

SIT, STAND, WALK

The Art of Spiritual Direction

Philip Seddon

*God goes not constantly by the same rule . . . no man can say that in such and such cases God will and doth desert men, or that he always does so,—but is various in his dealings herein.*¹

*God breaketh not all men's hearts alike.*²

WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR when I come to you for spiritual direction? I want to answer this question with a trajectory of spiritual direction over a period of time in mind, but to begin by noting four basic levels of need, which I will outline in the *persona* of a directee, and then explore in further detail:

1. When I first turn to you for spiritual direction, I admit to myself that I need *space*, time, quiet, comfort, privacy. Something new and strange is happening. I have not been here before, and I do not know what to say. Whether something erupted in me long ago or emerged more recently, or both, I know that I need to jump off the train and walk, stand or—best of all—*sit* still.³ Pascal says, famously: ‘The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room’.⁴ I need to stop time, take time, make time for what is primary: myself.

¹ Thomas Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, volume 3 (Edinburgh: Nichols, 1861), 292. Reprinted by Tanski Publications, 1996, and then at Grand Rapids by Reformation Heritage Books in 2006. Also republished by Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001.

² Richard Baxter, *Autobiography* (London: Dent, 1971), 11.

³ This alludes to the title of Watchman Nee’s book on discipleship, *Sit, Walk, Stand: The Process of Christian Maturity* (Fort Washington: CLC, 2009)—that language itself being taken from verbs in Psalm 1, even though the book itself is a study in Ephesians (in the book, ‘sit’ derives from Ephesians 2: 6, ‘walk’ from 4: 1 and ‘stand’ from 6: 11).

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, translated by A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), n. 136: ‘*Tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre*’. Morton Kelsey offers a brilliant illustration of precisely this need in his *Encounter with God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), 181–182.

This moment, that I would have stand still, is important to me. I need you to recognise my need for space, and give me time. I need to be able to sit and, in your presence, let down my anchor in the Trinity, even if the One I long for now feels absent.

2. In this expansive, safe space, with a complete absence of threat, I need the welcome of a *face* that will take me as I am, as I know God does, even though I cannot really believe it. And even when the light of God is reflected from this face towards me, I still have to take the risk of trying to find the words I cannot, words that I have long concealed in a place deeper within even than I know. I may have no words. There may be long silences, or inarticulate sounds and groans, but these are preparing the way for my voice in the presence of a face which never rejects, slanders or annihilates me. 'Listen to the voice of my lamentation', I am saying; 'do not mock me'. And then I discover that you do not dismiss my utterances, neither minimising nor relativising the force with which my deepest well overflows. I find you to be a *space* and a *face* with which I feel safe.
3. Deeper down, what I know I need and seek is *grace*—God's grace. I need to trust that in my search for a place of safety, with a face that understands and accepts whatever I say, I and we will both be brought into the arena of God's grace. I know that we may soon encounter 'the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:10), so I want to be sure that you do not just hear and listen, do not only understand what I am talking about, but also know the grace of God that I long for and can help me find it. I need to be able to *walk* as well as *sit*. I need to be sure that you, my director, know that 'deeper than horror is the Joy'.⁵
4. Further in and further on, having found a place to talk or be silent, to cry or sit, to stand, walk or be still; having begun to see the face of Christ in yours; having heard the Word that makes me clean (John 15:3); having been received by the sacrament of your presence; having been touched in human communion by the real presence of Christ, I then find myself

⁵ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1994), 274.

being drawn and called to follow Christ into the heights and depths (Ephesians 3:18) of *his* vocation, which I begin to realise is mine. I discover that we have been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20), buried with Christ (Romans 6:4) and raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1), and 'I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am'.⁶ 'Kenosis is theosis'.⁷ All of this—paradoxically—I know I want: the knowledge that this revelation of Christ's very self is within me. I do know it; but I do not always know that I know it.

