



Selecting a Spiritual Director

By Julie McCarty

Ever think about hiring a personal trainer or coach—for your spiritual life?

“Spiritual direction,” the ancient practice of spiritual mentoring, can be a lot like working with an athletic trainer. Like fitness training, spiritual direction helps assess your current spiritual needs, set goals, and devise ways to “tone your spiritual muscles.” Meeting with a “spiritual trainer” once a month can keep you motivated on the spiritual journey.

The Origins of Christian Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction has a long history. In the early centuries of Christianity, when monasteries were evolving in the desert, novice monks were assigned to work with a particular “abba” (father) or “amma” (mother). The abba gave the new monk one-on-one instruction in developing his prayer life, overcoming sin, and increasing in virtue.

Although we might be tempted to think of spiritual direction as a practice for “spiritual pros” (professed religious and clerics), spiritual mentoring is also for lay people, whether they are on fire with faith or feeling spiritually flabby. Over the course of history, lay persons have often consulted a “soul friend” or revered spiritual father or mother about their spiritual life. In the Middle Ages, the Dominicans especially sought to bring the practice of spiritual direction to the laity. St. Ignatius of Loyola adapted the time schedule of his famous *Spiritual Exercises* so as to provide for the spiritual growth of lay people.

Contemporary Spiritual Direction

In the past century, there has been a rise in the number of lay persons participating in spiritual direction, both as “directees” and as mentors. Rather than command strict obedience, modern spiritual directors often view themselves as a soul friend, companion for the faith journey, or spiritual midwife. They guide others to grow in awareness of how God is already present and acting in one’s life. They help directees recognize how best to respond to divine initiative.

Selecting the best spiritual mentor for your own situation takes a bit of discernment. Like an athletic trainer, a spiritual director should have some training and experience. They should

know something about spirituality, prayer, and the art of spiritual direction. St. John of the Cross reminds us that they should also have some experience of the spiritual life themselves!

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Here are some practical tips for selecting a “personal trainer” for your soul life:

- 1. Pray to the Holy Spirit.** The Spirit of God is the real guide, both for you and your spiritual companion.
- 2. List your goals.** Do you want to learn a new way to pray? Do you want to work on healing past wounds, exploring your dreams, discerning a new vocation or career path, or overcoming a poor image of God? What do you hope to get out of spiritual direction?
- 3. Consider what qualities you’d like in a spiritual director.** Would you rather work with a man or a woman, someone old or young, someone living in the cloister or someone “in the marketplace”? Do you want someone who will push you to work hard or gently coax you? What other qualifications should he or she have?
- 4. Locate spiritual guides in your area.** Your church or diocesan office might be able to direct you to retreat houses, spirituality centers, or other places in your area that offer spiritual direction. Ask around.
- 5. Interview the perspective spiritual “coach.”** Ask what training he or she has in spiritual direction. How does he view the role of spiritual director? Does she specialize in any particular area (such as, midlife issues, Ignatian spiritual exercises, 12-step spirituality, grief work, or contemplative prayer forms)? How often does he like to meet? Are there any fees? (Fees vary, but often include a sliding scale.)
- 6. Go for “spiritual training” on a trial basis at first.** After a few sessions, think about how things are going. Does this person support you and yet also encourage you to “stretch your spiritual muscles”? Do you feel at ease talking with this person? Are you gradually moving towards your spiritual goals?

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