



Companioning Spiritual Orphans by Kent Ira Groff

Jeremy came to a retreat called “A Gathering of Once or Maybe Believers” held in a local borough hall. He wanted us to know he wasn’t active in a religious community; even in childhood, he’d attended a synagogue only a few times.

The group watched a short clip from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, where wrongly imprisoned Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins) breaks into the guard’s office and plays a Mozart vocal duet over the loudspeakers. Andy’s inmate friend, Red (played by Morgan Freeman), announces, “For the briefest of moments—every last man in Shawshank felt free” (McNulty, p. 59). After showing the clip, I invited each person to meditate silently for about 20 minutes on a personal moment of grace or freedom in a time of diminishment or confinement.

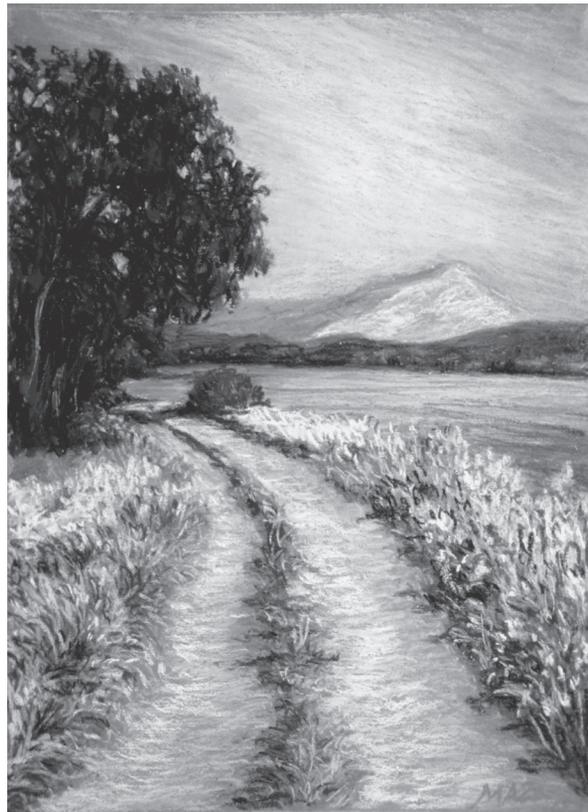
When we reconvened in groups of four, Jeremy stated that he had no story of such a moment. But nobody rushed to fill the silence; we just sat with him unhurriedly, comfortable with his not sharing.

After a few moments, Jeremy said he had been thinking of an experience when his daughter was so addicted to hard drugs that each time she used, he was afraid she was going to die. “One morning I pictured her as if she had died. I imagined letting her go. Her mother and I both stepped back. We quit rescuing. And my daughter will tell you that’s why she’s alive today, when she began to break free.”

Later, he shared this with everyone present. The one who thought he had no story had become a gift for the whole group.

Before leaving, Jeremy asked if he and I could meet for breakfast. Now we meet monthly in my study for spiritual companioning. As I listen to his longings, we draw from his own tradition and beyond both our traditions. We’ve explored how his experience with his daughter was akin to the Jewish Kabbalistic creation tradition of God “stepping back” or contracting—*zimzum*—to give space for the creatures.

He’s compared it to the empty bellows of the Tao, and I liken it to the self-emptying *kenosis* of Christ in my tradition. Jeremy found the retreat a safe place and now befriends his emptiness as we meditate and explore his life purpose. (For more on emptiness, see Mitchell, p. 189, and Groff, pp. 126–136.)



In this essay, I explore attitudes and approaches for spiritual guides who want to companion people outside the doors of institutional religion. In a politically terrorized and technologically complex world, how can we connect with those who appear self-sufficient, but who actually experience the cry of suffocating beings?

A World of Spiritual Orphans

Everyone is orphaned, even unawares. In the United States, all of us beautiful *and* ugly Americans (as Mark Twain tweaked us!) are resident aliens—Anglo Saxon types leaving behind European ancestries; Native

Americans disinherited from ancestral geography in endless trails of tears; African Americans kidnapped from Africa and imported as slaves; Asians and Latinos; Jews and Arabs; illegal aliens and failed business heads.

We see this orphaning process globally. Streams of chil-



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dren are orphaned because the AIDS plague took their only surviving parent in Africa and Asia, Australia and the Americas. Farmers and townfolk are being orphaned from peaceful landscapes by mega-farms, superhighways, and superstores. Kids have to leave home to find jobs, while their elders gather in graying houses of worship and go bowling alone.

