In Service of Stories: Offering Spiritual Direction to Writers

Introduction

When I first began teaching creative writing to adults, I had plenty of teacher training—I could create a nurturing environment, I could manage the classroom, I could teach skills in the craft—but what stopped me short were the tears. My students wrote spiritual memoir. They read aloud memories they'd written for the first time. The material that emerged often surprised them, sometimes during the writing and sometimes while reading. Each week someone choked up and would have to pass their pages to a neighbor. I was twenty-eight years old; I felt humbled by these moments and utterly incompetent.

So I applied to a spiritual direction training program. I'd been in direction myself for five years and figured training would give me the skills I lacked: The ability to stay present to divine unfolding in my students' hearts as they crafted their stories. Spiritual direction training completed for me what teacher training had begun; it gave me the capacity to help my students foster the soul in their writing, and through the creative process their own souls.

"Tell me more about this memory—what were you feeling? What sensations were in your body? How do you understand it speaking to you today?" As I began offering spiritual direction to others, I was surprised to discover that the questions which invited spiritual growth were remarkably similar to those that spurred good writing. "What theme is emerging in this story? How might you honor it more fully?" About the same time I began helping individuals revise and shape and polish their writing with

hopes of publication. I offered myself as a sounding board for this long, lonely process. "What is your story's heartbeat? How do you know? How will you serve this heartbeat as you revise?"

Thus I found myself silently bringing spiritual direction skills to my coaching and creative process skills to spiritual direction. Twenty years later, I'm no longer silent. My heart has been irrevocably, miraculously transformed through writing. I've witnessed similar movement in my clients, into lives of integrity, wholeness, and spiritual strength. In classrooms I've watched students open themselves to transformation by reading one another's work. And I've watched our society change as literature gives divinity fresh stories, opening new ways for humanity to understand the source of our being. Today I must testify: Creative writing is rife with emergent grace.

Over the twenty years I've been in spiritual direction, I've seen four different directors and each has treated my writing in the same way: as untouchable. When I share an essay, directors respond with reverence, affirmation, and appreciation, all of which feel great. What none has ever offered, and what I've longed for, is engagement.

A creative work is much like a dream, full of mystery and messages and invitations. Loving engagement opens the text to new possibilities. My colleague Mary Carroll Moore calls this asking "gateway questions," questions that pull writers into ever deeper explorations of their subject. "Sure you were angry in this moment, but what else were you feeling? What meaning do you make of this memory now, thirty-some years later?" Loving engagement also reflects back to the author what is apparent to the reader: "You write about healing but never share what was broken. What were you healing

from?" In other words, directors can respond to written stories much the same way we respond to spoken stories. Both are outward evidence of an internal and invisible reality. Both are means to listen for divine prodding. Both are still evolving.

I understand that most spiritual directors don't feel confident enough about literary craft to interact with it this way. For that matter, many of our clients who share their writing want nothing more than affirmation. Unlike the dreams clients present, a story is constructed; it comes attached to an ego desperate for approval. But the question spiritual directors and our clients must ask, regardless of our insecurities and ego-needs, is "How is God at work here?" God is always becoming, always pressing to become. Writers—and by writers I mean anyone and everyone who writes—need help staying focused on the life unfolding in their work. And one of the primary ways God communicates to writers (and the world) is through language.

I want to share some basic principles and tools in hopes that, when clients bring a page of passionate poetry or prose into a spiritual direction session, directors can see through the text to the Spirit's work.

Writing to become

Writers write to find out what we think—or feel or believe or know. We're an odd breed who revel in our choice of words and use paper (real or virtual) as a window onto the interior. "I want to write," Anne Frank told her diary, "but more than that I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried in my heart."[i] Those who keep journals or jot down memories or make up stories or compose poetry do so, consciously or not, as an intimate, heart-felt engagement between their deepest selves and the wider world. "Writing," says Margaret Atwood, Canadian novelist, "is a naming of the world,

a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word."[ii] Call it meditation, call it prayer, call it creative process, writing is a manner of listening and a profound means for the Spirit's work in our lives.

When I first began writing my memoir, I was also teaching seventh grade; to squeeze creative time into my day, I rose at 5:30 each morning. I was motivated by the ambitious thought, "I am writing a book!" Six years later, after leaving that job for work more accommodating to the writer's life, having come out as a bisexual Christian and become a published author, I had a more accurate understanding of what had happened. The book had written me.

