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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION • VOL. 17, NO. 1 • MARCH 2011



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Music and Spiritual Direction • The Growth of Spiritual Directors International

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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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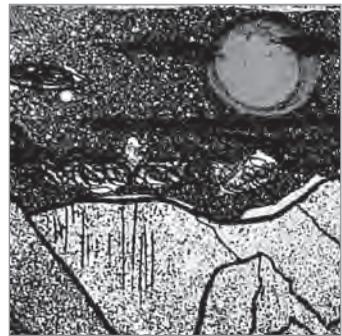
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A Call for Direction

Jade Angelica

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. (Heschel, 3)

The timing is always perfect!" proclaimed a woman at church during a presentation on her spiritual journey. Ah yes—God's timing. Her proclamation reminded me that God's perfect timing was, indeed, instrumental in the initiation and development of my practice of offering spiritual direction over the telephone.

During the summer of 2004, I was completing my first year of training in the Spiritual Guidance Program through the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland, USA. Throughout the training, I was required to work with two or more spiritual directees, and so, I was seeking seekers. At the same time, Ruth, a Protestant minister, was searching for ways to deepen her awareness of the Spirit working in her life and to explore her call as it related to her ministry. Ruth and I met at that specific moment in time. We discovered our complementary interests in spiritual direction and began to explore the possibility of walking together on the spiritual journey as spiritual director and spiritual directee—even though I lived in the state of Maine and she lived in Massachusetts (both USA).

Early in my learning about being a spiritual director, I realized that visual stimulation could be distracting. When meeting with spiritual directees at my home office, I noticed that I kept my eyes closed much of the time. With my eyes closed, it seemed easier to recognize the subtle movement of the Spirit and to hear what was most relevant. As Ruth and I discussed possibilities for spiritual direction, it occurred to me that since my eyes were closed anyway, it wouldn't really matter if we were in different states. And so we began our journey together in uncharted territory—the telephone.

The Shalem Institute did not validate my telephone spiritual direction. Although Ruth and I met every month and experienced our meetings as profound and enlightening, Shalem did not allow me to count her as one of

my official spiritual directees. Despite the absence of validation and encouragement from Shalem, Ruth and I considered our time together with the Spirit as worthwhile and rewarding, and our spiritual direction relationship has continued and flourished for more than five years.

Through many years of experience offering spiritual direction via telephone, focusing on sharing time rather than location, I have seen many benefits. At the same time, I have experienced challenges and learned many lessons. I begin with sharing the benefits and challenges, and I conclude with a description of the process.

Benefits

Saving Time, Money, and Energy

Spiritual journeys often include discoveries. In *The Sabbath*, Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel introduces some to and reminds others of the concept of finding God in "time." My telephone spiritual directees and I have come to know God's "realm of time" described by Heschel, and we have discovered that this realm of time can indeed transcend distance.

In 2005, I moved from Maine to live in the Boston, Massachusetts, area for two years. During that time, Ruth met with me at my home office only once. Even though she might have preferred being with me in person, the reality of a forty-five-minute, stressful drive through city traffic led Ruth to conclude that telephone sessions were still more desirable for her, even though we now lived in the same state. Other spiritual directees had similar stressful experiences traveling to meet with me in person. Because Mapquest.com's directions neglected to identify a crucial turn, Theresa, a new spiritual directee, was ninety minutes late for our first meeting. Although remarkably composed when she arrived, this was not a joy ride for her. I was still able to meet with her, and when at the end of our meeting I offered the option of telephone spiritual direction, Theresa responded with relief, "Yes! Thank you." Another spiritual directee once had to rent a car for our meeting because her husband needed their car that day. This added considerable expense and aggravation, and the very next month, she also chose to begin telephone meetings.



My telephone spiritual directees and I have come to know God's "realm of time" described by Heschel, and we have discovered that this realm of time can indeed transcend distance.

When I lived in Maine, my spiritual director was forty-five minutes away. She would not even consider distance spiritual direction, and so I traveled the distance. Once there was an ominous winter forecast, but because I did not want to miss my appointment, I had to drive home through a white-knuckle, teeth-clenching blizzard. When I moved to Massachusetts, my relationship with my Maine spiritual director had to end, and I felt adrift during a time of change and challenge. I finally connected with a spiritual director in Massachusetts who was an hour's drive away. One afternoon, as I crawled home in bumper-to-bumper traffic—doubling the time of my trip—I was involved in a car accident that still haunts me through higher car insurance premiums. Having endured my own experiences with stressful traveling for spiritual direction, I can appreciate my spiritual directees' desires and preferences for telephone direction and more fully understand the value of this option.

