

Spotting the Men Gordon Self and Dale Rhodes

At a Spiritual Directors International conference in Miami, Florida, USA, several years ago, a gentleman raised his hand during the open microphone session and posed the sentinel question, "Where are the men?" This was not the first time conference planners have heard the question, despite attempts to be widely inclusive in promoting and designing keynote and workshop themes. In fact, the conference was entitled "Everything Belongs" and headlined by Franciscan Richard Rohr, who has been equally intentional in writing about men's issues in spirituality over the last ten years.¹

The gentleman's question underscored the challenge we faced year after year, seeing that no more than 10 to 15 percent of conference participants are men. Given both of our previous leadership roles within Spiritual Directors International,² we recall the previous year's conference in Toronto, during the height of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, at which overall attendance was already down, so only a handful of men were present. The men gathered for a breakfast meeting, partly for fellowship and partly for solidarity. We began the conversation asking ourselves why we often felt the need to censor our images or experiences of God in sharing with women, especially for those men who served as trainers on spiritual direction programs as the sole gender minority on the team. Even the announcement made at the conclusion of the day's events by Don Grayston, director of the Jubilee Associates Program in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, to gather the next morning for a "men's only" breakfast was greeted with some good natured teasing by the women and admitted sheepishness by the men. There was a subtle ripple sent throughout the conference, suggesting this was not quite right, and we remember some coy questions about whether or not we were going to attend the "little" men's breakfast. Committed to standing against all forms of religious, cultural, gender, or sexual intolerance, Spiritual Directors International now suddenly seemed to some

to be taking a huge step backward in condoning this exclusive "men's only" breakfast. Yet it had never happened before in more than ten years of organizational existence.

The conversation with the men that morning seemed rather benign. The men talked about their need to claim a space and a forum that was theirs, giving voice to the words, images, and metaphors that authentically reflected their own experience. And yet, it was like the proverbial "shot heard round the world." Something was being named that took a couple more years for even us male conference participants to recognize the significance of.

By the time the next year's conference in Miami came along, the questions first asked by this remnant group over breakfast in Toronto were now being voiced at large at the general assembly. "Where are the men?" was now a question for the entire organization. Over the course of the event, we talked extensively together about the issue. At first, we laughed, making light of the preponderance of words like *midwife*, *well*, *container*, or *God's kitchen* bantered around in conference conversations and appearing on book titles, which always sounded a bit contrived coming from the lips of men. The laughter

Spotting

Spotting is a term used in weight training when a partner supports, or *spots*, another weight lifter to ensure his safety and to encourage him while exercising with weights. The authors believe *spotting* is an apt metaphor to describe the intimacy, support, and encouragement in the spiritual direction relationship, in which the partner (spiritual director) is focused on and attentive to the weight lifter (directee) without taking on his or her physical (spiritual) work. For men, this may be a more accessible term to talk about spiritual mentoring that honors their healthy masculine energy. The authors recognize that women *spot* women weight lifters as well and therefore the term may also speak to women's experience of spiritual direction. ■



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gave way to serious reflection: what *were* the words that made sense to us, and why did it feel unsafe to use them in the presence of our women colleagues? We sensed our fear of departing from the culturally sanctioned parlance, risking being viewed as sexist or insensitive, especially given our leadership roles with Spiritual Directors International.