When we create, we listen to movement deep in our being and then follow that urge outward into the physical world, birthing something new. But the act of birthing changes us. By the time I completed *Swinging on the Garden Gate,* I had discovered unity in the fragmented memories of my past. I had interrogated my queer identity and discovered there divine blessing. I had found my written voice, a voice able to whisper in a journal and shout between published pages. The confidence of this written voice transferred to my spoken voice as I told my story in pulpits and classrooms. The real creative product was the person I became for having written. This, I believe, is how God works in the world: Dynamically, within creation's capacity to create.

In college I had two professors who read and responded to my poetry. The first was Clare Rossini, a willowy poet who pulled a second chair up to her ponderous desk so we could sit side-by-side. I watched Clare mark my page, moving this line up and cutting

that image, bringing to my unformed thoughts a clarity and beauty I hadn't known possible. From Clare I learned the thrill of shaping language into art.

The second professor taught liberation theology with a unit on women's literature. Jeanne Wirpsa read my favorite novels like scriptural texts, finding there fresh, feminine images of God. I wanted to "do theology" in my own writing, and so asked if Jeanne would read my poems. She did, but when we met she put the pages aside and turned her chair toward me. "Why are you writing about your sister?" she asked. "What about your relationship feels significant? Divine?" Jeanne read beyond the text to the soul who was creating. She taught me that quality of mind and heart affects the words on the page.

I'm grateful to both women who together formed my understanding of the creative process. Writers participate in their own becoming when they craft their work, and their personal and spiritual growth manifest themselves in their creations. When I work with writers, I strive to embody both Clare and Jeanne.

Stories grow like people

"You can fall in love with your first draft," my colleague Jorie Miller says, "just don't marry it." A journal entry or rough draft, no matter how hard-earned, is always a first encounter. If the sparks fly, great! First drafts are always worth celebrating—something exists that didn't previously. And first drafts offer gifts of insight and a hand in co-creating.

But when we draft a journal entry or poem or story, we are just getting acquainted with our subject. We exchange pleasantries, find something in common, and begin an exciting conversation. Like any relationship, depth in writing comes with commitment.

Over time we appreciate how little we know about the beloved. Hard work and play and conflict and joint participation in community show us the beloved's many facets.

Unfortunately we humans have a propensity to grow attached to initial bursts of creativity. A spiritual director once told me that the greatest obstacle to an experience of God is a previous experience of God. We latch onto the page we've just written, assuming it's immutable—if we meddle with it, we will somehow mar its holiness. But this isn't how creation works. "God is not static," wrote Priscilla Braun. "God is in constant creation, constantly being created. We are not static, either. We are in constant creation." Within every draft resides tremendous possibility.

What gives writing the potential to *become*? The writer's open heart. When we think of our work as carved in stone, it is. When we approach writing as a means of exploration or, as is the case with spiritual direction clients, a means of relating to a sacred source, the words are mutable and the process revelatory.

A healthy writing practice occurs in two dimensions: Horizontally, in the sheer quantity of new work, and vertically, in revision. The horizontal generating happens naturally (although not without struggle) for those who love to write—think of all the journal-keepers scribbling away; think of closet poets and novelists. The vertical dimension often remains invisible and seemingly unattainable. We read the published works of great authors and assume they are different from us—more gifted, more brilliant—when often they just have the gumption to tunnel downward, exploring. Writers move vertically by revising our work, taking it through its paces to completion.

By encouraging writers to recognize the malleablility of text, we offer them a new dimension in the spiritual practice of writing. A prolonged commitment to a creative

project yields different fruit. We tap a wisdom both within and beyond us; we harness the power inherent in art-making; we make our most intimate ideas available to an audience, thus connecting us back to community. What was born in intimacy grows up to an independent and interactive life.

Revision is a prolonged and thorough meditation on a subject. Like any meditation done well, revision can ground us in our source.

Writing is communicating

I left seventh grade teaching to work in retreat ministry. The center's director often talked about the spiritual life as traversing the path of a figure eight: On one side was the journey inward into solitude, contemplation, and prayer; on the other was the journey outward into work and relationships. Each of us must find a unique balance between receptivity and outreach, between listening and speaking, between stillness and action. God, of course, is present everywhere, but we are most centered in God when we honor both sides of our path.

For many, writing facilitates the journey inward. The journal works as a marvelous "life's companion," as Christina Baldwin calls it.[iii] Because the journal has no outside audience, it's a safe haven for honesty, messiness, and questioning; it brings us into our most vulnerable self and therefore opens us to transformation. We write to discover what we know. Even in this most private of places, writing is communicating—with ourselves, with the collective unconscious, with whatever we name God.

