

# **Soul Friendship**

Spiritual Direction Training ~ Class Notes

Bill Gaultiere ~ [SoulShepherding.org](http://SoulShepherding.org)

Simply put a soul friendship is a mutual relationship between two or more people who share their hearts and lives with vulnerability and prayerfulness. (See my article "[Deep-Spirited Friendships](#)")

As always in life, our model is Jesus: his intimate relationship with his Abba and his friendships with his disciples (at least 120 men and women, not just the Twelve). As Soul Friends we are seeking to follow Jesus and organize our lives around his. (See my article: "[Jesus' Rhythm of Life.](#)")

## **Spiritual Longing**

In her group spiritual direction Julie reported: "It was... a place where I could talk about God and my relationship with Jesus. I discovered people like me — with yearnings and desires to grow spiritually." (Fryling, p. 13)

"A longing for a deep encounter with God has arisen out of the arid soil of knowing about God but having little personal, experiential knowing of him." (Benner, p. 13)

## **Two Problems**

(1) Some people want to meet with a Spiritual Director and can't find one. (2) Others find it intimidating. (Fryling, p. 7) For this reason the Soul Shepherding approach is to be open to putting spiritual direction ministry into an organic or pastoral context, like taking a friend out for coffee or sending them a note, "I've been praying for you. How are you?" Jesus invited people into soul friendship. We call this using "Zaccheaus radar." (Fryling, p. 7)

## **What is Spiritual Direction?**

"Spiritual direction is a way of companioning people as they seek to look closely, through the eyes of their hearts, at the guidance and transforming work of God in their lives." (Fryling, p. 11)

Fryling's testimony: "The effect of spiritual direction in my own life is that I have become less active but more effective, and more passionate but less driven. The Holy Spirit directs my life with a gentle, caring touch." (p. 14)

As I listen “I’m eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation” with God, (Fryling, p. 19)

Tilden Edwards (an Episcopal Priest, the founder of the Shalem Institute of Spiritual Direction, and author of *Spiritual Friend*) writes: “Being a spiritual friend is being the physical of a wounded soul... The physician does *not* heal. He or she provides the *environment* for the dominant natural process of healing to take its course.” (Fryling, p. 20) Soul Doctors specialize in creating this environment for healing.

“The intentional goal is to... become more aware of God in [our] lives, *for the sake of others*... it leads to a re-awakening of the soul.” (Fryling, p. 27)

“Spiritual direction is a one-on-one relationship organized around prayer and conversation directed toward deepening intimacy with God... Directors are not experts, nor do they direct... they journey with others who, like themselves, are committed to the process of spiritual transformation in Christ... They seek to help [their friend] discern the presence and leading of the Spirit of God...” (Benner, p. 17)

### **The History of Spiritual Direction**

When did spiritual direction begin? Many (including Fryling and Benner) cite the origin as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 3rd Century. But we see informal and organic spiritual direction/friendship throughout the Old Testament. Many Jews tugged on the sleeve of a Rabbi or spiritual mentor for care and guidance (Zechariah 8:23). In the forming of the Psalter there were music and prayer communities like the Sons of Korah who learned, shared, and taught the spiritual life. As Benner points out (pp. 62-63), the friendships of David and Johnathon and Ruth and Naomi are also examples.

### **The Nature of the Soul**

The soul is who we are. Gerald May (a Christian psychiatrist and spiritual director who lived 1940-2005) says the soul “reflects the essence of one’s existence... It is manifested through, rather than divorced from, body, mind, or any other facet of one’s being.” He adds, “There is an active life of the soul that goes on beneath our awareness.” (Fryling, p. 16)

“The soul... is not the technical concept of the theologian or philosopher... [It’s] persons in their depths and totality, with particular emphasis on their inner life.” (Benner, p. 15)

*The soul is shy.* Parker Palmer writes: “The soul is like a wild animal... it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around... [As Soul Friends] the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out!” (Fryling, pp. 19 and 21)

### **Practical Mysticism**

“Mystics commit themselves to the pursuit of a personal, experiential knowing of God, particularly the experience of union with God.” (Benner, p. 29) In a spiritual direction conversation we may talk about many topics, most seemingly “unspiritual”, but our experience of God (or lack of experience) is the ultimate focus.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941, author of the classic, *Practical Mysticism*) teaches three steps for growing in prayer:

1. Disciplining ourselves to pay attention to God’s presence (attunement)
2. Simplifying our lifestyle (discipleship in *the way* of Jesus)
3. Re-orienting our affections and will to God’s will (surrender)

Underhill defines *contemplation* as experiencing God directly rather than merely thinking about him. It’s an experience of sensation without thought. It’s a movement down from praying with our head to praying with our heart “in a loving attunement to God’s presence”. (Benner, pp. 29-30)

### **Three Goals For the Spiritual Journey**

1. Become a great lover of the God who loves us (attend to his presence)
  2. Become whole and holy (integrate all aspects of your humanity in Christ)
  3. Become your true self-in-Christ (move away from false attachments and false self)
- (Benner, pp. 32-39)

“Love is cultivated only in close soul relationships.” (Benner, p. 41)

### **Three Gifts of Spiritual Friendship**

In spiritual friendship what you do is secondary to *who you are*. “Being must precede doing... Spiritual friendship is... a gift of not doing — not interrupting, not attempting to solve problems, not prematurely or inappropriately advising, not assuming that what has worked well for us will work for others... [It] is a gift of hospitality, presence, and dialogue.” (Benner, p. 46)

### 1. The Gift of Hospitality

Soul friends cultivate a quiet place within themselves to receive others. “I cannot really be present for another person when my inner world is filled with preoccupations and distractions.” (Benner, pp. 46-47)

“Soul friendship is the gift of a place where anything can be said without fear of criticism or ridicule. It’s a place where masks and pretensions can be set aside.” (Benner, p. 48) It’s a place of grace, unconditional acceptance, gentle protection of weakness, and shared delight in authenticity.

