Serving Spiritual Independents: Companionship without Bias

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The religious landscape of America—and the world, for that matter—is rapidly changing right before our eyes as a growing number of individuals no longer identify with traditional religions. As spiritual directors, caregivers, and ministry professionals, are we adequately prepared for this change? More specifically, do we have the necessary tools, skills, open-mindedness, and heart space to serve these seekers well? Let us explore these vital questions and seek to discover a way that we, individually and collectively, might step toward a charism of presence—one that is devoid of judgment, comparison, and expectations about how we can view and ultimately companion seekers who have been most popularly designated *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR).

The term *spiritual but not religious*, according to John Mabry, editor of *Spiritual Guidance across Religions*, was first brought to public awareness by the Gallup Poll of 2003, an early attempt to illuminate the religious orientation of Americans. The term appears to have caught on because it has become part of the vernacular. Additional classifications have emerged in the last two decades to describe this ever-growing trend of Americans who refrain from holding membership in a specific religious community or being held to a nameable religious view (Mabry, 384).

The Pew Research Center in its "Religious Landscape Study" has chosen to use the terms *unaffiliated* or *religious nones*, indicating the suitable boxes to be checked by someone who fits this description. The second of these terms, *none*, has fallen into colloquial use as *the nones*. A third designation has emerged—*spiritual eclectics*—used primarily by the founders of the Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley, California, USA (Mabry, 384). And then there are the most controversial of all—*the unchurched* or *the unreached*.

The Pew research on nones is important to note as it pertains to conversation about SBNR individuals. The results are significant and, since they are, we are invited into a deeper conversation about how best to provide spiritual guidance and support to this diverse segment of the American population.

> By 2015, a new Pew survey marked a further uptick in unaffiliated Americans to nearly 23%. A full 35% of American adults under age 30 are unaffiliated. This newly reported increase in unaffiliation outpaced a projection by Pew only a month earlier that suggested the rate of unaffiliation in North America would reach nearly 26% by 2050. Clearly, Nones are the overachievers of the US religious landscape. (Drescher, 6)

In 2017, the Pew survey reported higher numbers yet: 27 percent of Americans surveyed claimed no religious affiliation. (No statistics on SBNR populations worldwide are available as of this writing.) This change in the American religious landscape is having a palpable effect upon religious organizations, churches, and temples, in terms of participation, as well as human and financial resources. And the dramatic rise of nones and unaffiliateds in the past fifteen years will continue to escalate according to the Pew report's findings.

The Issue before Us

One of the foremost issues presented to us as spiritual directors is how to acknowledge, name, and describe this growing group of seekers without bias. It is vital that we transparently examine how we are using these commonly held terms (NBSR, nones, unaffiliated, unchurched, and spiritual eclectics) to describe a group of people who are, factually, nonhomogeneous. The ways in which we describe them often utilize sweeping generalities, reflecting personal bias within the label itself. By applying such labels to members of a nongroup—individuals who do not seek to define themselves at all—we act disrespectfully. This could be perceived as a form of "spiritual profiling," and one that slants public perception in a detrimental way.

As a spiritual director and educator with an interfaith and interspiritual ministry, and as someone who falls outside the "traditional," I began to notice that these

terms did not adequately describe me or my spiritual persuasion. More than that, they did not make me feel good about myself or my choices, as if, by the very designations themselves—NBSR, none, eclectic—I was found lacking or missing something in comparison to the mainstream. I have received similar responses from the individuals I companion in spiritual direction. Many admitted that they felt uncomfortable, sad, or angry that a label was being placed upon them at all. Indeed, in many situations, it was a classification perpetuated by the very people or organization they could no longer affiliate with, as in the Christian usage of the term *unchurched.*

Each of these aforementioned designations can be perceived as negative and do not, in my view, foster the highest purpose of spiritual companionship: to be with, support, and bear witness to a seeker's inner journey with the sacred in a nonjudgmental, compassionate way for the highest good of the individual. For example, if we label someone as *unchurched,* the underlying assumption is that it is best for her to belong to a Christian church. *Spiritual but not religious* could imply a preference that an individual follow one path over another; that she is somehow missing the mark by adopting a solo spiritual path over a preferred traditional approach.