In their India home, my Princeton classmate Thomas and his wife, Anita, tell me with pathos of their grandchildren who live far away in the United States with their son and daughter physicians, James and Shandra. Their voices echo myriad left-behind parents whose adult children now live far away from their ancestral roots in Kenya or Korea to make a new life in the United States or the United Kingdom—or from an Ohio Amish farm to Silicon Valley, California. It is hard to tell who is more orphaned, the youth or their elders.

Ministers feel orphaned too. I no longer feel part of the other pastors' shoptalk, because I am in a specialized ministry. I feel orphaned in my changing beliefs too. I recently met with Dana, who, while standing at the door to greet the congregation after preaching a sermon, had a flash thought: "If I weren't a pastor, I wouldn't go to church."

In the film *The Cider House Rules*, a fake physician pretends to care for the world's lost orphans. And who is more orphaned? Who is more lonely—the hypocritical professional or the abused child? Guides can feel as lost as seekers.

New Spiritual Topography: From Map to Compass

Today's spiritual topography has changed. Our elders cannot say, "Here's the map for your faith," because no one has ever charted faith in a twenty-first-century

globally-terrorized environment. *Journey Without Maps*, Graham Greene's account of his trek through West Africa in the 1930s, parallels the postmodern spiritual journey of many seekers—one that lacks fixed points for orientation.

As many have observed, those under age forty in "developed" lands have grown up in a highly technological and global terrain. This creates a vacuum of understanding and experience for the elders. Maps of previous generations are a lot like the ancient map before the great continental rifting took place—when Africa, humanity's birthplace, was still connected to the Americas and the other continents.

Rather than a specific route, spiritual direction offers a *compass* for any who have embarked on this journey without maps. Yet the formal terms *director* and *directee* can seem off-putting. Instead, I refer to the process as *spiritual companionship*, and offer myself as companion and guide as the seeker and I explore uncharted spiritual terrain together. As a guide, I ask what the person wants to see, and together we follow that as our orientation.

Many have a gnawing spiritual homesickness. They are not beating down the doors of formal houses of worship, yet they're aching to find a door at the heart of their universe and dying for safe forms of community to deepen their search. How can trained guides connect with spiritual orphans, or, to use another phrase, with once or maybe believers?

I say to guides *over* forty, "Create safe spaces for listening with youthful seekers, and it will be life giving for you." I say to guides *under* forty, "Lots of dislocated older folks would treasure a safe youthful guide to converse with and learn from." I say to both, "Cultivate ways to connect with the spiritual orphan within yourself" (see Helderman, pp. 51–60).



“When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” But turn the ancient adage on its head: “When the teacher is ready, the pupil will appear.” It works both ways. If you befriend your own inner questionings as an edge of growth, you will be amazed at how seekers will appear at your doorstep.

Yearn—pray—to be open to friends, colleagues or extended family members. Trust this: Someone else’s troubled waters may actually heal your own soul. At my older cousin’s funeral, I sensed a connection with his forty-something son, and we have become soul friends. A self-described spiritual orphan, my younger cousin became the living, dialogical audience for the book I was writing. Spiritual companionship takes surprising forms.

I advocate connecting with the questionings and experiences of today’s youth, but not because they are the only ones orphaned from religious institutions. Many elders within religious communities, like myself, also feel orphaned, and youth help us connect to our common creative restlessness. If you embrace the orphaned parts of yourself, seekers will feel safe to express their own restlessness in your presence.

Making Initial Connections

Here are a few specific ways for seasoned spiritual guides to go the distance with the new generations. Think of each as a form of prayer, and yourself as a learner:

- * Converse with people younger than yourself where you live, in the hallways at work, at school, in worship houses, at retreat centers, or in study groups.
- * Develop friendships with the young (and older) journeyers while you walk the dog or look for the lost cat or deliver an extra loaf of fresh-baked bread or borrow a trowel. Invite them over for supper or out to lunch.
- * Elder guides can offer to babysit the kids of twenty- and thirty-something youth workers or teachers during youth gatherings or retreats. Find ways to rub shoulders with younger generations. (See “Safe Sanctuary Policy for All Conference and District Events.”)
- * Ask youth what movies they’ve seen lately, what they’re reading, and what TV programs they watch. Inquire about what their *friends* think of the direction their country is taking. (Especially outside the United States, it’s often unsafe to express one’s own opinion in politically charged situations.)

- * Be ready to ask deeper questions like, “When you look around, what’s going on that feels really important to you?” As Sharon Daloz Parks points out in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, young adults want questions that stretch, get at values, aspirations (see pp. 137–139).

- * Think of someone you care about and want to understand. Then, as an “intercessory prayer,” view a movie, read a book, watch a game, or listen to a radio station that person likes.