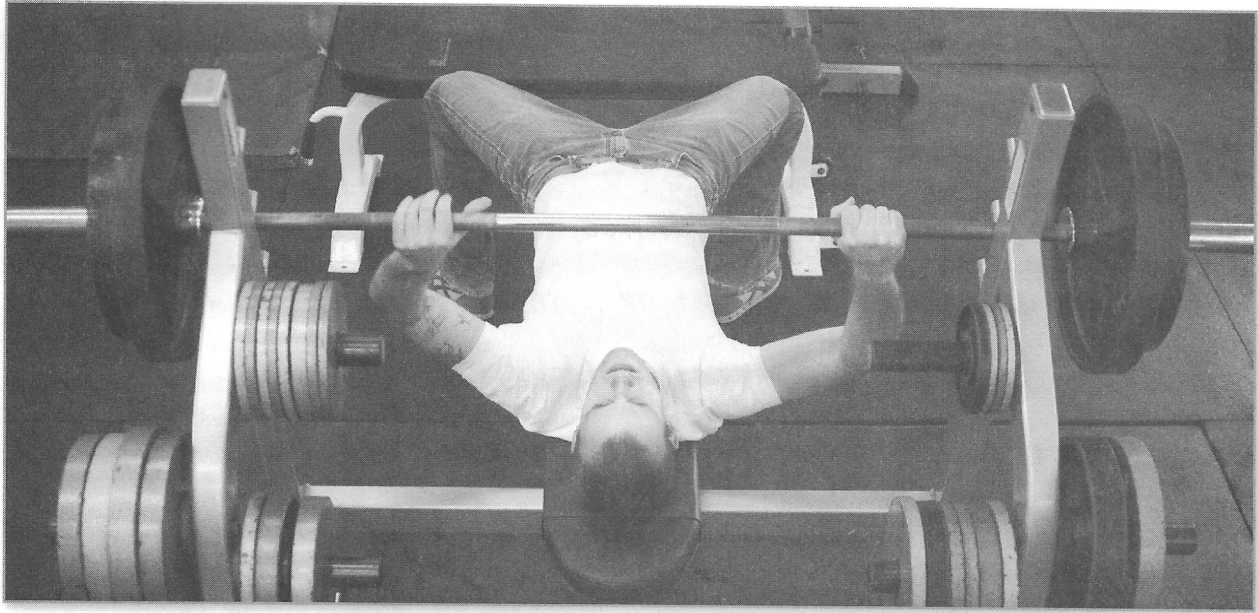
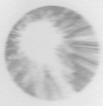
What was especially significant about our conversations is that Dale is gay and Gordon is straight, yet we found our experiences and concerns to be the same. And so as we talked we recognized something unique to the male experience that was common to all men, regardless of orientation. Together, we noted other contexts in which the “the conspiracy of silence” was operative and male metaphors were held in check. We acknowledged the implicit gag order men have taken upon themselves, perhaps owing to their awkwardness of finding their *own* words, instead resorting to using words and expressions commonly occurring in most spiritual direction conversations, which tend to include a majority of women. We noted how even terms like “leader,” which could sound overtly hierarchical and powerful, needed to be qualified by adding “servant” to complete the phrase, as was used to list members of the executive board and coordinating council. Something in the dynamic of repeatedly qualifying “leadership” in public statements smacked of an untruth we wanted to break open.

Because we had an easy and fun friendship as spiritual men through the years, we decided to submit a workshop proposal for the following year’s conference

in Chicago. But instead of offering the same workshop twice, once in the morning and again in the afternoon in typical conference-session format, we decided to have a men’s-only morning session followed by a co-ed session in the afternoon. We felt we needed to have a session in which men could talk about and name their experiences first, before it could be opened up to a broader audience. We did not want to risk compromising the integrity of the workshop (even unconsciously) by proceeding with a co-ed session before providing the men the opportunity to claim their own words without fear of censure. (See the sidebar notes of “cave drawings and inscriptions” near the end of this article.)

The tendency to qualify and neuter the male experience is very subtle indeed. Dale immediately challenged the issue when Gordon suggested, partly because of Gordon’s own trepidation about having a men’s-only session, that we mimic what Canadian pop band Barenaked Ladies does as fans arrive at their concerts—solicit donations for breast cancer research. Dale wondered why an “apology donation” was necessary, and even if it were, why not for prostate cancer? He was absolutely right. At that moment the myth was exposed and Gordon didn’t even see it! The myth signaled it was not *good enough* to just be about men’s experience of God and spiritual direction; it had to be qualified to make it safe.

We noticed a similar reaction when we first presented our idea to the council. Underneath their questions of “Can we do this?” and “Should we do this?” was, we believe, the real question: “Is this safe?” By the time

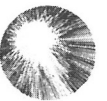


the workshop proposal was finally submitted and the council and selection committee had an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities this opened up, a chord had been struck. Early registration workshop preferences for “Men and Belonging in Spiritual Direction: Are We in Exile?” resonated with the conference participants as we successfully filled both the male-only morning and co-ed afternoon sessions. Men came because they wanted to be together. Most women came because they were curious and supportive of our goals. One or two women attended because they were insulted by the offering, as evidenced by their evaluations. But the majority of women came because they too felt a need to better listen to the voices of men in spiritual direction. The women acknowledged their difficulty in effectively ministering to some male directees, feeling at a loss for words. Although these were highly trained and skilled women, they admitted that they too didn’t have the language to meet the needs of the men. Both men and women participants helped describe the myth that rendered us all “lost in translation.”