Eugene Peterson summarises these four aspects of this holy task:

Spiritual direction is the act of paying attention to God, calling attention to God, being attentive to God in a person or circumstances or situation. A prerequisite is standing back, doing nothing. It opens a quiet eye of adoration. It releases the energetic wonder of faith. It notices the Invisibilities in and beneath and around the Visibilities. It listens for the Silences between the spoken Sounds.⁸

So—impossibly—I need you to be an eye and an ear, an outstretched hand, a mouth for the gospel of God, a sponge, a sounding-board, a mirror, a Bible. In short, I am asking you to be an icon of the resurrection: in Peterson's recent phrasing, to 'practise resurrection' in the specific instance of my life, to see me here and now with resurrection eyes.⁹

So now let me go back over the various levels that I have just outlined, and look in a little more depth at each. I relate them to four pieces of music, each of which, in different ways, expresses something of the pain of longing for God; to some Bible texts; and to some quotations from Thomas Goodwin.¹⁰

⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 66.

⁷ Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 37.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 181.

⁹ See Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). We might well adapt James's warning in 3:1–2 with the instruction: 'Let not many of you become spiritual directors!'

¹⁰ St John of the Cross' writings on 'the dark night' are widely known and appreciated, but the similarly acute spiritual analyses, diagnoses and medicine of Puritan and Independent writers such as Thomas Goodwin are hardly known. This is a great pity. I was introduced to the works of Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680; President of Magdalen College, Oxford, from 1650 to 1660) in 1983 during the writing of *Darkness* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1983).



A Safe Space

The first piece of music I would like to think about here is J. S. Bach's cantata *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen* (BWV 32). There are light, pizzicato chords, and harsh tone and semitone clashes (E/F#, G/F#); there is the plaintive, yearning oboe matching the floating, hurting soprano voice singing of love and absence. There is the blunt contradiction in faith between the first line, '*Liebster Jesus, mein Verlangen*' ('Dearest Jesus, whom I long for'), and the second, '*Sage mir, wo find ich dich?*' ('Tell me, where can I find you?'). Deep love and longing, love and loss, yearn and strain backwards and forwards and upwards in semitones to the cry that breaks the heart. The music expresses the pain of distance, disjunction and dislocation.

The opening page of Thomas Goodwin's *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness* (1633) vividly describes the pain of maximum darkness. This is how he begins:

Take a true believer, who hath had the least beam of the 'light of the glory of God, which shines in the face of Christ' ... let in upon his soul Think with yourselves, what is the worst thing that can be supposed to befall this man. What worse than to have that cranny, through which he first espied that beam, to be, as it were, clean shut up, the 'light of God's countenance' withdrawn ... and the terrors of the Almighty shot into his soul?¹¹

So what I want at such a point in my own life is someone who will hear me, who will listen to the cry beneath the tears or the fear hidden behind the curtains of silence, or even the joy beneath the cry, but also someone who can listen to God. It may be even simpler than that. I may simply need someone to whom I can talk.

I think of Joe Cotterill, now 93, my first Crusader Class leader, who opened the door of scripture to me, and to whom I would talk. He

¹¹ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 235.

taught me scripture, I asked him questions. He gave me *space* to explore—it was not officially spiritual direction, but the freedom of the sheep to ‘come in and go out and find pasture’ (John 10:9). He was a listening ear. He listened to anything and everything I said. I just *sat* with him. I found company, welcome, a guide, a friend. We rarely prayed, but it always gives me pleasure to think of him.

So spiritual direction may begin—and remain—at the level of friendship. To this, then, there may be added the dimension of ‘soul friendship’. I like the Latin translation of that role: *amicus* or *amica animae*, ‘friend of the soul’—not just a friend, but a friend of the soul, of the inner hidden person, longing to be known, whatever I know or am not aware is there.¹² This is Margaret Guenther’s language of ‘holy listening’;¹³ Tilden Edwards calls it ‘spiritual friendship’ or ‘spiritual companionship’.¹⁴ ‘What you and I need’, as one of those joke text cards says, ‘is a good listening to’.