At the same time, the journal is much like spiritual direction in that it provides an external container for the writer's most intimate self. I think of both as birthing rooms where a new self comes into being and we can safely test what it's like to be that person.

In this way even private writing facilitates the journey outward. It pulls us into the world; it changes us.

As soon as writers have the impulse to share their work, they begin traversing the path of the figure eight outward. An audience of any kind, even in spiritual direction, gives the page a human dimension. What will the reader think? Will she or he be moved? What will it mean for others to interact with these words I've formed? At first our writing feels like an extension of ourselves, an extra limb reaching out to touch a reader's hand.

Thoughts of the audience can prove deadly for writers. Had Anne Frank considered that her diary would be read by millions, I doubt she would have shared her anger at her mother or the occasion of her first period. Concern for what others will think can lead to self-censorship, thus breaching the safety and freedom needed for deep listening. The finest writers follow Strunk and White's advice: "Your whole duty as a writer is to please and satisfy yourself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one."[iv] Profound privacy isn't just a birthing space for spiritual growth. It's the starting point for great literature.

Yet most beginning writers who have the impulse to share their work find this kind of privacy unattainable. Their need for an audience's approval is huge. When readers simply gives this approval, they do little to facilitate the writer's growth.

So an initial task for any first reader is to nurture the writer's deep solitude. Praise messiness, honesty, rampant questioning. Ignore the surface elements of the text, no matter how awful or awesome, and attend instead to the writer's exploration. Foster the writer's capacity to converse with his or her soul. For many (perhaps most) writers,

this journey deeper into solitary writing fulfills their calling. "An audience of one" may be enough.

For others, writing for a wider audience can be profoundly life-giving. By this I don't mean the rewards of publication; I mean that the *process* of writing for an audience—learning to engage others, creating transcendent beauty, connecting the particulars of one's life or ideas to the human condition—can move us into deeper relationship with God. At times the Spirit beckons writers through an audience.

Initial readers need to remind new writers that audience is neither monolithic nor omnipresent. Writers can change how and when we relate to readers; we can determine who our readers are, at least until publication; to some extent we can control what sort of feedback we receive. A big part of a writer's development is learning, as Stephen King recommends, how to write with the door closed and rewrite with the door open.[v] Or, as I recommend, open the door inch by careful inch.

Stories are of us and beyond us

Here's a familiar experience: You begin journaling about some troubling event; you gripe, spin your wheels and then remember a dream that illuminates your problem or some wise words you've read. Suddenly you delve into feelings you hadn't anticipated. By the time you close the journal covers, your problem may be unsolved but something inside you has shifted.

People assume that memoir writing is simply a matter of recording what happened, but like journaling the process is full of surprises. Our minds leap unexpectedly. We recall details we'd forgotten. Insights shift our understanding of the

past. "A memoir may always be retrospective," writes Nuala O'Faolain, "but the past is not where its action takes place."[vi]

This creative dynamic is better recognized in fiction, where authors often describe their plans being thwarted by contrarian characters. Regardless of the genre, creative writing that grapples with questions in an open-hearted manner has a life all its own. Words emerge from our hands; we seem to "speak" on the page. But in fact creative writing includes both speaking and listening. Writing teachers say, "Write what you know but write toward the unknown." Call it the muse, call it the collective unconscious, call it God, a dynamic force exists in the universe and creativity helps us participate in its work.

Oddly enough, stories have wills. In response to her early draft about learning to play piano as a child, memoirist Patricia Hampl wrote, "The piece hasn't yet found its subject; it isn't yet about what it wants to be about. Note: What IT wants, not what I want."[vii] Most beginning writers are surprised by the idea that writing might have its own agenda. But accepting this is critical to writing well. Through revision we continue this call and response: We listen for what the story wants, attempt to give it language, then step back again to listen.

Usually we're drawn to write by what I call an "outer story"—some memory or idea or feeling or conundrum. The outer story is consciously chosen. Every outer story has a hidden inner story that only comes forward with revision. The inner story can never be imposed; it is always discovered. Why? Robert Frost wrote, "No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."[viii] An author's emotional journey through the writing process embeds itself in the text.

Without the writer's open heart, without the author's willingness to cry and be surprised, the work itself remains heartless. Only a rich and multidimensional engagement with a subject leads to quality engagement with an audience.