Nancy, a spiritual directee from Arizona, USA, chose telephone spiritual direction from the onset because of the obvious geographic distance between us. Instead of traveling, Nancy spends time before and after our telephone meetings reviewing and writing in her journal—a now cherished ritual. She describes this ritual as “peaceful and centering” and conducive to opening her heart to God. “I always visit my journal for some time as a way to reconnect to the Spirit. This enables me to be very present for direction and to never feel that I have simply made it to an appointment on time.”

Continuity

Because of the nature of our telephone relationships,

my spiritual directees appreciate another benefit of distance spiritual direction: the continuity of companionship on their journeys. Like therapeutic relationships, spiritual direction relationships tend to ripen and deepen over time. The mysterious workings of the Spirit are revealed in God's time, and the continuity of the relationship between spiritual director and spiritual directee over time can foster this revelation in a way that has nothing to do with proximity.

In 2008, I moved to Iowa, USA, to be a companion and advocate for my mother, who has Alzheimer's disease. I offered to refer all of my Massachusetts spiritual directees to local spiritual directors. By this time, most of my spiritual directees had already chosen telephone spiritual direction, and therefore, without hesitation, they all decided to continue our meetings via the telephone.

After several months of telephone meetings for spiritual direction, Theresa accepted a call to ministry that would move her to an international location. She asked if I would continue as her spiritual director, specifically citing continuity as the motivation for this request. At a time when everything in her life would be new, Theresa felt that maintaining her relationship with her spiritual director would be highly beneficial. This was a remarkable request because at first Theresa had told me she was “very skeptical about the idea of having a meaningful spiritual relationship over the telephone.” She supposes that our first meeting “in the flesh” helped in the later development of our relationship. Theresa and I have had telephone meetings now for more than three years. We met consistently even when she traveled across the United States before her move and when she visited with



[She] associated the word "burnt" with pain, damage, destruction. But as she entered the dream landscape more fully, she found the burning was a liberation from the material realm, allowing a transformation into spirit, a release of essence, and a return to God.

family in Europe. Perhaps because of her initial skepticism about telephone spiritual direction, Theresa is both surprised and grateful to report that the relationship between us has “deepened beyond anything I could have imagined, and has been extremely important to my spiritual development.”

Shortly after my move to Iowa, a number of seminarians from Massachusetts who had participated in spiritual direction groups I had led at their seminaries tracked me down in Iowa and asked if I would be available for individual spiritual direction via telephone. Although there are many spiritual directors in Massachusetts, for various reasons these seminarians felt guided to continue meeting with me. The recognition, connection, and trust that we had developed mattered more to them than where I was located.

There perhaps comes a time in any healing relationship when “fresh eyes” or a different perspective may be useful. However, if a spiritual directee has developed trust with a specific spiritual director, the potential for this trust to aid in deepening the connection with the Spirit need not be lost through distance or relocation.

Bridging the Gaps

Over the past two years, more spiritual directees from all over the United States and around the world have found me through the website for the Unitarian Universalist Spiritual Directors’ Network (www.uusdn.org). Many of my spiritual directees are Unitarian Universalists (UUs), but not all. Because of our pluralistic approach to spirituality, many UUs prefer to work with a UU spiritual director. This is a geographic

challenge because there are only sixty UU spiritual directors scattered throughout the United States and Canada, and only one in Great Britain. Telephone direction can bridge these particular gaps as well as other types of gaps. One of my telephone spiritual directees lives in a rural area. The nearest spiritual directors of any denomination are at a retreat center more than 100 miles from her home. The telephone can carry our ministry to people who cannot otherwise participate in spiritual direction. Physically disabled people and others who have difficulty traveling will be grateful for the option of telephone spiritual direction. One of my spiritual directees suffers from multiple chemical sensitivities and cannot risk exposure to chemicals or fragrances in unfamiliar environments (e.g., public restrooms or office buildings). He had to discontinue his journey with one spiritual director because of toxic cleaning products used in the convent. Telephone spiritual direction is a godsend for him and others with limitations.