Carl Jung somewhere tells of a patient who came to him and sat for an hour without saying a word—but returned later because for that person the relief of not having to say anything, the freedom to sit in silence without being attacked or hurried along, the freedom to be with another person who was listening and waiting intently and compassionately was a revelation, and therefore—in some ways—a salvation. And so, I have been able to sit with you; you have sat with me, as Jesus asked the disciples to ‘sit here while I pray’ (Mark 14:32), you have heard me, and so I can be free to say a psalm which thanks God for hearing my voice and my supplications (Psalms 116:1, 6:9, 28:6).

Or things may be much more chaotic—an avalanche of pain may crash down the valley, and you, the director, may feel overwhelmed by all that I pour out over you. Actually, I do not want you to explain it all, I just want you to listen. It helps when you ask, ‘Tell me more; what happened? Can you describe that again in more

¹² See Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994 [1977]); Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (New York: HarperOne, 1989); and John O’Donoghue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

¹³ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992); Henry Morgan and Roy Gregory, *The God You Already Know: Developing Your Prayer and Spiritual Life* (London: SPCK, 2009).

¹⁴ Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1980) and *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending the Soul* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2000).

detail?' Nor will I be embarrassed if I see tears in your eyes, because I will know that what I have said moves you; and perhaps if I see that the way I was treated hurts you, I can believe that God, too, has heard my cry and has shown me compassion through you. You have been my place of refuge, so I can more easily say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust', 'my portion in the land of the living' (Psalms 91:2, 142:5). In either situation, you have been God to me.

Nor (in passing) do I underestimate the power of e-mails as direction. I could write to you, as I do to others, and explore on paper what may be difficult to express even in the best face-to-face conversation. So long as I know you can receive me and be my secure place

A Welcoming Face

Herbert Howells's *Like as the Hart* is another E-minor piece of music, with sharps and flats, dropping thirds and minor sevenths—even the jazz-blues line of B♭, A, G, E. There are external reproaches to reinforce the internal jangling. There is longing, thirst 'for God, yea, even for the living God', 'tears ... day and night' and questions: 'When?' 'Where?' 'Why?' (Psalm 42:2, 3, 5 and again 9, 10, 11). Above all, the longing to 'come and appear before the presence of God' (*Book of Common Prayer*), or now, in the NRSV, to 'come and behold the face of God'. (That overlap between 'presence' and 'face' in Hebrew [*pānîm*] is very interesting.)

I recall a workshop in September 2009 at the Restoring Prayer conference in Cambridge when I asked what had been most important for people in their experience of whatever they meant by darkness. One answer flashed out: the *faces* of other believers. They are my consolation, even if they can also be my desolation. I forget, of course,



that they are my mirror-image, which is why I need you to be a mirror to me of my genuine self, and of God. I need a *face* in the darkness as well as a place to weep, and to bring my shadow into view.

In theology, David Ford has explored this element of the ‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6),¹⁵ and only recently did I again see freshly the link between *our* seeing *with unveiled faces* the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, and that glory *on the face of Jesus Christ*. When I look at your face, I am unconsciously looking for signs of the face of Jesus Christ, signs of the image of God in you being cleansed, so that I can believe that it might be possible in me, too. Because if your face can remind me of God’s, then I might be able to ask you what those who visited the Desert Fathers and Mothers often asked them: ‘Father, Mother, give me a word’. So I might ask you for a clue, a word, a thought, a verse, a passage of scripture, and know that through you, God would give me some life-giving word, daily bread, relief.

God’s Grace

Arvo Pärt’s ‘Como cierva sedienta’ on the CD *Orient Occident* (1998) is a setting of Psalms 42 and 43. Here is another minor, but indeterminate and shifting, key, with hints and wild fragments of pressure, jagged notes, a taut line of increasingly anguished and extremely high voices. There is assault, attack, bare lines and notes, chattering hyenas. I sense anguished groping and straining towards something unknown, loved, long lost and still to be found again. Here, even more than in the Bach and the Howells, large, lunging intervals, lurches and dips of line express a hollowing out, a vacuum, a collapse, a being-stretched or an ascent. Above all, I sense a four-way struggle: between *You*, ‘God, my rock’, my defender, and ‘Why have you forgotten me?’ (42:9); and between the external mockers (‘*they* say to me continually “Where is your God?”’ 42:10) and the internal doubt and torture (‘When shall *I* come and behold?’ 42:2).

