

# THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR AS HEART SPECIALIST

**Paul G. Mast**

I remember winter of 1996 not only because fifty inches of snow fell but because it was a time I learned so much about spiritual direction.

In January of that year I made a thirty-day Ignatian retreat at the Jesuit retreat house in the picture-postcard Portuguese fishing village of Gloucester, Massachusetts. I arrived in a snowstorm, left in a snowstorm, and experienced two snowstorms in between. I am not a fan of winter, and I was sorely tempted to relocate my retreat to Miami, Florida. I was overdosing on anger, feeding my addiction to impatience with the weather. My anger was making me deaf to the voice of God.

On the morning of the third day I decided to fake a prayer period in the chapel. The storm had abated during the night. I stood by a large bay window and looked out on a brilliantly sunlit scene: snow-capped rock formations along the shoreline, white-capped ocean waves beyond, wind-sculpted drifts of snow at the corners of the retreat house. I saw it all with new eyes and a sense of awe. It was a moment to savor, like the taste and aroma of good red wine.

As I turned to go back to my place, I caught sight of a vase of baby roses almost hidden next to the tabernacle on the shelf of the bay window. After an initial moment of surprise, I found myself talking to them. "Hello!" I said as if I were chatting to a person, "How long have you been here, and I never noticed you because I've only focused on the

raging storm outside?" Somehow I knew these roses were God's way of grabbing my attention. For a few minutes longer I pondered how I had failed to notice them because my focus was so narrowly locked on to the storm outside and the storm of anger brewing inside me. I spent the rest of the prayer period wondering what this inner awakening meant.

I shared the experience with my spiritual director in the afternoon. When the property was plowed later that day she drove into the village of Gloucester and bought me a long-stemmed yellow rose. She left it outside my room with a card saying, "Paul, may God use this rose to draw your heart away from outer storms so you can attend to inner storms." I placed the rose in its vase on the shelf in my room.

For twenty-seven days I watched it slowly and miraculously open. For twenty-seven days I watered it, talked to it and contemplated it. It became a spiritual metaphor for a radical new opening of my life to God. My inner life was beginning to quiet down. I soon felt more at home with myself even while storms raged outside.

Now, every January I have an anniversary ritual. I get myself a long-stemmed yellow rose. It helps to transport me back to Gloucester and to savor again the graces of that month of conversions. The rose reminds me to slow down, stop the multitasking and listen to my heart speak. January is the month when I celebrate the spiritual heart transplant I re-

ceived while on retreat in 1996.

My spiritual director was a heart specialist when I needed one. This yearly ritual is the equivalent of an annual check-up on what I learned from her about the spiritual director as a heart specialist. Here are some of the things I review:

The heart has the capacity to talk spiritually, and it talks in a variety of ways. What is happening in a directee's life affects the way the heart talks.

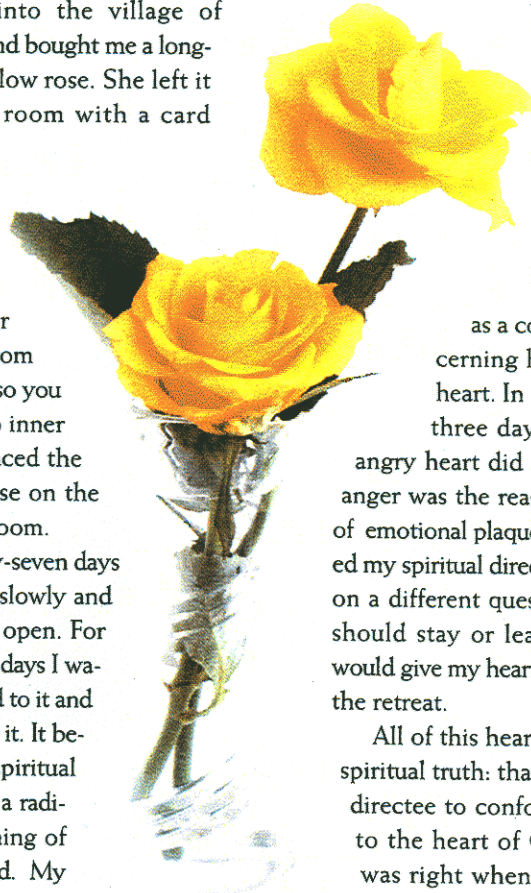
It will talk as a hurting heart if a directee is struggling with betrayal.