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Usage of the term *spiritual eclectic* presents its own difficulties. Despite the fact that the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2017 ed.) defines *eclectic* as "selecting what appears to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles" or "composed of elements drawn from various sources," the common usage may be quite different. *Eclectic* can be perceived as strange, ungrounded, or unbalanced.

In *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Life of America's Nones,* Elizabeth Drescher makes the case that identifying individuals as nones may be more ineffective than we realize, and I concur.

> The tremendous diversity of self-identification of American Nones is among the most difficult thing for commentators—academic, journalistic, and religious alike—to grasp about a demographic category that does not, in fact, describe a distinct social group. "None" is a "negative definition." It describes people who do not identify as belonging to a specific group, who are not affiliated with one institutional religion or another. It was thus not surprising that nearly all of the people I interviewed for this book at one point or another mentioned ... a discomfort with the labels, and the practice of labeling itself, as opposed to ways of understanding the religion and spirituality of individuals or groups. (Drescher, 5)

Being labeled as *none* may be disarming to a seeker who wishes to pursue an independent path because *none* may imply "nothing." A deeper conversation with this individual might reveal that he does *not* believe in nothing. In fact, the opposite may be true. He may be quite inclusive, embracing a wide array of beliefs, rituals, and practices and, by doing so, is hoping to create a spiritual life that is nourishing and sustainable. The irony of identifying someone as *none* is that we may miss seeing the fruit of his passionate search altogether—one of moving beyond borders, boundaries and labels, and dualism—possibly even knowing a genuine experience of Oneness, which is the ultimate goal of all religious endeavor.

Yet, the most harmful result of utilizing potentially negative categorizations like *nones, SBNR, unchurched,* or *eclectic* is that doing so can damage the way the seeker regards herself. This label can be experienced as a brand, an identifying mark that conveys the message, "You are not like us." This can create an avalanche of troublesome feelings within the individual, including being dismissed by the mainstream and feeling voiceless, devalued, alone, and isolated. These labels, which we hope will help us know how to relate to a person of such inclination, can backfire, leaving the hurtful impression of having been judged and found wanting. Judgment separates us out from one another, implying "my way is

the best way." His Holiness the Dalai Lama encourages us to leave labels behind for this very reason, especially when it comes to religious designation. He has said (and I paraphrase), "I call myself a simple monk. If I were to call myself a Buddhist, I will have separated myself out from you."

Granted, we need terms to talk about things. It is helpful to categorize data, characteristics, and behaviors so we can better understand what we are talking about. When it comes to people, however, it is far too easy for personal bias to leak through because language has its limitations. I propose if we absolutely must create a category for those who do not fall into the traditional perimeters we have placed around religion, that we consider the term *spiritual independents.*

This term was brought forward by Rabbi Rami Shapiro in his book *Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent: Sacred Teachings—Annotated and Explained.* He describes spiritual independents as "people who share the same existential questions as almost every other human being but do not confine their search for answers to any one religion" (Shapiro, xiii). A spiritually independent person could, therefore, seek answers within or outside of any given religious, spiritual, or ethical tradition.

Additionally, the notion of *spiritually independent*, rooted in the concept of independence, does not create an emotional tremor. In fact, independence is widely encouraged in all aspects of human endeavor. The United States itself was built upon the foundational principle of independence. That nation has independent voters and does not deter them from casting their vote with due conscience. Why not spiritual independents then? And why not offer them a wide berth, along with encouragement, to follow their spiritual hearts?

The Invitation

Individuals with diverse spiritual views are excellent candidates for spiritual direction for the reasons stated above. In fact, many are seeking empathy and support for these very reasons. They may feel uncertain, lack confidence, or feel alone or misunderstood by their peers and families. In my private contemplative practice of spiritual companionship, many have confided to me over the years, "I have no one I can talk to about this." They feel isolated yet often long for an accepting community. They have experienced rejection, even disdain, by family members who do not understand their need to search for authentic meaning outside of familial norms. Many experience fear that if they search "outside the box," there will be divine repercussions in terms of the afterlife. They avoid talking to a pastor, rabbi, imam, or priest about their pursuit, for fear they will be judged and found lacking, be punished, or coerced "back into the fold."