Consistency

Since entering spiritual direction as a spiritual directee in 1999, it has become an essential part of my life. Like most spiritual directees, I meet with my spiritual director monthly. I look forward to my meetings, and I prepare reflectively. If a meeting has to be cancelled or rescheduled without much notice (because of weather conditions or sickness), I feel disappointed—even more so if I have to wait another month for an appointment. For us to be optimally effective in spiritual direction, being consistent with monthly meetings is important.



Telephone meetings facilitate consistency for my spiritual directees. Weather conditions are never a concern; even sickness need not deter our meetings. Both my spiritual directees and I have been sick on the days of scheduled meetings. Shortly after I moved to Iowa, I was sick with the flu for three weeks. I had spiritual direction meetings scheduled during this time, but influenced by Thomas Keating's opinion that centering prayer can be done even while we are sick, I chose not to cancel or reschedule my spiritual directees. However, I did make one accommodation. Instead of sitting in the chair I use for prayer, meditation, and spiritual direction, I lay on my bed—eyes closed as usual. These meetings went exceptionally well. Reflecting on this somewhat surprising discovery, I came to realize that illness makes us more vulnerable than usual and thus more openhearted and less prone to intellectualizing and defensiveness.

Spiritual directees have also chosen to meet with me when they are ill. They report feeling the same vulnerability and resulting openness to the Spirit. They were not too sick to call me, but if they would have had to get dressed, leave their homes, brave the elements, walk, take public transportation, or drive somewhere, they would have cancelled. The deep meetings with the Spirit that have happened from that vulnerable place, partially induced by sickness, would have been missed.

Familiar and Comfortable Settings

Sarah, another spiritual directee who lives hundreds of miles from Iowa, is in the formation process in the Episcopal denomination and needed a spiritual direction relationship as a requirement for one of her seminary classes.

From the beginning, Sarah felt comfortable with spiritual direction sessions over the telephone. She said, "This process allows me to remain at home during the session, where I have the security of familiar surroundings." Lily, an interfaith spiritual directee from Colorado, USA, feels

that being in her own home makes it easy to "just be [herself]." When I facilitate spiritual direction meetings, I am also in my home, in my sacred space—the space where I pray and meditate daily, the space where I meet the Spirit. When spiritual directees participate in telephone spiritual direction, they essentially invite me to be with them and the Spirit in *their own sacred spaces*. This continuity of place for spiritual directees enhances their experiences of safety in a process requiring risk.

Nancy feels that our time together in spiritual direction is "very connected" but also "private and safe." She is settled in her own sacred space (sitting in her grandmother's favorite chair, with her dog at her feet, looking at her own meditation patio). Nancy acknowledges that although she has her "guard up" a lot of the time, she can be "authentic" in her own home. She is convinced that experiencing telephone spiritual direction within the safety of her own space allows her to "break down a few stubborn walls and share more openly" with me. Nancy entered telephone spiritual direction out of necessity. She felt guided to connect with me though I am nearly two thousand miles away from Phoenix, Arizona, USA. A year later, Nancy states that telephone spiritual direction is her preferred process.

Spirit as Spiritual Director

According to Thomas Merton, spiritual direction is, "in reality, nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey the real spiritual director—the Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our soul" (39). My spiritual directees are stunningly open with me—as Merton claims spiri-

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tual directees must be—allowing me to know their “real” selves. By revealing their truths to me, they cast “big shadows” for the Spirit to move in (Rilke; see sidebar). According to Sarah, Lily, and Nancy, distance spiritual direction has actually enhanced their ability to be open with me, consequently enhancing their readiness for connection with the Spirit.

A “highly visual person,” Sarah describes herself as “prone to over-reliance on visual cues during social interactions.” Were we meeting for spiritual direction in person, Sarah admits she would be watching my facial expressions and body language, trying to determine my reactions. “On the telephone,” Sarah says, “when I am unable to see the other person, I’m forced to pay closer attention to the actual words being said, the emotional, psychic undercurrents of the conversation, and most importantly, the spaces between the words.”

