on-one with directees every month. The director's understanding of creating sacred space needs to get larger and more flexible and immediate. She has to be able to walk in a room and intuit or know just how she can create a more calm and peaceful space when the caregivers are scattered and exhausted and have no time beyond meeting the sheer physical demands of the dying person, and when the bedclothes are tangled and dirty and the children are screaming in the next room.

Spiritual directors will need to practice discernment about what will and will not work, given the situation where they find themselves. Directors need to employ all the capacities discussed in this thesis – showing up; being present to what is; being a holder and agent of blessing; practicing not-knowing while at the same time gaining a concrete sense of what could shift the energy in a room to invite the tangible experience of the Sacred to be known.

Taking one's cues from the person one is accompanying is always the first doorway into this kind of discernment. It will not do to create something that does not feel authentic to the person and family. The Sacred needs to emerge from the specific incarnation and personal life choices of the dying person, or if one is not aware of those details, from the clues given to one by the family. The director learns to observe, ask questions and sense what is appropriate. He

practices holy listening and deep trust in the mystery of Spirit itself to bring what is needed into a room, gathering its rich expression from each and all who gather there.

Knowing how to create sacred space is a very physical, embodied capacity and art – an act of incarnation. It requires working with both physical and non-physical energies and moving between them with ease. Someone who has this understanding works consciously with the body and felt-sense of things as well as subtle energies. She is aware that her senses are the finest tools for perceiving what to do and how to proceed. She works with both outward attentive observation and an inward intuitive listening from the heart. Her awareness of others is heightened, and she can sense what might bring movement or shifts or flow of energy into a stagnant situation. She understands that the Sacred can be called and will often emerge out of these shifts and transformations, and she seeks to create a place, a container of space and time for that possibility.

For example: the simple act of cleaning a cluttered room, putting on some quiet harp music, inviting others to sit quietly instead of chatting – this change creates a holy pause. It awakens our senses and can transform a chaotic environment into one that feels peaceful, safe and contained. The Sacred can suddenly be heard, experienced, received. When one of my directees' mother died in a nursing home, we arrived in the early morning hours, bathed and anointed the woman's body, lit candles, placed rhododendrons all around the woman's bed, and put on beautiful music that filled the room with its soothing sounds. The caregivers in the nursing home had never seen anyone do these simple things to honor a mother's passing. One by one, they visited the room and lingered there, soaking in the energy and beauty and peacefulness. One nurse was so moved, she said she was going to try and do a similar thing for her mother when she died.

Those who work with sacred space and time learn to heighten their awareness of what disturbs and what nourishes the body and senses and emotions. People are so desensitized in this day and age that they hardly recognize how their bodies and energies are constantly being assaulted. For example, the persistent noise and glaring lights of a hospital room are not conducive to healing or peace or feelings of sacredness. Yet a few physical changes - like laying a beautiful quilt over a dying person and closing the door to the hall; bringing flowers to the bedside; the simple act of joining hands and making a circle around the bed - these simple adjustments can bring an element of calm and beauty into an otherwise sterile and nerve-racking environment. (Meg Anderson *Sacred Dying* 80).

Understanding the gifts and power of silence is important in this craft. Silence creates space, allows our senses to rest and be held so that our awareness can open and sharpen. Silence is healing and refreshing and allows us to deepen naturally, to listen below the flotsam and jetsam of normal life. One suddenly has the time and space to hear the Sacred, to notice its appearance in the room. It is difficult to find silence in hospitals, but there are ways to create a quiet energy by meditating in the room and consciously working with crafting a boundary of stillness around a person despite the noise.

Nature and the elements enliven a space, bringing more etheric life forces into a room. Such efforts are inherently healing and a source of comfort and nourishment. Lighting a candle can almost always shift energy. Opening a window so fresh air and wind can blow through can be very helpful. Having a bowl of holy water nearby can be used in many different ways to cleanse and bless a person or the room. The presence of flowers, plants, moss, ferns and green growing things also helps freshen a sick person's room, and brings beauty and aliveness to everyone (Anderson *Sacred Dying* 81).