This is where spiritual direction as a formal source of guidance and support can be invaluable. Seekers who experience any or all of the above—as well as "agnostics, atheists, and nothing in particular," according to the Pew Survey—can benefit from compassionate care and conversation. As the numbers of individuals who have stepped outside the perceived confines of traditional religions rise (including those who have not been raised in a particular religion, yet long for a meaningful inner life), there is a great need to be listened to, and for healing presence. If we are to meet the needs of this growing and diverse group—who disdains to be named, and who may experience emotional difficulty by having been so labeled—we must go deep within ourselves to find out if we can, indeed, answer this timely invitation and authentically meet their needs.

Beyond Tolerance

Religious tolerance is a term that many in mainstream religions use today as a benchmark to philosophically establish good relations with others who believe differently from themselves. We tend to believe that tolerance is a good and desirable thing. Beneath tolerance, however, lies a hidden bias that can rise to the surface when we are shaken awake.

Priscilla Warner, coauthor of *The Faith Club*, speaks about unexpectedly discovering this bias within herself. While writing a children's book with two women of differing faith traditions, she searched for a religious story to include from the Jewish perspective that would teach about tolerance. She approached her rabbi Jeffrey on the subject.

> "You know," said Jeffrey, shaking his head, "I never liked that word 'tolerance.' It's too passive. Think about it. To

> tolerate someone? That doesn't sound very positive. It's not a call to engage and understand someone else. I like the phrase 'mutual appreciation.' That can lead to an understanding that no one faith has a monopoly on truth." (Idliby, Oliver, and Warner, 28)

Mutual appreciation is the foundation of the swelling interfaith movement and, I believe, central to the charism of spiritual direction. Mutual appreciation is a landscape of the heart to which all of us in ministry are invited. It begs each one of us to transparently answer the most important question of all: "How am I being with others who believe differently than I do?" The dramatic rise of spiritually independent thinkers today offers a compelling motivation for us to look within—*now*—so we can be present to them with the purest of intentions—to serve and offer hospitality. Because, very simply, the "them" could well be your cousin, your next-door neighbor, or your hospice patient, and you may not know it. If you are a pastor, you may be surprised to discover that the pews in your church are filled with parishioners who remain seated, but whose minds may be wandering elsewhere.

And as J. R. R. Tolkien wrote in *Lord of the Rings*, "Not all those who wander are lost." Lest we forget, questing and questioning are at the core of religious experience and have been demonstrated as such by saints and sages of all traditions, including Jesus and Buddha. This is "the hero's journey," as comparative religion writer Joseph Campbell named it. If it is authentic and soul centered, it can be eclectic—perhaps it must be, for we must try on what we find for size. Our task is to sift and sort, discern what speaks to us at the deepest level of our being, to discover a spiritual life that is rich, meaningful, and authentic.

A New View

Mainstream and scholarly efforts have been made—launched with helpful intent—to better understand how and why someone might embrace spiritual independence. Unfortunately, many of them fall short. They tend to speak in sweeping generalities, which, again, may lead us toward characterizing others inaccurately. We are wise to take this information in, sort it through, and then bring warm-hearted curiosity and compassion to what remains but not take the research verbatim because it is highly subjective, based on human interaction, which is prone to change, shifting with the winds of the day.

Case in point: John Mabry, in his groundbreaking book *Spiritual Guidance across Religions*, does an excellent job explaining how spiritual guidance can be approached with eclectics (his term). Yet, when it comes to describing what an eclectic believes, we step into muddy waters.