Yes, before long, if not straight away, I find myself getting into deeper water than I expected. This is where three themes become inextricably linked: the experience of desolation, the need for *grace*, and the *gift* of grace, which is consolation. Listen to Morton Kelsey:

I have seen many people with their masks down, and I have never yet seen any who was not infinitely more attractive and beautiful

¹⁵ David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) chapter 7, ‘Facing Jesus Christ’ and chapter 8, ‘The Face on the Cross and the Worship of God’.

unmasked than masked. The ugliness we often see in the naked soul is far more than made up by its native beauty, which is more wonderful and attractive than any other creation of God. When a man finally opens up the depths of himself to me I cannot help but love what I see. So I believe it is with God. When a man comes before Him in utter honesty, nakedly himself, there is a response on the part of God which opens channels of contact between God and man.¹⁶

Tears turn to smiles, or I may not quite know which is which, or smiles turn back into tears, but certainly ‘those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves with them’ (Psalms 126:6).

So: what do I want from you, my spiritual director? I select five *desiderata*. First and last, your *prayers*. Metropolitan Antony tells the story of Father Silouan on Mount Athos praying for Nicholas, a young man who worked for the monastery.

In the beginning I prayed with tears of compassion for Nicholas, for his young wife, for the little child, but as I was praying the sense of the divine presence began to grow on me and at a certain moment it grew so powerful that I lost sight of Nicholas, his wife, his child, his needs, their village, and I could be aware only of God, and I was drawn by the sense of the divine presence deeper and deeper, until of a sudden, at the heart of this presence, I met the divine love holding Nicholas, his wife, and his child, and now it was with the love of God that I began to pray for them again¹⁷

Think also of the visitor to Mount Athos asking an elder, ‘May I write to you sometimes to ask for advice?’ ‘No’, the monk replied, ‘but I will pray for you’. The visitor went away saddened. But another monk said to him, ‘You ought to be very happy that the *geronta* promised to pray for you; he doesn’t say that to everyone. His advice is good; but his prayers are far, far better.’¹⁸

¹⁶ Kelsey, *Encounter with God*, 199–200. And compare the words of the nineteenth-century German Protestant pastor Wilhelm Löhe, quoted in Heribert Mühlén, *A Charismatic Theology: Initiation in the Spirit* (London: Burns and Oates, 1978), 86: ‘I have never felt deeper respect for a human being than I did before my penitents acknowledging their misdeeds with shame and repentance. I bowed before them. I served them gladly.’

¹⁷ Anthony Bloom, *School for Prayer* (London: Libra, 1970), 74–75.

¹⁸ Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), xiv.

Yes, I need to know that you are interceding for me before the face of God, that you are holding on to me where I have lost my footing. I need your ‘listening prayer’.¹⁹ And I need you to be able to pray across the spiritual traditions, so that you can pray with me with tears, or in silence, or in few words, or in many words inspired by the Spirit’s running water, or in calling down a blessing on me, or in quiet praying in tongues, as the Spirit bears witness.

Then I need your *patience*, because I need patience. I need it because some things never seem to change or improve, and I feel as frozen as one of Queen Jadis’ stone statues in *The Magician’s Nephew*.²⁰ Or, contrarily, with John Bunyan, ‘I should sometimes be up and down twenty times in an hour’.²¹ As Goodwin says: ‘We are not the same to-day that yesterday we were; but “Christ is the same to-day, yesterday and for ever”, Hebrews 13:8’.²² So sometimes I need you to tell me that you can see the change in me, even if I cannot, still feeling as trapped as ever in circumstances I feel I cannot change.