- * As a trained spiritual guide, introduce yourself to therapists, pastors, and healthcare providers, suggesting they refer folks who express spiritual longings.

A powerful theme in most spiritual traditions is that one needs to become like a child to enter or re-enter the spiritual realm. We hear a lot about embracing childlike wonder, but I propose *embracing a youthful restlessness again*.

To put it another way, paying attention to the doubting struggles of younger adults benefits the guide. First, listening to the questions of youth cracks open the golden seed of a guide’s own dormant questionings. Second, learning more about the younger worldview helps a guide to navigate in today’s radically changed world. And third, youthful questioners train a guide to connect with spiritual orphans in any generation.

The first person to show up at a book signing for my book *What Would I Believe If I Didn’t Believe Anything?* was a retired man in his late sixties. When I asked him what prompted him to explore this topic, he told me he was taking care of his church-going mother, now in her nineties, who was expressing many spiritual doubts herself. She was asking him questions that he, who had not attended church for years, had no clue how to discuss with her. *Amazing*, I pondered. A “religious” woman in her nineties and a “secular” man in his sixties are on the same spiritual plane as young adult seekers.

Now that we’ve explored ways of connecting, we need to be prepared to understand the painful barriers that emerge when we begin journeying with folks outside organized religious traditions.

Barriers: The Grist of Companionship

We can’t go anywhere real with seekers unless we listen



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to their honest barriers and difficult questions. Sometimes you have to lose your religion to find your faith. So obstacles to faith and even rebellion against religion can become worldly paths to creative compassion, bridges to some mystery at the heart of things, and the grist of serious companioning. Here are some common issues.

Outdated God-Talk

In *Wobegon Boy*, Garrison Keillor says of Lake Wobegon that “all the Norwegians were Lutherans, of course, even the atheists—it was a Lutheran God they did not believe in” (pp. 135–136). The theism a lot of “atheists” reject describes a God I cannot believe in either. Many grew up, as I did, with an emotionally or physically absent father, so God, presented in male images, seemed distant. Talk of “surrendering” to God can distort spirituality for a child, a spouse, a worker who has submitted for too long to an abuser. Trusting in God is more like yielding to a cause greater than oneself.

The Buddhist on Your Street

Our grandparents’ far-away world is now on our TV and computer screens. For centuries missionaries were sent around the world to start schools and hospitals, but mainly, folks assumed, to convert “heathen” Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and animists. Now the Buddhist child next door is your son’s best friend; Hindus convert a downtown church into a temple; Muslims are invited to explain their faith; and an atheist shovels snow from the widow’s driveway down the street.

The End of OTC (Only True Church)

Church is not the only place where people go for spiritual meaning and service. (Was it ever?) Yet many groups are founded on the OTC assumption. So if you will not go to hell for not being part of a religious institution, is there any reason to engage in a spiritual quest? Folks hunger to explore their sense of purpose and safe community, *without pressure.*

“The Bible Says So”

Fundamentalist believers among all religions repel thinking, compassionate people. By wrenching a few damaging words out of context, they cancel their scriptures’ timeless message of love. At the same time, ordinary



people devour scholars' research. Those of Christian background are refreshed or puzzled by what is left of the Jesus they thought they knew. Here's a great opportunity for spiritual companionship: How can critical study prepare the way for rebuilding faith?

The Explosion of Knowledge

In the age of the Internet, we experience information overload and fragmentation. Having a myriad of specialists, it is difficult to keep up with the whole field, be it health or religion, economics or literature. It is even more challenging to integrate new burgeoning specialties. The multiplicity of stimuli makes it difficult to practice simplicity—what the spiritual traditions call a “single eye” (Mt 6:22, King James Version) or the “third eye.” Yet lots of people know bits of stuff in zillions of fields. Can we live contemplatively in a complex world?

The Sacred-Secular Split

One of the biggest barriers to believing is the stained-glass split between sexuality and spirituality, violence and values. I have a passion to bridge this worldly versus holy divide. In terms of my tradition, this means taking the Incarnation seriously: “The word became flesh.” *Passion* can convey sexuality, excitement, or suffering. Can the worldly stuff become a vehicle for the spiritual?

Suffering

How can a Supreme Love allow suffering? People misquote Harold Kushner's popular title *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* as *Why Bad Things Happen...* We want answers. But Kushner does not try to figure out *why* suffering happens. Rather, he suggests how to respond creatively instead of destructively *when* it happens. And what kind of God can one believe in since the Holocaust? Viet Nam? September 11, 2001? Iraq? I express the quandary in this prayer poem:

“Collateral Damage”

FRIENDLY FIRE KILLS INNOCENTS

“War is hell,” the General said.