Years ago I heard the children's author Jane Yolen say that all writers are responsible to three things, in this order: First we're responsible to the story, second to ourselves, and only lastly to our audience. I hear echoing in her words the commandments to love your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Like the implementation of these commandments, the practices of serving story, self, and audience get tangled. Behind Yolen's hierarchy exists a theological unity.

When I work with clients and students I use Yolen's terms—to write well, we must serve our stories. This means setting aside any self-serving agenda, usually the yearning for praise, and listening to a tender place within us yet beyond us. "Follow the ache," my colleague Cheri Register says. Because the nature of writing is such that we discover what we think only by doing it, we need to listen for any profound movement at the heart of our work. We must look for the heartbeat—the place where story, self and audience come alive. The heartbeat is a piece's purpose for being; it is its primary, unifying theme; it is the life pulsing from some mysterious source through the writer's heart, through the reader's being and into the world.

Both spiritual director and writer must turn their allegiance from narcissistic impulses toward fostering the story's evolution. In my mind, serving the story and serving God are the same. Listening for the story's heartbeat is essentially discernment.

Engaging the soul of stories

When my daughter was old enough to use a crayon—that is, create—I read a parenting book challenging parents to consider how they respond to kids' achievements. Most of us look at crayon scribbles and say, "Wow! That's great!" This teaches children the delight of a final product. Sometimes we respond, "I'm so proud of you," thus emphasizing creative work's effect on an audience. The parenting expert warned us to be careful with this second reaction since it can orient children's play toward pleasing others rather than themselves. Instead she suggested responding to the child's process: "I bet making that felt good."

In my mind all three are worthy responses; artists need to be nurtured in their process, commended for their product, and given a sense of their impact on an audience. But when Gwyn thrusts a page of scribbles in my face, the most satisfying experience for us both is when I "ooh" at the pink loop and "aah" at the brown squiggle and then ask, "What's this?"

"A pencil sharpener," she says.

"And what's happening here?"

"This is the pencil, and here's Hootie sharpening it, and—Hoo! Hoo!—he flies to the owl library and…"

Artists long to communicate. A pat on the back gratifies the ego but never the soul. I appreciate when readers respond to my books with silent awe but part of me is disappointed. Readers put authors on pedestals when they withhold part of themselves, their own authority, and have not fully engaged with the material. This is psychological transference in the literary world. The reader reactions that replenish my creative fuel are

those that relate how my story has intersected with their lives. I'll never forget one twenty-year-old lesbian woman who asked me to sign her copy of *Swinging on the Garden Gate*; the book was highlighted, dog-earred, and beat up almost beyond recognition. She told me she'd been raised Catholic but was considering converting and going into the ministry. *Swinging* had awakened her vocation. With her simple thanks, my disappointment at *Swinging's* small print run evaporated. A healing power far greater than anything I could conjure was working through my story.

Communication is participatory, an expansive give-and-take that at its best transforms all parties. The longing that's led me to share my writing with spiritual directors has been satisfied instead by my witty, practical-minded writing group. They never fail to note when I wrap up essays with a seemingly wise but too-easy ending. "What do you *mean* by a piece's heartbeat?" they'll ask. "What's at stake for *you*?" They'll speculate about answers based on my text and a lively conversation will follow.

Even with this essay I'm driven by hope that the dialogue begun in the privacy of my easy chair will emerge into lively public discourse. Such engagement connects the small inner workings of my being to a bigger Soul working beyond me.

Writers depend on readers' responses to know whether their work has a life of its own. I suspect that, when a client hands writing to a spiritual director, he or she is really asking, "Is the Spirit at work here?" Directors can help clients explore that question as we usually do, in the context of their lives. But we also have a responsibility to explore it as readers, sharing if and where we are moved by the text. How is the Spirit unfolding in this bit of creation? Early drafts seem like an extension of the self, but as a piece is

reworked it grows into its own being independent of the author. While a work is still in process, the best feedback responds to what the piece *is* as well as what it is *becoming*.

For this reason, I suggest detaching yourself from what you know about your client and reading the text as an entity all its own. Even when writers don't consider their work separate from themselves, this is the best way to honor a story. "My business as a friendly critic *is* inherently respectful," writes Cheri Register. "A direct, cathartic cry of sorrow calls for consolation, but a poem offered for critique deserves to be read as a poem."[ix] Allow reading to be a meeting between the text and your own roughly-hewn heart.