I also need your *direction*, your spiritual direction, your specific advice and instruction,²³ your wisdom from God. I need you to pray for and to have what I also want to have, which is what Solomon asked for: in the Authorised Version an ‘understanding heart’, or what the NRSV calls an ‘understanding mind ... to discern ...’, and what literally is a ‘listening heart’ (*lēb shōmēā*) (1 Kings 3:9). What I do not always understand is that I have been fed lies from my youth upwards: lies from others, and then my own internalised expansions. But you know that. As I talk, you can hear my lies about myself and about God. So I need your direction, to expose the lies and to reveal to me the *grace* of God by which to live. I needed you to help me *sit* and then *stand*; now I need you to help me *walk*, and to *walk* with me along the Way where I am being summoned.

Goodwin is so good on this aspect of the ‘child of light walking in darkness’. He recognises that the Spirit may lead us into darkness;²⁴ he

¹⁹ A phrase in use at Holy Trinity, Brompton.

²⁰ See C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (London: Macmillan, 1955).

²¹ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, n. 191.

²² Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 313.

²³ See William Barry, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins: 1982); Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion*; and, emphasizing the role of the ‘spiritual elder’ as ‘spirit-bearer’, John Chryssavgis, *Light through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 127–139, here 130.

²⁴ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, chapter 3.

recognises that Satan ‘may draw forth false and fearful conclusions ... and start amazing doubts and fears of [our] utter want of grace’;²⁵ he sees how we ‘misinterpret’ and ‘pervert’, ‘misconstrue’ and ‘misapply’ what God is up to, and analyzes how we ‘practise ... delusions’ and draw ‘false conclusions’ and ‘false apprehensions’, and make ‘false accusations’ and ‘pass a false sentence’ upon ourselves.²⁶ This is where distinguishing between the psychological and the spiritual, between Satan and the id, or the super-ego, is so difficult and so important, and where you and I always need greater discernment than we seem to have. But even though Goodwin will put ‘Satan and our own conscience’ together in one sentence, listen to how he also distinguishes between Satan and the Holy Spirit:

The difference is, that the Holy Ghost dealeth sweetly herein, but as a father that rebukes and convinceth his child of his misdemeanours; but without putting in any such sting in the conclusion, that therefore we are hypocrites; ... but in these of Satan, that is the issue he mainly drives to all, and it is made the foot, the burden of all those his accusations.²⁷

Or, famously:

When the Holy Ghost hath lashed and whipped the conscience, and made it tender once, and fetched off the skin, Satan may then fret it more and more, and be still rubbing upon the sore, by his horrid suggestions and false fears cast in.²⁸

But Goodwin is equally well aware of the ways in which we feed our own sickness and desolation (especially in chapter 5). He knows ‘that our hearts are a great deep also’, in deceitfulness and self-deception (which Goodwin calls ‘false-reasoning’ and ‘befool[ing]’ ourselves), in our frequent inability to use our reason well, since it ‘is of itself a busy principle, that will be prying into, and making false glosses upon all God’s matters as well as our own’, and in ‘self-flattery’.²⁹

²⁵ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 246.

²⁶ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 246–247, 268–269.

²⁷ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 269–270. Consider that Jung, when asked what system of psychotherapy was most similar to his, replied: ‘The closest to my system? ... probably it was the method practised by Abbé Huvelin and the men like him who were skilled directors of conscience in France in the last century.’ (Quoted in Kelsey, *Encounter with God*, 159.)

²⁸ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 282.

²⁹ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 249, 250, 251, 253.

I then also need you to *bear scripture* within you, Job and the Psalms, Paul and Peter, so that you can give me texts and promises which I can feed on, to counteract the lies I can still fall into. I need you not to set the Spirit against scripture, because both are vital to me. And I love it, as you listen and pray, when you are given the gift of words from scripture to match the words I have been using, so that I can meditate and feed on those verses on my own when nothing else satisfies. I might want you to say that you sense what God is



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saying, or that God has given you a picture,³⁰ or a word of prophecy to comfort me, or a word in a spiritual tongue to undergird me. I do not want you to separate the direct Word of God from your role as director; I want you to be open to the Spirit at *this* moment. Sometimes, I need you to say the words that I cannot say. I need you to point me to, to take me to, to be, the *grace* of Christ. This means I also need your courage, and trust, in me, and in God, to travel with me into fearful or beautiful arenas I have never visited before, so that we meet the same Lord together, who is gracious to all those who call upon him (Psalms 86:5) and who blesses us mutually through and with each other.