One of the goals of a spiritual director is “to get out of the way” in order to make the path clear for the Spirit to enter and work. As carefully and as conscientiously as I can, I monitor the possibility of intrusion by my own emotional or ego reactions in the spiritual direction rela-

tionship. However, Sarah’s self-awareness points out that just as spiritual directors are reading the body language of spiritual directees for unspoken reactions, spiritual directees could also be reading and responding to our unspoken reactions. Sarah has helped me see that removing the physical presence of the spiritual director can, in some spiritual direction relationships, increase rather than decrease the potential for guidance by the Spirit.

Challenges

There are challenges in any spiritual direction relationship. Some become greater in telephone spiritual direction; some are specific to telephone spiritual direction. All of the challenges need attention in order for the experience of telephone spiritual direction to feel comfortable and successful for both spiritual directee and spiritual director.

Mutual Relationship

I believe it is the presence of the Spirit at work *in between* spiritual director and spiritual directee that facilitates awareness, growth, and healing. Developing a relationship that invites the Spirit to enter and work is the challenge of any spiritual direction process.

Angela, a Protestant seminarian living hundreds of miles from Iowa, “initially had doubts about spiritual direction via telephone.” As she accurately describes, “many things had to fall into place for us to work together.” This felt very “Jungian” to Angela, and she liked these mysterious movements of God—which eventually paved the path for us to work together in spiritual direction. After six months of meeting, Angela feels “we have managed very well.” We both attribute this to her sincere motivation for being in spiritual direction. A mutual trust and respect has grown between us that is palpable over distance and telephone lines. Angela acknowledges that developing a mutual, trusting relationship over the telephone might not be possible in every situation—and then she adds the real truth of any spiritual direction relationship: “It might not happen face to face either.”

Clues about safety, connection, and respect may not be as obvious over the telephone as they would be in person. Spiritual directees and spiritual directors who are paying attention can and will sense comfort or discomfort, connection or disconnection, the presence or absence of the Spirit.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don’t let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand. ■

— Rainer Maria Rilke



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Respect, trust, and mutuality *can* develop through a telephone relationship when both spiritual director and spiritual directee are being truly authentic, present, and reliable. Spiritual directees will know if they are being “seen” in a soul sense, even if they are not being seen physically. They will notice if they are being “heard into being” by a spiritual director who views listening as holy and understands his or her role as one of “midwife to the soul” (Guenther, 81).

Spiritual directees and spiritual directors often initially meet for three sessions in order to discern the mutuality of the relationship. I follow this same process for telephone spiritual direction. In all spiritual direction relationships, the spiritual director and spiritual directee must continually discuss how the process is going. Therefore, I offer an evaluation process to all spiritual directees every six months. The distance provided by the telephone may actually give spiritual directees who are challenged by confrontation the courage to speak about fears and hurts they would not feel safe revealing in person. I have found that the evaluation process’s honest sharing and taking of responsibility by both spiritual director and spiritual directees can strengthen and deepen the relationship.

Listening

In a recent conversation with Liz Ellmann, MDiv, of Spiritual Directors International, she described the ministry and service of spiritual direction as “a *listening* experience; one which takes us deeper into the holy.” For me, the listening process of spiritual direction includes recognizing the reflection of God in my spiritual directees; it is about seeing and knowing them “not as [they] are in the eyes of [others], or even as [they] are in [their] own eyes, but as [they] are in the eyes of God” (Merton, 39). What spiritual directees choose to share will be the guideposts for us to learn about them and about God.

The most common objection I have heard to distance spiritual direction is that the things spiritual directees *do not say*—the things they do not consciously reveal with words but communicate through facial expressions, body language, and their energetic auras—are critical to the spiritual director’s process of knowing and connecting. During my first in-person meeting with Carrie, the importance of body language rose to the surface of my awareness, but not in the same way others consider

important. Carrie’s pattern for covering upsetting feelings is to appear positive and smile through it all. This positive energy is so powerful and her smile is so radiant and infectious that one could easily conclude that all is well with her. Carrie’s body language and facial expressions are a way she protects herself and others from the truth of her deeper thoughts, feelings, hopes, and challenges. During our first meeting at my home office, I was influenced by Carrie’s smile and her upbeat presentation—until I closed my eyes. Without the visual distraction, I quickly realized that her words were not consistent with her physical presentation, and I could hear something different beneath her smile and even beneath her upbeat words. I sensed the real emotion and responded in a way that invited Carrie to reveal her truth.