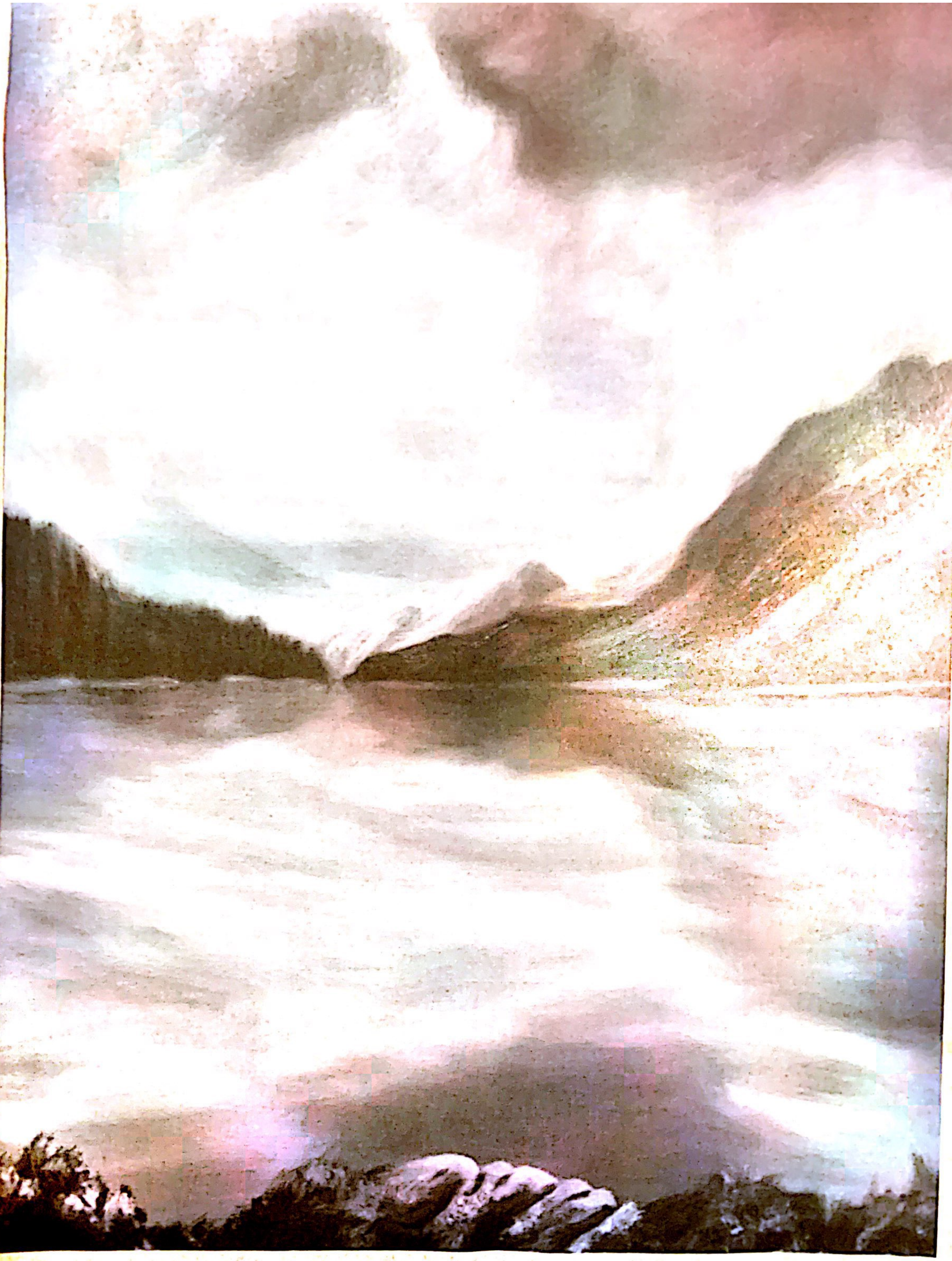
> Spiritual Eclectics may adorn their home altars with a staggering variety of divine images: Jesus might be cheek by jowl with Krishna, Shiva, Kali, Ganesha, or other Hindu deities; Tibetan thangkas may adorn the walls; statues of the Buddha or the Virgin Mary may be nearby. ... At heart, most Spiritual Eclectics tend to be pantheists; all things, all people, all deities are simply manifestations of the one animating force behind creation. (Mabry, 379)

> Spiritual growth schemas in New Age circles abound, and there are nearly as many models as there are Spiritual Eclectics. Nevertheless, the chakra system remains the hands-down favorite among Eclectics in some form or another. (Mabry, 380)

These are just a few examples of the use of generalities, some of which may or may not apply depending upon the individual. The most helpful word, however, that Mabry uses throughout this work in his attempt to describe eclectics is *may*. *May* allows for the very personal and ever-changing nature of one's beliefs and practices.

As spiritual guides, we must be vigilant and cautious that we do not make general statements about what someone believes—what *anyone* believes—unless we ask them ourselves, otherwise we miss the opportunity to be fully present to them as they are, not as we have perceived them to be. As a respected colleague and former teacher of spiritual directors once told me, "You have to know the right questions to ask." This statement was in response to my question, "What does a spiritual guide need to know to be able to serve someone of a tradition or belief system other than her own?" Indeed, what do any of us need to know?