Understanding how to create beauty is an integral part of creating sacred space. Creating an altar or a table and placing objects that are special to the dying person there can bring good energy into a room and serves as a focal point for people to gather or participate in a way that nourishes the patient. Natural light, essential oils, a voice singing, flute music drifting through the air - these can be wonderful aids in crafting holy space and time.

Beauty is a powerful pathway to the Sacred; it *is* the Sacred made manifest. It is often part of a person's Principle and Foundation. As John O'Donohue says in his book *Beauty, The Invisible Embrace*, when one is taken by the radiance of a sunset, or the dew on a leaf, "there is a sense of homecoming...we awaken and surrender in the same act...Beauty beings a sense of completeness and sureness...we can slip into the Beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient within us already trusts that this embrace will hold us" (2). It is hard to imagine a better way to help someone prepare for dying, to experience this "completeness and sureness," this "seamless embrace" that is there to hold and bless a person's way.

These ways of creating sacred space are actually ways to bring more aliveness and life force to the threshold of death, more ways to "re-source" others, to support them to open up to what they are experiencing rather than shutting down from resistance or fear. As John O'Donohue says so eloquently: "The wonder of the Beautiful is its ability to surprise us. With swift, sheer grace, it is like a divine breath that blows the heart open" (*Beauty* 7). When we experience Beauty, we feel more fully alive.

When my friend Cary asked to have a three -day sacred vigil for her husband Bob, I experienced directly how a shared collective creation of beauty, nature and aliveness at the threshold can open people up and soften their resistance, fear and avoidance of death. Two

fathers in the Waldorf community built Bob's pine coffin with tender care and reverence, and their creation was simple and elegant and full of love. We set up the lid of the coffin on a table in the kitchen, with paints and markers and ribbons, so all the children who came to the vigil could paint pictures and write messages to Bob on the top. Bob's daughter wrote on the lid all the ways he had taught her how to live, and painted a huge red flower of life in the middle of her words. The Waldorf teachers spent hours creating a stain glass scene of a sunrise on the windows behind where Bob lay in state. The sunlight poured through that window onto Bob's face, in vivid beautiful colors and warmth.

Abundant offerings from nature brought healing life forces and energy - fragrant evergreen boughs lining the coffin; daffodils perched jauntily behind Bob's ears; sap from his favorite tree placed lovingly on his throat by his daughter; stones from crop circles nestled in the folds of cloth; a single carnation, startlingly pink between pale and bloodless fingers. An array of candles offered their light and blessing. Each gesture was the response of someone's soul – their heart wish to soothe, their instinct to bring vibrancy and beauty to the wan, lifeless hues and waxy textures of death. These gestures, offered in so many ways, softened and eased the cold starkness and finality of Bob's crossing.

I was present in the room each day, and I experienced how healing and transformative such a sacred space and such beauty was for each who entered there. Many who came had never seen or been close to a dead body. I watched people open the side door and let themselves in slowly, hesitantly, breath held in, chest and facial features tight and contracted. Then the sheer beauty and soul of the space would embrace them. I heard gasps, sighs, as the space enfolded them, relaxed their tight stance, helped them breathe and feel free enough to walk forward. The

space invited authenticity and realness and embodied connection. It gave people permission to feel and be in their strongest and most alive experience of death's mystery,

The space also honored death's ordinariness. It was this ordinariness that seemed most profound to us. Children playing in the hall, running into the room, held suddenly by the silence and peace, coming shyly up to the coffin, staring intently at Bob - not retreating - curiosity and wonder overriding any hesitancy or fear. A deep sense of safety, revealed by the children's comfort ; the warmth of laughter and voices in the rooms above; the clink of dishes; a kettle whistling in the kitchen; someone weeping; a voice singing quietly in the corner. Strong feelings of sadness and grief were embraced and held by something greater – a tangible field of calm and deep acceptance. This is death, and it is a part of life - our lives right now in this house, this community. This is Bob's time and threshold. It is here now. We are here now – and all is holy.