In fact, I might need you precisely to say to me, or perhaps to convey to me by your general encouragement: 'Philip, take your courage in both hands. Trust your gut, trust your own instincts, trust this moment to be a gift of God's grace to you. Trust God to be here now, to lead you and speak to you; trust and trust God's mercy again

³⁰ We should certainly not minimise such 'charismatic' elements. I recently received a lengthy piece of documentation of the very precise ways in which one particular person's life had been radically turned around because she knew that particular 'words' from God had been addressed personally to her.

and always.’ ‘Only when we stop resisting the gift, and rest instead in God’s mercy, will we find our real voice.’³¹

But above all, I need *your knowledge of Christ*, whose brilliant light is more than I can bear, but which I know is in us and between us, so that I can sense his *grace* in the interface—the face-to-face encounter—between us. I need to know that whether God’s light seems to appear to me as darkness or light does not matter, since I have been baptized again and again into and by God’s Holy Spirit, and because I want to be continually baptized in the Spirit and to swim like a fish in the waters of Jesus’ baptism.

Kenosis is Theosis

The final piece of music I would like to refer to here is a song by Annie Lennox, ‘Ghosts in my Machine’, from her album *Songs of Mass Destruction*. Musically, it is marked by an aggressive, thumping rock bass line on the tonic/minor third relation, with an interspersed semitone descent in the bass line for the refrain, while the singer laments that she has had too much of everything, and cries out for her pain to be taken away, for some medicine to help her forget the ghosts that haunt her. It is very raw.

So now, in this most awesome aspect of my pilgrimage, when I am still coming to see you after years, and I think that perhaps I am boring

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you silly, I need you more than ever to accept my weakness and my blindness to what God has already done in me, and I need you still to hold my hand as I am called further in and further on. I need you to be as deep as I want to be, and I need you again to trust God for me, because sometimes—often—the darkness is a darkness where there is no light, ‘that is, no comfort’, ‘exceeding terrible and full of horror’, and I do not know

³¹ *Reflections for Daily Prayer* (London: Church House, 2010), 22 April 2010.

how to trust.³² Then I need to know not only how to *sit*, or *walk*, but also how to *stand* (Ephesians 6: 13–14). I need you to hope for me, and so to help me hope, that there is such a thing as the Light of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the joy of God’s countenance (Psalms 16:11); and that the darkness I feel is not dark to God, but ‘as light’ (Psalms 139:11–12). Blessed are those who know that, for they can guide others out of Hades. Goodwin writes:

Now, who are they who are furnished with such apt, and fit, and reasonable considerations to comfort such, but those who have had the same temptations, and have been in the like distresses? This art of speaking peace and words of comfort in season is the greatest wisdom in the world, and is not learned but in Heman’s [the psalmist’s] school.³³

This fourth—unnamed—element (though let me say again, ‘kenosis is theosis’) came into focus for me in the context of a corporate ‘writing’ of an Eastern Orthodox icon of the resurrection, the *Anastasis*. I was reminded by Carmen Orastean, an artist and iconographer from Romania,³⁴ that in Eastern Orthodoxy, Easter begins on Good Friday; Sunday begins on Friday: joy is proclaimed to those in the grave: ‘Christ is risen from the dead, by death he hath overcome death, And to them in the graves hath he given life’.³⁵

It is in the darkest, most unexplored depths of my soul that Christ seeks me out, looks into my face, and ‘with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm’ (*beyad hazāqāh ūbizrōa’ netūyāh*, Psalms 136:12, Jeremiah 32:21, etc.), raises me, Adam, you, Eve, up. ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ God will not take us somewhere else in order to minister grace to us; it will be here, right here and now—as we talk, considering this mess, this morass—that God administers God’s grace.

So, here I am. I have come to you for spiritual direction, told you about my shame and fears, my sense of a fragile ego and self, my abandonment, my fear of non-existence, of not being taken seriously, or of being idolized, fear that nobody, let alone you, could possibly love me if they saw a film of my thoughts. And all you can say is: ‘Philip, it’s

³² Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 238, 242.

