

I needed more depth



When Jen Helmuth Sherk was a stay-at-home mom with young kids, she felt a kind of spiritual restlessness. She was an active and committed church member, but spiritual practices that used to be meaningful had become stale and dry. "It was like I was eating the same old meat and potatoes diet day after day after day, and I knew I needed something more.... maybe not more variety... but more depth."

Around her she noticed individuals who seemed to have a deep spirituality that she aspired to. In conversation, she heard them say things like, "I was talking about this with my spiritual director, and she said..."

Depth that goes beyond the circumstances

Jen reports that when she heard these insights, her response was "Oh, that's so wise... that's so powerful." And she concluded, "I want what they have. It wasn't like they had this perfect life, it was like, they have something that's grounded in them, I can just tell. Like they just had a sense of depth that went beyond circumstances."

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For Jen, finding her first spiritual director was easy because there was a woman in her congregation who had an excellent reputation as a director. They began meeting together and Jen found the structure and format different from any other relationship.

"It's such a natural deep listening," she said. "My spiritual director is completely focused on tending my spirit and that holy space. I can't think of any time that happens anywhere else. There really is no other time when people completely put aside their personal agenda and give you their undivided listening and

attention for an entire hour. That in itself is just such a holy thing. ... You can have supportive systems in place like family or friends, but a spiritual director can pay attention to what's underneath in ways that are so deep and so powerful that a friend or a therapist can't get to. A spiritual director keeps pointing you back to where God's spirit is already at work, helping you see where God is in the midst of what is happening within and around you. With a therapist, the focus is on you. With a spiritual director, the focus is on God **and** you-- together."

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Discerning a new vocation

Paying attention to what her soul was longing for eventually led Jen to a new vocation. "I was an elementary teacher. Once we had kids of our own, we decided I'd stay home with them. So that was my reality for six or seven years. But then once the kids started getting older and attending school, I felt this deeper spiritual hunger, and that's when I started meeting with a spiritual director."

So Jen's restlessness was both spiritual and vocational. "I started doing photography just as a hobby, and it turned into a business. That was nice for a time. It was a creative outlet that was really satisfying. As my photography business grew, at the same time I was becoming more involved in serving in the church, which I found deeply gratifying. My schedule was getting tight and I didn't have time to pursue both photography and church involvement to the same degree. In a meeting with my spiritual director, I asked her about this struggle. We

needed the income that my photography business was producing, but it wasn't feeding that deeper longing like the worship and the church work was. At one point I said to my spiritual director, 'I just wish I could do this church work stuff and get paid for it.' And she said, 'Well, why couldn't you?'

That had never occurred to Jen. Jen's spiritual director suggested she form a Clearness Committee to help her discern the next steps.

"For me, spiritual direction has always been a journey. I didn't come out of the Clearness Committee saying 'I'm going to be a pastor!' I came out of it saying, 'I'll just keep saying yes to the next right thing.'

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The next 'yes'

"The next 'yes' for me was serving on my congregation's Worship Committee, and then chairing that committee. Then I felt this pull towards seminary. So I took a class, and that felt right. While at seminary, I learned of an opening in a local congregation that seemed like a great fit. So I applied for it and now -- I'm a pastor."

"So it's not like I came out of spiritual direction with a clear set of steps to follow on my life path. But taking that next step of applying for the position and seeing my gifts in a new light was a very pivotal shift for me. And that was directly due to receiving spiritual direction. It's a continual journey."

"Don't forget who you are. Don't forget you are a beloved child of God. You are enough. God is with you."

Is spiritual direction only for people who might become a pastor? For Jen, the answer to this question is an emphatic "No!" She went on to explain, "I think anyone could benefit from that deep sense of awareness that God is in this space, with you, right now. It's such a natural deep listening."

Jen was reminded recently how important her monthly sessions are with her spiritual director when her director had to skip a month. "I can tell I haven't had that monthly check-in with her, because I just feel more agitated, and less grounded. With all of the usual distractions and the busy-ness of life, it can be easy to forget who we are created to be. Spiritual direction is a very powerful 'reset' of remembering who I am, and who God is."

Jen summarized spiritual direction like this, "It reminds me of when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness-- Jesus was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. I think that a spiritual director is one of those angels that attends us in the wilderness. They don't tame the wild animals, they don't remove the wilderness or make it all better. But they are the ones who bring us these messages of truth in the midst of it all: 'Don't forget who you are. Don't forget you are a beloved child of God. You are enough. God is with you.'"