Those who participated in Bob's vigil felt they were experiencing a re-imagination of what is possible at death's threshold. Not something new but reclaimed in this time, a fresh turn on an ancient spiral. Our primal fear of death lies beneath all of our resistances to life. Creating sacred space and bringing life, beauty and nature to death's threshold can be a powerful aid in transforming our denial and fears about mortality. Such sacred work helps us be more present and incarnated and we can more deeply participate and delight in the wonders of being alive.

## CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The gifts of spiritual direction are many at the threshold of death. Spiritual directors, in the very nature of their work and practice, have much to offer a dying directee as she faces the end of life. This thesis outlines how a training in spiritual direction can be translated into work with death and dying. It defines two main aspects of traditional training - Principal and Foundation and Desolation/Consolation - and how these apply to the transition journey. The thesis explores "Threshold Awareness" and how spiritual directors practice this art with directees in life and in the dying process. Such an exploration offers the opportunity to look more deeply at death's mystery, and what might be possible at death's threshold.

An underlying thread and emerging question in this thesis explores the potential present when a spiritual director can work from a grounded place that is rooted in the body and felt sense, and yet includes and embraces the non-physical, more subtle and multiple dimensions of the director's being and life. It also means paying attention and honoring the unique integrity and gifts of the dying person, and how that person's wholeness can show up as a tangible resource while facing the challenges of death's transition. Can death be a more resourced and fulfilling experience if approached in such a way- both for the person making the transition, and for those left behind? This thesis explores such possibility.

The thesis also emphasizes a need to re-imagine how death is viewed and experienced by most people today. It sets forth the possibility of bringing a greater lightness of being, more aliveness, beauty, connection and freedom to the threshold, as a radiant field of light and energy that can embrace and hold the challenging energies of suffering, grief and loss that will inevitably be there. Several ways of generating this greater lightness of being, this greater freedom, are explored. If a person can release obstructing thought forms and experiences as part

of his preparation, heal relationships and the past if possible, and find a sense of completion and closure before dying, he can make his crossing with more freedom and grace. Such healing work when someone is dying is ideal, but it is often not possible. Indeed, seen from this side of the veil, many deaths a spiritual director participates in will not fit the picture of a “good death” at all. A spiritual director can still strive to hold a lightness of being, a vibration of peace and even joy as a balance and gift, even if a person’s death is hard and fraught with negativity and suffering. She can also learn to trust that the wholeness of the dying person’s life and death have a hand in orchestrating what happens at the threshold.

Since such inner work is not easy, a director can find ways to prepare and help herself in this endeavor. Facing her own mortality, practicing dying everyday in little ways, and establishing a grounded meditative practice that connects the director to the wholeness of who she is as a human being become essential tools of self-care. She can recognize and draw upon the ecology and communities she is already engaged with – family, friends and caring others - as a field of life-giving positive energy and support. She can also engage more deeply and make new connections with the subtle dimensions of her own being and incarnation. This may mean establishing co-creative alliances with earth, nature and other intelligences beyond the physical and calling upon their aid when the gateway of death swings open. Such an approach can help the director develop and stand in the capacities she needs to handle the challenging energies of death’s threshold - holy listening, standing in a place of not-knowing, being present and mindfully aware, practicing equanimity and compassion, learning to hold and bless and to create sacred space.

Whenever a person is engaging in the wholeness of her being, she is of greatest service to others. If she is rooted in a living and co-creative connection to the Earth and the greater

ecology of life, she can draw upon this solace, healing and nourishment as she does her work. Such support is a tangible field of energy, a gift of Love. The sacred capacity to generate and be this Love lives within each human being and exists in the larger ecology of life itself. When a spiritual director stands at death's threshold, her capacity to be and to generate this Love is, in the end, the greatest gift and blessing she can bring.

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