In my role as spiritual director, I aspire to listen in the way Arthur Ciaramicoli, EdD, PhD, describes in *The Power of Empathy*: to hear “beneath the surface,” to hear one small point that will facilitate an opening for the Spirit to enter. Removing the surface of facial expression and body language has enhanced this process of holy listening for me. I specifically listen for repetition, changes in emotion, catches in the voice, a hesitation, any change in inflection that might indicate tears welling. The “gift of tears” is the one movement of the Spirit I miss not being able to visually witness. However, I often sense it, and I often experience the tears myself. If I suspect churning emotions, I will ask how a spiritual directee is feeling, and often he or she reports being teary. Other times a spiritual directee will offer unbidden, “This makes me cry.”

In my experience, the energy of my spiritual directees transmits over the telephone. I easily sense if they are calm or frantic, happy or sad, within their first few words. I now even sense if Carrie is hidden behind a smile.

Practical Aspects

The practical aspects of every spiritual direction relationship, such as scheduling appointments and collecting payment, take on a new dimension in the context of telephone spiritual direction.

Scheduling appointments happens smoothly enough, but *remembering* telephone appointments can be a challenge for me as well as for some spiritual directees. For some reason, a telephone appointment does



“Come Explore” — Laurel Genteman

not have the same kind of priority in my memory as does an appointment that requires me to get ready and go somewhere. Although spiritual directees miss and forget appointments for all kinds of reasons (including resistance to the process), some have joined me in the struggle to remember telephone appointments. Through deliberate effort, we have all managed to find various techniques for consistently remembering our telephone meetings. I write them on the calendar in my kitchen using red ink.

Time zones present another scheduling challenge for telephone spiritual direction. Because my spiritual directees live in five different times zones, both clarity and diligence are required to ensure that we hear and schedule the time appropriate for our own zone. For our first appointment after Theresa moved overseas, she called me at 3:30 a.m. my time instead of 3:30 p.m. She was mortified. Having

already experienced a number of time zone mishaps, I was amused and able to relieve her distress by laughing.

Remembering to pay for telephone meetings can be challenging for some spiritual directees. When spiritual directees attend in-person sessions, most easily remember to write a check before they leave; or if they forget, the spiritual director can remind them. It is easier for spiritual directees to forget to pay for meetings when they are not doing it at the meeting. One spiritual directee in particular was always changing appointments, always late, and always forgetting to send a check. Repeatedly having to follow up with her about payment became so aggravating that I had to terminate our spiritual direction relationship. After this experience, I developed guidelines for lateness and sending payment. I discuss this information with potential spiritual directees and review the guidelines with all cur-



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rent spiritual directees during evaluations. Occasionally, even reliable spiritual directees forget to send payment, but a gentle e-mail reminder usually remedies the omission immediately.

Disturbances to a telephone meeting can more easily happen because spiritual directors and spiritual directees are in their own homes rather than in a different setting such as a retreat center. In the home setting, spiritual directees may have pets or young children. I always ask that children be attended to by another family member during spiritual direction meetings, and I ask that pets, if they are disruptive, be in another room. Sometimes spiritual directees prefer to have their calm pets with them, which can be lovely. Other disturbances can also occur: mail carriers or neighbors ring doorbells; a spouse knocks on the door, unaware of the scheduled meeting; a persistent caller continues to beep into the dialogue through call waiting. Disturbances are even more likely if spiritual directees call from their place of work. Such events happen rarely, but when they do, we have always managed to reengage in the process by moving back into centering silence for a time and deliberately reconnecting to each other and the Spirit.

Telephone technology presents its own challenges. Mobile telephones do not always provide clear connections, so I prefer landlines, if available. If a spiritual directee does not have an unlimited long-distance plan, I initiate the call. When talking on the telephone, I use a headset so my hands are free and I feel relaxed physically; I recommend this to spiritual directees as well. When we begin our meetings with silence, some spiritual directees who do not use headsets put the receiver down for comfort, and others turn on the speakerphone (occasionally disconnecting us in the process). Sometimes the long-distance connection is filled with static; when this is the case, we hang up and start over.

