Spiritual Mentoring or Direction

by Gretchen Woods

What is it?
Spiritual mentors and spiritual directors offer guidance in developing a practice which will deepen our connections with our inner-knowing/source/god/goddess/ground of being. They listen, support, challenge, and provide tools for greater understanding of our whole life. They not only teach, they model through their own living and their way of being with us.

To be spiritual is to experience connections that energize and support one's whole life. Those connections may be experienced with one's self, with others, and with the cosmos, but they need to be energizing and bring inspiration to us. When we seek a spiritual mentor, we ask another to be present to us as we seek those connections, to help us develop a practice which enables us to move closer to our source, to witness and challenge our process of living “life abundant.”

Why do it?
Jack Kornfield says it best: “We do not know where our spiritual life will lead us, but it always requires us to go into that which is difficult and unknown. Those who attempt to practice alone are almost inevitably more confused or lacking in spiritual depth than those who have practiced under a skillful teacher.” (Kornfield, A Path with Heart, p. 229.)

Ministry requires that we go into “the difficult and unknown.” It also demands that we grow as authentic human beings, that we face our own deepest fears and engage our ecstasies. We need tools and a guide to help us in that process or the chances of our floundering rise radically. The tools provided by a spiritual mentor allow us to stand firm in storms of personal or congregational life, to be grounded and centered, and to respond, rather than reacting to events that engage us.

Who does it?
While ministry may be done without a mentor, as many of our forebears have shown, most of us can benefit from a spiritual mentor, especially during the first five years of ministry when we first encounter the difficult and confusing challenges of everyday ministry. Some of us find it a great source throughout our service.

How does it work?
This depends largely upon several factors: one’s learning style, one’s heritage, and one’s predisposition toward certain cultural relationships.

Learning styles: It helps some spiritual mentors to know whether your primary way of taking in information involves visual, aural, or kinesthetic learning. A visual person may derive more satisfaction from practices that entail gazing at a flame or prayer wheel, watching a sunset, or visualization techniques. An aural person might do better with sounding, chant, drumming, a purring kitten, or listening to certain kinds of music. A kinesthetic person needs to walk, run, swim, lift weights, or dance. Trying to fit a practice which does not match your
style may result in deciding that you are not spiritual and cannot use spiritual practices to aid your ministry.

**Heritage:** If one is comfortable with one's religious heritage, the form of direction may follow naturally. For example, Christians may benefit from prayer practice that involves focusing upon the prayers of Christian mystics or hymnody. Jews may find great inspiration in the *Kabbalah*. There is a sense of deepening one's connection with one's self through this process.

**Cultural relationships:** Some of us find that we develop our connections through cultures other than our own. Life experience, inspiration from other women and men, and other factors may take us in directions we never imagined we could go. These too must be honored. My own practice is a combination of Buddhism and Earth Centered practices, though I was raised Presbyterian.

**How do I find a mentor/director?**
The best source of dependable and valuable spiritual mentors is word-of-mouth. Colleagues, both Unitarian Universalist and of other religious persuasions may offer us their positive experiences of spiritual mentors. The Association of Spiritual Directors lists spiritual mentors, but has no credentialing process involved in getting listed.

Regional training programs, such as Shalem Institute in Washington, D.C., can be researched through the internet, but, again, one has no guarantee of the quality of the directors. Consequently, it is very important that you ask questions.

Kornfield recommends these: “How do they view the path of practice? How do they guide students? Will we be able to spend time with this teacher? Will we actually get their direct assistance? What kind of support does the teacher give to students through the arduous parts of the spiritual journey? What is the sense of the community around the teacher? Then we need to look at what is asked of us. Does what is asked feel healthy and appropriate? What commitments are necessary? What kind of relationship is expected? How much time is required? What does it cost?” (Kornfield, p. 235.)

**Perils:** Beware of misuse—or abuse—of power, over-emphasis on money, harm through sexuality, and addiction to alcohol and/or drugs. Each of these signal danger in the intimate relationship of mentor/mentee. Honor your spiritual self by keeping healthy boundaries and leaving any such practice.

**Blessed Be!**