I wonder, God, if you are dead.
Or can it be that where you dwell
is just within such living hell?

(Groff, p. 13)

Could what people mean by “God” be the mysterious bits and pieces of Love swirling around within the suffering itself?

Lack of Permission to Question or Share Experiences

People question but feel orphaned if they try to express their skepticism or scientific worldview, their anger or spiritual abuse suffered in religious institutions—or to “God.” Ironically, people with mystical experiences also fear rejection if they speak of such occasions within the walls of religious structures. A child who is abused regularly may have a vision of Jesus standing in the room, protecting her. So often a spiritual “vision” lies close in the psyche to an experience of submerged pain; it is hard to speak of one without the other.

Boring Religion

Seekers want to *experience* something they do not have a name for. Instead of inviting persons into experiences of the sacred and finding fresh language, many religious folks talk about a “God” that seems out of touch, and they mindlessly mouth hackneyed phrases, such as “it’s God’s will,” at the scene of a car crash. Religion seems like “dull habit,” or else it takes on the violence of an “acute fever,” to borrow William James’ phrase (see James, p. 6). Is there anything in between?

Violence Caused by Religion

The ultimate turn-off is when communities teach love yet are so intensely committed to their beliefs that they will harass or even kill anyone who differs. Osama bin Laden reportedly claimed “God” attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, killing citizens from many countries. While rescuers were still at work, TV evangelist Jerry Falwell said “God” was punishing America for homosexuality and abortion, though he later apologized. Both “Gods” seem vicious or stupid. A little healthy doubt can temper a dangerous certitude. Yet who wants a boring faith?

How can you experience genuine faith and live it out passionately without a “crusade” mentality? Somewhere between a dangerous fundamentalism and a complete spiritual meltdown, we catch a clue: the true grit of ordinary barriers can create a bridge to a deeper level of faith.



Engineers tell me how a well-designed bridge must have flexibility as well as stability. If it is too rigid, it will not give with the rigors of environmental shifts and stresses. And that is the point of the spiritual quest: *to be able to give even under stress.*

Informal Companionship

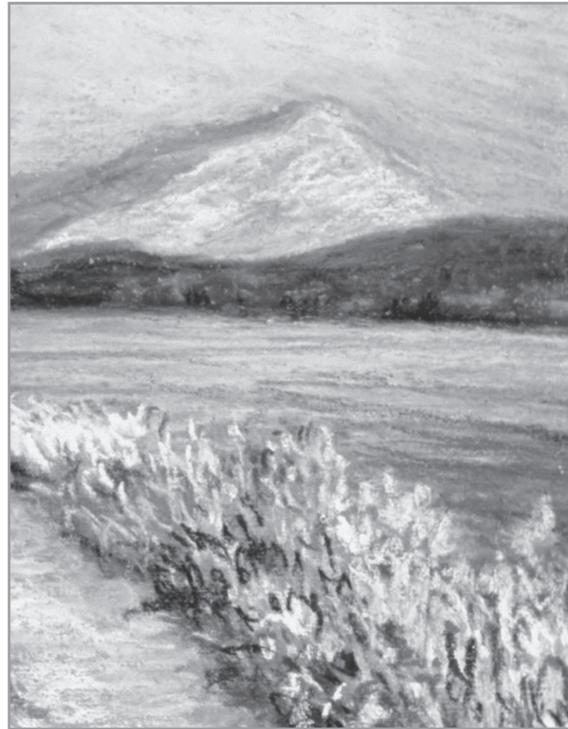
How can we walk with spiritual orphans who are asking, “Can I develop a genuine faith, passionate *and* open to question itself, willing to shed outgrown religious views to allow a new thing to be born?”

Along with cultivating the mindset and methods for connecting, I try to keep open to many outside-the-box approaches, as well as the potential of group contexts or one-to-one sessions. There is no one-size-fits-all method for any kind of spiritual companionship, especially with people who are not involved in religious institutions.

I value informal ways of connecting that may go on indefinitely and never need to evolve into formal spiritual companionship. I’ll invite a young adult to an event that I’ve got tickets for. Trail hiking or movie watching, a concert or a game, lunch or supper—all are occasions for listening for traces of grace in the grit of life.

When a time comes to move to an intentional process of companionship, the next step can take the form of a group. Drawing on Rose Mary Dougherty’s book *Group Spiritual Direction*, Ann Kline wrote “Widening the Lens: The Gift of Group Spiritual Direction” for the June 2004 issue of *Presence* (see pp. 38–42). Sometimes a group creates a safe link to deeper exploration by using a book. Other times a gender- or age-based group creates a safe link, for example, a movie-discussion group. But often, especially if persons

have been wounded by religion, the ancient tradition *anamcara*, one-to-one soul friends, creates the safest space to explore.