The greatest telephone technical difficulty has happened only twice. In the middle of a meeting, the call was disconnected. At first, this unexpected circum-

stance caused confusion, but now, with awareness of this possibility, we can be prepared. If it happens, my spiritual directees and I have agreed that whoever initiated the call will call back. The other practices trust and patience by waiting.

Like therapeutic relationships, spiritual direction relationships tend to ripen and deepen over time.

Technical difficulties have caused very little disruption to our meetings, showing my spiritual directees and me that our connection with each other and the Spirit can transcend distance *and* technology.

Physical presence in spiritual direction may be more desirable, but because it is not always be possible, we can compensate for the separation. I

ask all of my spiritual directees to send me a photograph, which I keep in front of me during our sessions and during my daily prayer for them. Those I have not met in person have at least seen my photograph on the Internet, so we are not physically mysterious to each other. To enhance our visual connection, spiritual directees often e-mail me other photos taken of ordination ceremonies, new homes, family members, and pets.

When we begin our meetings, I often ask spiritual directees to describe where they are in their homes and what they see in the space or through the windows. Through this process, I learn more about them, both by what they choose to share and by visualizing what they describe in their surroundings. This has inspired a few spiritual directees to rearrange their spaces to enhance the view outside; others have been inspired to create altars; and others have been motivated to clear their spaces of clutter.

The Process

I conduct telephone spiritual direction exactly as if I were meeting with a spiritual directee in person. Sometimes we begin with a brief, unstructured “how are you” greeting, both sharing some highlights. This is important for nurturing our relationship, but if it is not monitored closely it could consume the entire meeting time. After the brief check-in, I guide my spiritual directees into five minutes of shared silence. They can count on me to gently end this



informal time and move into the process of formal spiritual direction. Sometimes we begin immediately with the shared silence. The needs and preferences for how to begin vary from person to person and meeting to meeting, and I remain attentive to what is needed in any given moment.

A colleague who also is a spiritual director expresses disbelief when I say that my spiritual directees and I spend five minutes of silence together—*on the telephone*—at the beginning of our meetings. It's true. We do, and spiritual directees respond positively and appreciatively. This is how I was trained to begin in-person spiritual direction sessions, and there is no reason to conduct telephone sessions any differently.

As one who appreciates the feeling of safety resulting from ritual, I use the same words at every meeting for guiding us into silence, and then I read a prayer, poem, or other reading chosen for a particular spiritual directee. I ring a chime to begin and end the silence, inviting spiritual directees to begin speaking—when they are ready—about whatever they feel inspired to share. To keep focused on the process of noticing the Spirit throughout the meeting and not allow talking to carry the experience into a regular telephone conversation, I often ask spiritual directees to pause, to breathe, to visualize, to notice bodily sensations, and to spend more time in silence with the Spirit as we pray for guidance and clarity.

I make an effort to keep our meetings to the scheduled hour, but they sometimes go longer by ten or fifteen minutes. Spiritual directees often express gratitude for these extra minutes of my time, which I am happy to give in order to facilitate a gentle completion process. Because spiritual directees cannot see my body language that might give them clues that our meeting is nearly over, I am explicit with words. "We are nearly out of time." It has become a cherished practice for me to close our meetings by asking spiritual directees to summarize our time together with the Spirit by creating a breath prayer. We both commit to saying this prayer each day.

We try to schedule our next meeting before ending the call because it gets more complicated when scheduling has to be done by e-mail.

After in-person sessions, I walk with spiritual directees to my door, and if inspired and welcomed to do so, we give each other a warm hug. I miss this possibility with telephone spiritual directees; however, our partings always include warm wishes and many blessings.

At the end of every one of my meetings with my telephone spiritual directees and the Spirit, I notice and acknowledge how much love I feel for the spiritual directee—*every one of them*—with whom

I have just spent time. I cannot imagine receiving any more nourishing "fruit." It is this feeling of love flowing through me that inspires me in my unconventional practice of distance spiritual direction. For me, flowing love identifies a holy connection. Across distance, through the telephone line, I have truly met another soul, and we have shared time together in the presence of the Spirit. ■

Note: All references to and comments from spiritual directees are printed with permission. Their names and identifying circumstances have been changed to protect their privacy.

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