³³ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 289.

³⁴ Carmen led a workshop on icon painting at the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme (STETS) Easter School in 2010.

³⁵ A Troparion (hymn) of the resurrection in the Orthodox prayer book.

OK'. 'You are being conformed to Christ' (see Romans 12:1–2), you say. 'You are being recast in the form of cross and resurrection. The divine Light is shining in you. The High Priest of our salvation was made flesh.' And then I recall that George Herbert said: 'My stuff is flesh, not brass'.³⁶ And Athanasius: 'He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God'.³⁷ 'So do not try to become God', you say, 'without being human, without being you'. What an extraordinary affirmation—thank you!

But then Goodwin warns me that 'after God hath pardoned [us] also in our consciences, as well as in heaven, yet the guilt may return again and leave us in darkness'.³⁸ The point is: *it happens*. Goodwin knows that. Again, he counsels patience,³⁹ explaining that 'waiting is indeed but an act of faith further stretched out. As an allegory is but a continued metaphor, so waiting is but a continuing to believe on God'.⁴⁰ He knows that we play the game of hiring lawyers to plead against ourselves, and begs us instead to plead to Christ for ourselves;⁴¹ 'if thou diest', he urges, 'die at his feet, mourning, bleeding out thy soul in tears', 'plead that thou art never able to satisfy him', and see how the tears flow as you fling your accusations in Christ's face.⁴²

And thus whilst thou mayest be a-speaking blindfold, as it were, casting anchor in the dark, yet speaking his very heart, he [Jesus] haply may own thee, and fall upon thy neck and kiss thee.⁴³

In short, you keep holding me between presumption and despair: between a self-centred assumption or anticipation that I am saved, and a self-centred assumption or presumption that I am not. You hold me in the *truth*.⁴⁴ You help me *stand*. Even after it all, if I only manage to remember one promise that you have given me, you have still ministered Christ to me in your role as director.

³⁶ George Herbert, 'The Pearl', in *The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), 82.

³⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De incarnatione Verbi Dei*, translated by a religious of CSMV (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1996 [1944]), n. 54.

³⁸ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 297.

³⁹ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 316: 'But, good souls, you that are in trouble; oh, take heed of such impatient wishes or speeches'

⁴⁰ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 330.

⁴¹ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 319, 333.

⁴² Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 334.

⁴³ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 336.

⁴⁴ See Joseph Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 47: 'there are two kinds of hopelessness. One is despair; the other, *praesumptio*. *Praesumptio* is a perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope. Despair is also an anticipation—a perverse anticipation of the nonfulfillment of hope.'

If one promise do belong to thee, then all do, for every one conveys whole Christ, in whom all the promises are made, and who is the matter of them all.⁴⁵

But please do not prejudge the path God will take with me. Give me neither false comforts nor false ideals. *Sit, stand* and *walk* with me. Do not send me to the psychiatrist because I have sensed Jesus deep within myself. Even if God has taken *you* at *Three Miles an Hour*, in the title of Kosuke Koyama's famous book, I can testify that God has sometimes come to me at lightning speed, 'in a flash, at a trumpet-crash'.⁴⁶ You never know, I might turn out to be a blessing to you; I might even start *running!*⁴⁷

Mysticism of Darkness and Light

Of course, it is extremely important to bear in mind what Goodwin says:

Think not therefore thou hast not true grace, because thou wert never terrified as some have been. As some have true faith and sound peace who never tasted 'joy unspeakable and glorious', so some have sound humiliation who never knew terrors of conscience.⁴⁸

And Richard Baxter is certainly right, again, that 'God breaketh not all men's hearts alike'. But, equally, God *mendeth* not all men's hearts alike. Spiritual direction is such a subtle vocation, such a gentle ministry, that it requires what Goodwin calls 'a lady's hand':

To be a bone-setter is not every man's skill; he must have special art and cunning, and withal a lady's hand, as we use to say, that is, meekness and pity.⁴⁹

But Goodwin himself and John Donne were alike absolutely clear about the reality of God's 'direct action'.