It is important to know this: above all, spiritual eclectics honor their own experiences, their own reason, and their own bodies as wisdom sources (Mabry, 379). My



research and personal experience validate Mabry's observations. In establishing trustworthy spiritual direction relationships with others, we must know what they value and how they make choices so we can have meaningful conversation about their inner lives.

Linda A. Mercadante and Elizabeth Drescher are two researchers who are studying the rising phenomenon of religious nonaffiliation. I find their approach and interpretation of results refreshing and hopeful and in alignment with the purpose of spiritual companionship. Each researcher sought out hundreds of people who had identified themselves as *nones* or *spiritual but not religious* on polls and were willing to plumb the depth of their experience. In anthropological fashion, they spoke to them intimately, asking key questions. (Drescher also heard from atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists.) Drescher speaks about her approach:

> Rather than expressing itself through traditional modes of *believing, belonging* and *behaving* that have fueled much recent discussion with religions about how to engage the unaffiliated and to retain current members, this broader Noneness appeared among the Nones I interviewed in narratives that emphasized *being* and *becoming*.... For the majority of Nones who talked with me, the spiritual life is seen as emerging organically from the whole of life in relationship to a diversity of others, rather than being structured through categories of propositional beliefs, affiliational patterns, and the associated ritual and social actions of defined religious groups. (Drescher, 14)

Drescher's protocol seems to honor what spiritual independents themselves desire: to be treated as individuals engaged in a search to find and make meaning of their lives in a customized way. This is an excellent approach to keep in mind, especially in fostering helpful, spiritual guidance relationships.

Mercadante engaged participants identified as SBNR in similar dialogue, including how they looked at their spiritual journeys, how they formulated current beliefs, and why they rejected the claims of organized religion. As a result, she presented five categories of SBNRs for our consideration from her research: dissenters, casuals, wanderers, seekers, and immigrants.

While I appreciate Mercadante's approach, I am discomfited by her results that place individuals in categories once again. Looking more deeply into the categories, one finds generalities and sometimes missing elements. One such element that is absent from having a clear place within one of the five categories is for individuals who have been wounded by organized religion or have experienced spiritual abuse of one kind or another. Where do they fit in? Their spiritual path is quite tender and requires special care. Mercadante does provide narrative about this type of individual, which is helpful for understanding. As a spiritual companion, however, I have journeyed with many seekers over the years who are in the early to middle stages of recovery from religious mishandling. I propose that this number is significant enough to warrant its own category if, indeed, this is the best way to approach the matter.

Upon reviewing the material presented by each researcher, it is safe to say that deeper understanding and mutual appreciation were outcomes of the work of both and, as spiritual guides, we would be well served to become familiar with their process and results. I was pleased to read that the none and SBNR populations were empathetically presented; shared characteristics were highlighted. In the end, both researchers held to the view that every individual who participated had a unique journey and should be respected accordingly.

Taking this into consideration, the question moves us forward. How then shall spiritual independents be guided and companioned? What do they need from us as spiritual directors?

Pure Presence

Mabry cites multiple ways spiritual guides can better relate and serve.

> Spiritual Eclectics (especially in the Boomer manifestation) tend to be idealistic, wanting to raise the consciousness of the world, to work for global change, and to create programs or movements that will change the course of history. While these goals are noble, they are rarely realistic, and Eclectics can experience disappointment and depression when their ideas and plans don't succeed as they had hoped. Spiritual guides can help them focus their

efforts on achievable goals that are still in line with their sense of mission and meaning. (Mabry, 381–82)

He also states that spiritual eclectics can be ungrounded because of their lack of rootedness in one tradition, so spiritual guides can help them focus on spiritual practices and stay faithful to them. Guides can provide accountability. Eclectics often experience obstacles on a wide (but not deep) path and struggle with the very nature of the spiritual journey with its ups and down. The guide can reassure them about the nature of spiritual formation, especially when the going gets tough (Mabry, 382). Because this type of seeker is not always part of a community, it is painful for them to be without support or the company of kindred others. Spiritual guides can help them find a community that is "good enough," considering the eclectic nature of their beliefs (Mabry, 383).