### 2. The Gift of Genuine Presence

One author refers to presence as “soul atmosphere”. For each person this is unique. (Benner, p. 49) The soul is large and flowing out from our bodies. When people are in a place together they feel the vibe of each other’s embodied soul. Maybe even in a video conference or phone call! *Perhaps my soul (whole person) and your soul (whole person) are touching and flowing together right now!*

“Think how often you have been with people who appeared to be listening, but the sound of their own thoughts all but drowned out the presence they were attempting to offer. Perhaps it was the echo of their rehearsing what they would say next, or... the noise of their inner thoughts... You knew they were not fully present.” (Benner, p. 50)

“I can be present for another person only when I dare to be present to myself. And... I can be genuinely present to myself only when I can be genuinely present to God... It is simply being fully my authentic self and then setting this self aside as I seek to create a place within myself where I can receive another person.” (Benner, p. 51)

Being my true self includes feeling my emotions and inner being which I do by receiving empathy from a friend and from God. If we repress our emotions, negate our needs, criticize our weaknesses, or condemn our shortcomings then we’ll suffer from anxiety, distractibility, shame, and detachment. We will not have the capacity to be genuinely present to care for others.

### 3. The Gift of Dialogue

Dialogue is not chit chat, exchanging information, or debating — it’s personal conversation. Martin Buber famously called it an “I-Thou” encounter, not an “I-it”, encounter. It’s “seeing the other person through the eyes of Christ... seeing their worth and dignity... what they can become... I see Jesus in them...” (Benner, pp. 55-56)

Mother Theresa cared for the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. She looked into the face of each person she encountered and *saw Jesus*. She insisted this made it *easy to love* people who were shunned and despised by others. (Benner, p. 56)

### **Spiritual Direction Tips**

Here are some active listening prompts for guiding a Spiritual Direction conversation (largely inspired by Fryling, pp. 22-24):

- Consider opening with silence, prayer, or Scripture to provide a transition into a welcoming, safe, authentic, place. Personally, I prefer to warmly greet people and allow for a “warm up” that’s natural for my friend.
- Ask a general open question drawing out personal self-disclosure like “How are you?” You’re fishing for a specific, concrete life situation that has life significance to your friend or a theme that ties a few situations together.
- When someone shares something personal or deep that seems significant to why they’re in spiritual direction you might ask, “Could you say more about \_\_\_\_\_?” You’re drawing out more and deeper personal sharing, which is always spiritual even if God is not being named.
- Look for opportunities to reflect your friend’s emotions: “It seems you felt \_\_\_\_\_ a lot lately.” Use a specific emotion word and perhaps a magnifier to validate the size of the emotion. Aim for fresh words that go a little deeper into your friend’s emotions. *Use lots of feeling reflections!*
- After you’ve spent sufficient time empathizing, consider probing for your friend’s experience of God’s presence in their situation: “What do you think God is feeling about this?” Or “Do you sense any gentle nudges from God in this?” Or, “How might God be inviting you to respond?”
- Some people avoid silence by talking on and on! Why? Being quiet, especially with another person present, is intimate and evokes emotions. Some people feel awkward, anxious, ashamed, or isolated. Others just don’t know what to do with it and are waiting for you to talk.
- But silent pauses can be very important and helpful, particularly in spiritual direction. Try to discern what your friend experiences in these pauses. The silence is valuable and worth elongating if you’re friend is feeling emotion with grace or engaging with the Lord prayerfully.
- “Silence in the spiritual direction session can become a resting place where God’s Spirit whispers to our souls.” (Fryling, p. 23) For this to happen you need to be prepared to offer spiritual hospitality to your friend. You need to train your

bodied self to habitually tune into people's emotions and their connection to God's presence in the moment. This means practicing the presence of God (prayer) and practicing the presence of your friend (empathy).

### **Group Spiritual Direction**

Fryling introduced group spiritual direction ministry in her church by holding a class for those who were interested. She says it was like what a music academy is for musicians. (p. 27)

Here's the format of Fryling's spiritual direction groups:

- Begin with silence or a short meditation
- One member becomes the directee and shares for 5 or 10 minutes
- The group returns to silent prayer for a few minutes
- Group members can ask the directee questions
- The directee finishes sharing
- The group offers silent prayer for the directee
- Sometimes a second person takes a turn as a directee (pp. 26-27)

She also does Lectio Divina Groups. We have about 150 one page Scripture meditation guides on [SoulShepherding.org](http://SoulShepherding.org) that are great for introducing small groups the way of Christ-centered spiritual direction. (See "[Lectio Divina Guides](#)", "[Ignatian Meditation Guides](#)", and "[Experiences For Retreats and Groups](#)").

### **References**

*Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction* by Alice Fryling

*Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* by David Benner