⁴⁵ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 321.

⁴⁶ Hopkins, 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection', 66.

⁴⁷ See Ann Griffiths (1776–1805): 'I shall walk, and as I run, I shall walk slowly all the days of my life, under the shadow of the merit of the blood of the Cross, and I shall run the course in the same way, and as I run I shall stand still and see the full salvation that I shall find when I come to rest in the grave', quoted in *The Lord of the Journey: A Reader in Christian Spirituality*, edited by Roger Pooley and Philip Seddon (London: HarperCollins, 1986), 364.

⁴⁸ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 342.

⁴⁹ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 289–290.

Some he humbleth much, some are led on with comfort; some he works on with a sudden and marvellous light, as if the sun should rise on the sudden at midnight, and on others insensibly and by degrees, as when the dawning steals upon the day.⁵⁰

[God] brought light out of darknesse, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring; though in the wayes of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintred and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupefied till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries, all occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons.⁵¹

So there is a ‘mysticism of light’⁵² as well as the more familiar mysticism of darkness; the Light can shine as well as apparently disappear. For, as Karl Rahner famously said: ‘The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all’. St Symeon the New Theologian, St Seraphim of Zarov, St Dorotheus of Gaza: all knew the fire of the Holy Spirit burning and shuddering within. ‘Just as a pregnant woman feels the child moving in her womb, so we know that the spirit of God dwells in us on account of the joy, the happiness, and the exultation we feel in our hearts’.⁵³ So does this friend who sent me these lines from a longer poem not so long ago:

What grace is mine that your eternal glory
seeks shelter in, transforms, the darkness of my fragility?
The revelation of your very self is the radiance that you
are in me.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness*, 263.

⁵¹ John Donne, ‘Preached at Paul’s, upon Christmas Day, in the Evening. 1624’, in *John Donne’s Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels: with a Selection of Prayers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California P, 2003), 182.

⁵² See George Maloney, *The Mystic of Fire and Light: St Symeon the New Theologian* (Denville, NJ: Dimension, 1975), especially 83–111; Basil Krivochéine, *Dans la lumière du Christ: St Syméon le nouveau théologien* (Paris: Editions de Chevetogne, 1980); Chryssavgis, *Light through Darkness*, 94–95; Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, ‘Enstasy—Ecstasy’, 230 following, especially 237, 241–257; Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev at, for example, http://en.hilarion.orthodoxia.org/8_4, http://en.hilarion.orthodoxia.org/6_5_7 and http://en.hilarion.orthodoxia.org/6_6_7; <http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/studies-fathers/67-symeon-the-new-theologian-on-the-divine-light>.

⁵³ Dorotheus of Gaza, cited in Tomáš Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), 20.

⁵⁴ Catherine Lomas, ‘The Gift of a Lifetime’, 13 April 2010.

This is Jesus rejoicing in the Spirit (Luke 10:21), it is Jesus' prayer that his joy might be in us, and that we might be full of his joy (John 15:11), it is the *phōtismos*—the light, or rather the *illumination*, the 'in-shining' of the light—of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4), or the illumination *in our hearts* of the knowledge of the glory of God in the *face* of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6); it is the rejoicing 'with joy unspeakable and full of glory' of 1 Peter 1:8.⁵⁵ The image of God in us is being cleansed, not destroyed—and the full glory is being revealed. That is where it all began. I, your directee, know this; and still I long for it.

What I, then, as a directee, am searching for in this *space* is the light reflected in your *face*, and what you, as a director, are also looking for in me, are signs of the *grace* of the resurrected Jesus, and of the image of God in me being cleansed and renewed. You and I are as utterly dependent as each other on the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11). It is the gift of the Spirit to which the New Testament bears witness that can become present to us in this unique *inter-face*. The Holy Spirit of Jesus turns out, as we knew all along, to be the *real* Director.

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⁵⁵ Mühlen, *A Charismatic Theology*, 187, says: 'We must finally take Christian joy seriously' (!).