Other times it will talk as a shameful heart, burdened with regret. Sometimes it will talk

as a conflicted heart, a discerning heart, or a forgiving heart. In 1996 during the first three days of my retreat my angry heart did a lot of talking. My anger was the reason for the build up of emotional plaque in my heart. I needed my spiritual director to help me focus on a different question: not whether I should stay or leave, but to whom I would give my heart for the remainder of the retreat.

All of this heart-talking points to a spiritual truth: that of the desire in the directee to conform his or her heart to the heart of God. St. Augustine was right when he wrote that "our hearts are restless O God, until they rest in thee." Spiritual director and directee share a hunger for that divine, free heart. I know that because it is what connected me with my spiritual director on a level that helped me experience her as a heart specialist. She held my angry heart in great reverence, and with a sacred gentleness and skilled attention she worked away at the anger.

★ "To whom will I give my heart?"



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has spiritual meaning for a directee. It had deep meaning for me in January 1996. Before the "roses" intervention I had given my heart to the emotion of anger about being confined to the indoors. Without realizing it I was denying myself the oxygen of stillness and centeredness from which the graces of joy and contentment would be born. My heart ached because I was only feeding it

a negative diet. My inner life was as stormy and messy as the snowstorm outside. My spiritual director read my heart accurately after I shared the incident with the baby roses. Those roses and the movement away from inner conflict to contemplation triggered a form of conversion therapy that freed my heart to desire healing and to convert my energy into hope for more graces to come in the remaining

twenty-seven days. Her gift of a rose was more than just a thoughtful gesture to cheer me out of my dark sadness; it was her unique way of being a heart specialist to me.

The spiritual movement from inner turmoil to inner calm happens when a spiritual director acts as a heart specialist. Some of the miracles that can occur are helping a directee spiritually transplant old passive-aggressive behaviors with new honest behaviors, transplanting old insecurities with new strengths, transplanting old ways of avoiding inner demons with new ways of befriending them, transplanting anger at God with new ways of being vulnerable with God. These miracles happen when someone helps you ask the question, "What blocks my heart?"

★ Reverence stillness and silence in spiritual direction as much as talking and explaining and, as in my case, sometimes use roses. For people with an inner life there is more to life than talking things to death. In the words of Gandhi, for people with a spiritual life, "there is more to life than increasing its speed." The "more" hints at the search for the divine mystery hidden in all human experience. Mystery is meant to be experienced, not explained.

My retreat director enabled me to stay focused on giving my heart to God for the remainder of the retreat. She converted an experience into grace. Taking the roses from my story and enabling me to bring one into my room lured me away from the remaining snow storms outside and deeper into the mystery of the experience. It was that lonely, single stem of springtime beauty perched against the harsh winter landscape that drew me to a place inside where I discovered and nurtured a new desire to be still and quiet. Becoming one with the mystery had palpable effects: the narrative in my head changed, the beat of my heart changed, my focus changed. I found myself warming to a new desire to contemplate the revelations of God hidden in the gradual opening of the yellow rose in my room. Only later did I realize that by becoming

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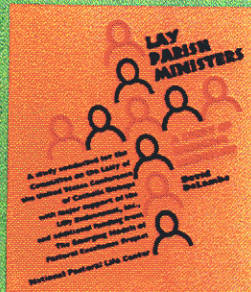
one with the mystery hidden in the rose I was becoming a heart specialist myself. It forever changed my style as a spiritual director.

Finally, the spiritual director as a heart specialist enables a directee to learn a new language. A spiritual heart whose arteries are clogged with guilt, shame, fear, worry, anger, hurt, etc., can be transformed into a heart beating with the spiritual graces of freedom from all those ills. A spiritual heart constricted by fear is free to hear the saving words, "Be not afraid" and to own and speak them. This new heart language nurtured in me a new desire for a more contemplative attitude toward life. It's like having an inner radar installed that connects the inner life with a human experience.

A recent television ad marketing Cheerios features a grown man as a parent stretched out on a sofa. His son, four or five, is lying atop his stomach. The boy looks at his father says, "I hear thump, thump, thump." The father smiles and says, "That's my heart talking." One of the many tasks of a spiritual director is to enable the directee to attend to the inner sounds of the "thump, thump, thump" so he or she can name and embrace the heart that is talking. I am a practitioner of that style of directing thanks to my heart experience of January 1996.

Let me speculate that the divine spiritual director intended the human heart to be the meeting place with all who are searching for the heart that makes all searching meaningful. A Google search shows that in the Hebrew Scriptures the word "heart" is found 975 times in 895 verses. In the Christian Scriptures it is found 170 times in 162 verses. That says something profound about God wanting to be found at the center of every creature's heart.

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