A three-fold process

Then I recommend three steps. First **note the piece's strengths**. By this I don't mean blithe general compliments. Consider carefully how you were affected by the writing. Where were you engaged? What did you see / hear / feel / think about? What did the author do to create this effect in you? Often I read such passages aloud so the writer can feel their power. Then I share my experience: "Your sensory details in this scene made my heart pound," or "When you asked this question, I found myself wondering…"

By noting a piece's strengths we usually satisfy the writer's need for someone to say, "That's great!" But we also offer useful information. Writers rarely know what's shining in a piece. By sharing the impact of specific passages, we show their creative work dynamically interacting with another human being. We mirror back the Spirit alive on the page.

Next **ask questions**. As a spiritual director you already know that the best questions are genuine, not leading; they open possibility; they invite us into deeper levels of honesty. When a memory is related without emotion, ask, "What were you feeling here?" When emotion is described without context, ask, "What was happening in the physical world?" Questions about the author's motivation for writing are fruitful, and the best answers are multidimensional. The soul of a story is always bigger than what appears on the page. Our job as readers is to open doors onto this soul, and questions do this beautifully.

Lastly, **articulate the heartbeat**. What do you see this piece as essentially about? What's at stake for the writer? What unifies the story? What gives it life? As best you can, give textual support for your comments. What scenes or details or bits of exposition or images lead you to feel this? How did you respond to the spirit of the piece? Be descriptive rather than prescriptive in your response.

Readers must be fully present to the text before we can recognize sacred movement there. As a human being, what did this piece mean to you? If we can articulate this for writers, we give them a tremendous gift—evidence of their participation in God's unfolding work.

Some stories

For years I offered spiritual direction to a young man I'll call Pete. Periodically he brought me pages of a fantasy about a crusty oldster who went on fabulous adventures. Because of Pete's delight in writing and love of fantasy literature, he quite naturally fell into what Robert Johnson calls "Active Imagination," creating characters as an external manifestation of dynamics in his psyche.[x] Pete also gave me essays for feedback but he

knew his adventure writing was different. "I don't know how to pray," he said, "but I can do this." I was the only audience for Pete's fantasy writing.

I always looked forward to the next installment. What creatures would the oldster encounter next? How would he survive the impending battle? In the margin I made observations about the story without reference to Pete's life: "I love the oldster's wit here" and "Once again, he's blundering into trouble!" I also asked questions. "Why does he use his sword first and think later? When he takes a risk here, what is the source of his courage?" At the end of each installment I offered reflections on the themes emerging in the story, how the oldster was changing over time or how his impulsivity was as much an obstacle as the odd creatures he faced. In other words, I walked into his stories, looked around, and made observations.

Pete always lit up at these responses. Carl Jung advised his students not to analyze dreams but rather "dream the dream onward," which was how my conversations with Pete felt. They reminded me of my writing group's impassioned discussions. They also reminded me of stories about the Bronte siblings participating in imaginative play well into adulthood. The world Pete created was alive. It represented the landscape of a psyche strong enough to thrive within human relationships. Children know this better than any of us: Imaginative play allows us to face fears and grow into our fullness. Done in solitude, the experience is rich. Done with a trustworthy friend, imaginative play is dynamic, full of tears and surprises.

The oldster of Pete's story was an archetype, a representation of a part of himself united with all humanity. Through his fantasy writing he could hear the longings of his

heart, recognize barriers to his growth, and feel the Spirit's movement. I felt privileged to participate.

A few years ago a woman came to see me; she was writing a memoir about her struggles with ovarian cancer. I began by asking why.

"To make money," she answered.

I broke the bad news.

She back-peddled; she knew the writer's plight. "Recognition," she said.

I gave her credit for honesty—most writers want fame but few state it so baldly. Still, I asked, was this reason enough to spend hundreds of solitary hours in front of a computer revisiting memories of chemotherapy?

Then she told me a story. When she was going through treatment, she realized that nobody would miss her terribly should she die. She decided to write a book because she wanted to matter.

I paused. When a person is this honest, the air vibrates. I felt reverent, and told her so. While she still had a ways to go to put this stake front and center in her writing, she had exposed information that was absolutely essential to writing well. She'd revealed the piece's heartbeat. If she writes her book as an attempt to get the reader to care about her, it will be a flop. But if her book explores why she hasn't mattered and what it means to matter and how a life-threatening illness can bring forward the ultimate value of a life, the book has a possibility of working—of *mattering*.