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One-to-One Companionship

Essentially, I prepare to meet with seekers the same way as with anyone else: yearning for the person to teach me something new about myself, about the unique terrain of his or her world, about the world we inhabit together, and about God. I am praying to be attentive to bits and pieces of love in the stuff of this person’s lures and longings.

Sometimes I use a visual, audio, kinesthetic, musical, tactile, or poetic meditation to lead into silence, to express the person’s feelings during the session, or to offer blessing at the end. For example, we might meditate with a Langston Hughes or Mary Oliver poem or a sacred text; with art like Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” painting; with the song version of “Vincent,” by Don McFarren; with the Beatles’ “Let It Be”; or with a brief piece from Bach or John Coltrane. Or I may hand the person an empty chalice, a seashell, or a rock to hold in silence.

Opening the session

The two of us may have begun our relationship casually, in a noisy restaurant, or at a movie or a social event, so meeting in a set-aside, quiet space may be new. First, we engage in a bit of casual conversation. In the initial session, I say something like: “Silence is so rare in our noisy culture. I need to take time to center myself, and I invite you to join me.”



But instant silence can seem too abrupt, so I feather into silence by explaining how the session will work: “Usually I’ll light a candle, then lead a brief meditation, followed by silence for you to center your thoughts. Then you break the silence and speak whenever you’re ready.”

Normally the meditation or prayer is one I’ve planned for that unique person. I use a spoken or non-verbal “hors d’oeuvre” to lead into the silence (as above), but if something else emerges, I set aside my plan. Other times before lighting the candle I ask, “What’s something you bring that you need light on?”

During the Session

I try to get inside the world of spiritual orphans. Some come seeking with a neutral slate, but many are hurt by institutional religion. As we meet, I remind myself of important ingredients for establishing trust in relation to the barriers I’ve cited:

- * *A safe space.* This above all is love: for two solitudes to connect without fear in a spirit of confidentiality and acceptance.
- * *Expression of anger and pain.* Often I model this by sharing experiences of my own brokenness, if I sense it will validate the seeker’s issues.
- * *Grace buried in the grit.* ¿Qué pasa? What’s happening? When I ask this, I’m convinced we’ll discover glimpses of the Sacred in whatever the person shares with me.
- * *The primacy of experience.* In the high-tech world we live in, people are starved for high-touch—to get in touch with buried stories and experiences of pain and bliss.
- * *Stories and questions.* If tempted to give an insight, I pause and try to turn it into a question (see Groff, pp. 85–94). If a person replies, “I don’t know,” I may say, “Take your time, I’ll be here.” Often this spawns a person’s own story, which may contain a better truth.
- * *Contemplative pauses.* Pauses slow down talk and allow space for the Spirit. If a person tells a story, I may say, “Sit with it in silence, to mine its gifts.”
- * *Breath, brains, or brawn.* I try to stay awake to a balance of spirit, mind, and body. Yearning (simple breathing as prayer), thinking (selected readings), or sweating (as in work, exercise, or sex), all become ways to journey home.
- * *A contract.* Asking, “What do you hope for from our meetings?” is a key to clarifying expectations (see

Addison, pp. 110–117). Often I find spiritual orphans eager to experience practices like meditation, centering prayer, and journaling. Part of the contract is also to discuss money (in my case, a contribution to our non-profit organization).

Closing the Session

After setting the next appointment, often we extinguish the candle together or close with a verbal or artistic blessing.

Between Sessions

Many questing folks ask for methods to meditate and readings to ponder between our (usually) monthly meetings. Sometimes the seeker makes a retreat, alone or with a group, and once in a while, very gingerly, explores spiritual community.

Conclusion

If we can learn anything from today’s critique of institutional religion it is this: Spiritual experience will be judged authentic only if it makes a difference in a world gone mad with violence and numb with meaninglessness.

In spiritual companionship, non-institutional seekers can discover new layers of meaning and forms of community, while experienced guides can learn new spiritual terrain. Finding creative ways to reframe “worldly” stuff and share isolated spiritual experiences in safe forms of community is life giving. Even “wasted” experiences can be re-deemed—that is, re-valued.

And who knows? You might be sitting beside the next Van Gogh or Simone Weil or Gandhi or Rosa Parks. In the words of artist Andy Warhol, “Let things that would ordinarily bore you suddenly thrill you.” ■

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