There are additional unique challenges facing eclectics, like a tendency toward perfectionism and confusion of truth sources, all of which can be realistically and compassionately navigated with an appropriate guide. Mabry offers excellent suggestions for doing so.

I maintain that as spiritual directors, we have an even deeper call and invitation when it comes to companioning spiritual independents. It is good and wise to educate ourselves on the current research about any population, spiritual or secular. But we must go beyond the research to genuinely extend ourselves to seekers of all persuasions—to provide *genuine presence*, compassion, and care to one and all. We must—each one of us—engage a deeper process to get there. We must plumb our own depths to discern if we actually have the ability to be fully present to others despite perceived theological differences. It is vitally important that we transparently do so considering the changing spiritual landscape and the rise of spiritual independents who are desirous of spiritual care but have a difficult time finding it.

All spiritual directors, however, may not feel comfortable or well equipped to companion others who believe differently than they. For the past fifteen years, I have been honing a protocol that spiritual care professionals can use to provide nonjudgmental, unconditional, compassionate care to individuals from all walks of life, including every spiritual persuasion. I have successfully used it in my private practice with spiritual directees over the past fifteen years and have encouraged emerging spiritual directors to do so as well. I call this method "Pure Presence."•

We will only sense the numinous when our minds and hearts are fully open and aware of our biases and be willing to set these aside for deeper understanding.

Pure Presence is rooted in both the Eastern and Western traditions of body-mind science and contemplative spirituality. It serves and benefits the spiritual director (or guide) as well as the seeker (or client) simultaneously. Pure Presence allows an individual to listen deeply, to offer the deepest empathy and spiritual care to *whomever* they companion. This interfaith *and* interspiritual approach to formal presence training is the most comprehensive way I know to both deepen and advance spiritual understanding and care in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and religious communities.

Pure Presence is praxis based. It requires deep intention and a strong desire to eliminate what separates us one from one another, particularly in light of theological differences. It also requires practice—*consistent practice in self-awareness*—because our thoughts and feelings about those who may be different from ourselves are deep seated, and it takes time to uproot beliefs or actions that do not serve us well. With transparency and good self-awareness, we can transform limiting beliefs through the practice of self-compassion. Fully integrated self-compassion ultimately leads to compassion for all beings with whom we interact. And when mutual compassion is present, barriers are overcome, wounds are healed, and all

who sip from its cup are made better from the partaking.

The "burden" of establishing presence falls upon us as spiritual directors, first and foremost, to do the good work of self because without having done so, we will always be dominated by ego and the volatility of the false self who convinces us of the superiority or rightness of our view. Presence dwells in the "spiritual heart," as yogic sage Ram Dass calls it, and within the "true self" as theologian Thomas Merton explained it. Indeed, it is the journey of a lifetime to empty oneself; to eliminate one's own small idea of what someone should believe or how they should live; and to bear loving witness to the wonder and mystery of an individual's spiritual formation and unfoldment.

Conclusion

Spiritual director and author Norvene Vest writes, "The sacred breaks through experience in many ways, and humans respond variously to the awesome experience of the holy" (Vest, vii).

How we respond to others is key to our ability to see and bear witness to the holy at work in their lives—in all our lives. We will only sense the numinous when our minds and hearts are fully open and aware of our biases and be willing to set these aside for deeper understanding. The invitation to companion the spiritually independent pilgrim is rich with treasures to be found on all fronts. We can learn much from such passionate and purposeful individuals who experience the presence of the sacred in a myriad of ways.

I maintain that this is the call being sounded today for all of us in ministry, and it is one we must answer post haste. Let us listen and learn. As the number of spiritual independents continues to rise, as it likely will, we must look deep within ourselves to see where we may not be welcoming the other as Jesus taught, and, then, to transform what prevents us from doing so into a universal hospitality of presence. As the Persian poet Rumi entreated us in his poem "The Guest House":

Be grateful for whoever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Each individual whom we encounter invites us deeper—deeper into transparency, purity, humility, and the heart and mind of oneness. Every person is a universe unto herself and, unfailingly so, the sacred can be found within. May we look deeper and be present to all who arrive at our doorstep. ■

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