In other words, when we connect the heart of our writing to our own aching heart, the sparks fly.

When writers first seek me out, I always start by asking, "What's your stake in this project?" Really I'm asking, "How does it touch your heart?" To an extent the only genuine answer is, "It's a mystery."

I remember a small group in one of my classes enthusing about a funny collection of anecdotes about a family car. The author's father had been a mechanic; he kept the car running for three turns of the odometer over thirty years. Then someone said to her, "While I love these stories, I'm not sure why you're writing them."

The author burst into tears—a week prior, she'd hauled the car to the junkyard.

The group was floored. This information gave her story drive, emotional resonance, and present-day relevance. These weren't just sentimental memories, they were part of a grieving process that looked through the old car to a family togetherness the author had lost. "You need to include that!" everyone insisted. The author's tears and the readers' instant recognition of the story's soul were confirmation.

Note how the heartbeat of this writer's story was located off the page. So often the real reason we write is hidden from us! Readers can provide new eyes to help us "re-see"—that is, revise—our text.

Early on when I was writing *Swinging on the Garden Gate*, a professor returned a chapter to me marked with red ink. Every time I'd used an abstraction like "God" or "Spirit," she'd circled the word and written in the margin, "What do you *mean*?" After I threw a tantrum, called her a belligerent atheist, and put the draft aside for a month, her questions finally sank in. I could not assume my reader knew what I meant by these

words. I had to create my understanding of Spirit on the page; I had to represent God as a character for the reader to encounter. The story's heartbeat was located within my particular experience of God, not some clichéd spouting of seemingly holy language.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus demands of the disciples. These days I ask similar questions of my clients, albeit in black ink. Articulating the sacred within the details of our lives is an essential part of spiritual growth. When we call God using others' names—that is, with creed and dogma—we can't heed God's specific manifestation in our very specific life. God is in the details. It's no coincidence that good writing is found there, too.

Finally, I want to share Jim's story. Jim was a spiritual director and retired pastor who had survived a bout with cancer in his twenties and as a result spent his life in a wheelchair. The short pieces Jim wrote concerned a recent wound that had appeared at his sacrum. His medical team tried to close that wound, to no avail. He had initially conceived of his project as four or five essays chronicling his faith struggles as he endured multiple surgeries and long periods of immobility. Then he got bogged down. He wanted the wound to heal, providing neat closure to his essays. When it didn't, he made the assumption that his essays would never be finished.

In my crass manner I told Jim that a physical healing would be a predictable ending. Besides, his essays weren't about the wound; they were about the questions the wound posed to his faith. The wound didn't need resolution for his writing to be complete but the questions did, or they at least needed exploration. Maybe living with

lack of closure *was* the resolution. Regardless, he could complete his project without physical healing.

When he revisited his essays, Jim discovered that while he still desperately wanted the wound to heal, he also occasionally embraced the possibility that he would spend the rest of his life with a chronically open wound and that this was not all bad. His wound forced him to be "open" in ways that strengthened his capacity to listen. It made him dependent on others' care, keeping him humble. He railed against the limitations imposed by the wound, he sought medical solutions, and yet he also understood himself to be a wounded healer, working from his place of vulnerability.

Jim's revision recounted this with detailed scenes and unabashed questions. As I read his aching portrayal of paradoxical truths, I felt deep awe.

Later Jim told me that revising helped him integrate these spiritual insights. I've experienced this phenomenon as well: In the course of writing, we land on wisdom beyond what we currently embody, and the naming of this wisdom helps us grow into it. Language stakes out the next leg of our journey.

What is going on here? Our stories are not our selves. They have their own wholeness, their own identities. Only when we know that our stories are of us and yet beyond us—God and not God—can we begin a lively dialogue. "To be a writer," Sarah Porter says, "means, perhaps, exactly this: surrendering the defined, expressible self to the wider possibilities of the page."[xi] Spiritual directors can nurture this surrender; we can foster writers who are unafraid to tell provocative stories with great love. The Word is still being written, literally, and we have an opportunity to participate.

Two practicalities

- Reading is work. It's not possible to give manuscripts longer than three pages thoughtful attention within the hour of a spiritual direction session. If you read work outside of a session, asking for additional compensation is appropriate.
- When your clients grow serious about learning the craft of writing, send them to a writing coach. But remember that their creative work remains a place of sacred unfolding. Be sure to continue asking how the sacred is emerging in their writing: What is your piece's heartbeat? What are you discovering there?

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Biographical Statement

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