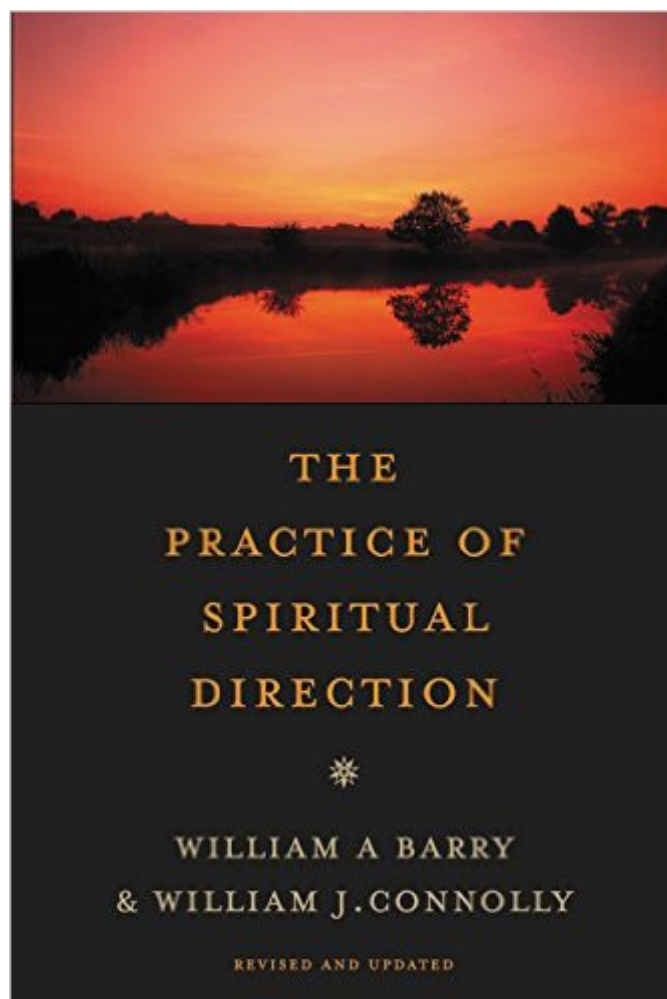


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The Practice Of Spiritual Direction



Synopsis

The Classic Work on Helping People Become Closer to God Fathers Barry and Connolly see the work of spiritual direction as helping people to develop their relationship with God. In thinking and practice they have absorbed the insights of modern psychotherapy, but have not been absorbed by them. This highly practical book reflects the authors' experience at the Center for Religious Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where spiritual direction is available and where directors are trained.

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Customer Reviews

By spiritual direction here is meant that central and often avoided part of pastoral counseling that deals not so much with people's many problems and struggles as with their experience of and personal relationship to God. It is a specialized and all important area that is easy to side step in normal counseling because of the relative ease with which other problems can be addressed and/or because of an inbuilt fear on everyone's part of a relationship with the almighty. This eminently practical book points out in great detail the paths by which one may help another to foster this all-important relationship which is more basic and prior to resolving other symptomatic difficulties in the individual's life. It describes as well the distractions, pitfalls, avoidances and other problems that beset director and directee along the way. This is probably the best text available in this area. Its strength comes from the massive experience of the authors in doing, teaching, and supervising spiritual direction, in their theological, spiritual and psychotherapeutic background, and in their ability

to organize and present the material clearly and cogently. It is a must in the library of any spiritual director, could profitably be read by anyone seeking direction, and is well worth frequent rereading.

I am currently in a two year process of training in spiritual direction and have been reading numerous introductions to the subject. I found this one easily the most useful of the lot. It is well organized, especially in its analysis of the opportunities and hazards of the relationship with the directee as it develops. Part of the book's strength is that it is based on the experiences of the authors in running a center devoted to direction and training directors, not on one individual's view of the topic. I suspect that some of the writing is more sophisticated and nuanced than I can yet appreciate, so the book will bear rereading at a later stage. I especially enjoyed this quotation in the Conclusion - "As the dialogue and exploration [of the nature of spiritual direction today] continue, both pastoral care and theological reflection can benefit. The divorce of theology from religious experience has begun to be healed, and spiritual directors who are alive to theological issues and regularly in contact the religious experience of Christians will contribute to further healing."

E.G. Melillo voiced a concern about the response given concerning a married woman who was having a relationship with a divorced man. I understand E.G. Melillo's concern, however, I interpreted the author's words in a different way. The authors didn't seem to be saying that the relationship was appropriate in any way. They seemed to be talking about how we "approach" a directee which can affect the listening relationship and working alliance. On page 143, the authors say, "In the first place, the directee usually knows that there is a discrepancy...God has an interest in the quality of the directee's life and that behavior that is seriously inconsistent with God's desires will lead to disturbances in the relationship with him...(Then) the director, whose working agreement has been to help her with prayer, can now begin to probe more deeply into the causes of the disturbance and thus help the directee." If the director strongly points out the "sin" in her actions right away, the directee is likely to tune her out. The authors are encouraging a director to be patient and maintain a relationship with the woman and then the director will be able to help "her" discover this discrepancy for herself. Allowing someone to hear God for themselves is always better than trying to be God for them. We can easily get in the way and interfere with the Spirit's action if we try to jump on a subject before the directee is ready to hear. I found the book to be good, basic knowledge. It doesn't wander from the main thing, which is a clear understanding and knowledge of spiritual direction. They state over and over again that the motivation for spiritual direction has to be the desire to grow in relationship with the Lord.

Though the knowledge and experience which the authors possess is clear, my impression was that, rather than taking classic concepts of spiritual direction and incorporating the insights of modern psychology, they were accepting the latter as truth and adapting the former to fit them. Certainly, the sort of distance and authoritarian stance of previous centuries, which the authors rightly see as passe (though it worked in its time), requires much adaptation to be effective today. Yet, in recent decades, the essence, comprising the accumulated wisdom of many centuries, too often has been sacrificed because how to apply the accidental is unclear. The authors make some areas rather murky and puzzling. For example, one case cited is that of a religious Sister who is spiritual director to a married woman who believes her life and prayer have improved in the course of a current adulterous relationship. The authors believe the director should keep silent, because to do otherwise would be following an agenda of defending marriage rather than being open to the other woman's needs - and rely on her having other sources of information, or a personal intuition, that may influence her assessment of her situation. This is quite contrary to any classic view, since one of a director's ministries always has been to assist the other in a truly honest view, unhampered by self-deception - and adultery, a clearly immoral action in Christian teaching which a director would have an obligation to correct, has never been viewed as helpful in the spiritual life. My impression was that, in encouraging those in this ministry to embrace current trends in psychology and the like, many of the key parts of the ministry (however unpleasant they may be at times) were neglected.

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