We wanted to propose a new metaphor to capture the male experience in spiritual direction. As a centerpiece for the room, we replaced what we call the “rippled cloth display”—the familiar arrangement of folded, often brightly coloured fabrics adorned with candles, seashells, flower petals, pictures, and other feminine artifacts—with a set of weights and barbells resting on a chair. (See

photo.) No coloured cloth folded in such a way to suggest waves or nonlinear process. No artifacts. Nothing to soften the starkness. No “servant” language to disqualify Dale and Gordon from unequivocally *leading* the group experience. Just heavy weights and a chair to represent a bench press. At one point during the afternoon co-ed session, as we were calling people back from their small-group discussions, Gordon simply lifted the weights an inch or two above the ground and then let them go, causing the gym-sound clang of metal. There was sudden silence in the room, and then everyone burst out laughing, recognizing at once how the centerpiece clang was the perfect way to gather the group back versus the usual chime of bells or soft tap on a gong. The laughter turned the myth upside down. Nothing could have summoned the co-gender group back more fittingly.

And yet, the workshop was not about celebrating bravado and machismo. It was about the *authentic* masculine experience. We focused our workshop on a new metaphor to articulate the male experience in spiritual direction. We proposed that *spotting* is an appropriate masculine metaphor for such an experience. The image is familiar to anyone who visits the gym, even women-only gyms. As the weight lifter lies back on the bench press under a significant amount of bar weight, someone *spots* the person—essentially standing at the ready in case help is needed. As some of the women participants pointed out, *spotting* has another meaning: intermittent



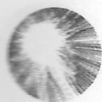
vaginal bleeding, sometimes associated with imminent fetal demise. Our use of the word is not intended to co-opt a feminine experience or render a sense of doom; we are using it specifically in the context of strength training in the gym and as metaphor for spiritual direction ministry. That the men and the women in our workshops had such different initial responses to the word *spotting* supports our premise that words describing spiritual direction have great power and influence to connect or separate us by gender and culture. Humble curiosity is required in this terrain if we are to be with one another at all.

Dale and Gordon spotted one another as each of us, in turn, demonstrated sitting on the chair and pressing the weights over our heads as the other stood over, resting his hands lightly on the bar. As if this were a physical exercise in *Lectio Divina*, we asked the participants to notice what we were doing and to relate aloud how this reflected an experience of spiritual direction. The group commented on the intimacy between the spotter and the lifter, each in close proximity, almost looking directly into the face of the other. They noticed how the spotter only rested his hands on the bar, so as not to rob the lifter of his work, much as the spiritual director avoids telling directees what to do or rescuing them from their own spiritual experiences. Participants pointed out, however, that the spotter's hands were at the ready in case the lifter faltered, in the same way the spiritual director does not abandon the directee in desolate moments on the spiritual journey. Finally, the group noticed how the spotter coached the lifter, giving him encouragement as you would expect in the spiritual direction relationship, especially during moments of desolation or the dark night of the soul when it hard to sense God's presence in our lives.

Spotting is a lively and contemporary metaphor that may more authentically describe the male experience in spiritual direction, both as male director (spotter) and male directee (lifter). Moreover, it is a lively *masculine* image, accessible to both men and women in deepening and strengthening their spiritual lives. As men have been enriched in their understanding of the spiritual direction experience through exposure to feminine metaphors like *midwifery*, so too does *spotting* provide a context of meaning that is meaningful to people of both genders and of either orientation. The important criterion for those who do lay claim to this metaphor is that it truly fits. The intent is to use words that are neither borrowed nor contrived but congruent with a person's lived experience of spiritual direction. For many of the men in the room that day, and indeed for many of the women, *spotting* fit.

Our workshop also featured selections from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to provide the stage for adventure, risk-taking, and mystery in recovering the healthy masculine. Chapter 132 offers such an image, again acknowledging the giftedness of both genders without

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compromising either. Melville does not play it safe. There are no apologies for being a man nor any dishonor to women. Air and sea touch at the horizon.

It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of the air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering, swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep.

...

Tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted with wrinkles; haggardly firm and unyielding; his eyes glowing like coals, that still glow in the ashes of ruin; untottering Ahab stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl's forehead of heaven. (Pp. 580–581)

Since our workshop, a number of other venues arrived to widen the conversation in reclaiming the healthy masculine in spiritual direction. Don Grayston, who in 2003 had risked asking if other men would care to join him for a men's-only breakfast, hosted a men's retreat followed by the Spiritual Directors International-sponsored "Men's Writing Institute," which hoped to surface possible articles and "spot" writers seeking to deepen this conversation. Dale and Gordon are pleased that Spiritual Directors International is broadening its appreciation of the wide range of men's experiences in spiritual direction and leadership.

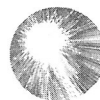
And at last year's conference in Southern California, the workshop "Reclaiming the Masculine in Spiritual Direction" was featured. It had a men-only session and a women's session that explored the masculine in spiritual direction from the women's experience, led by a woman facilitator. It seems that the recovery of male archetypes, experiences, and language for spiritual direction is important to both genders.³ This is reflected in the comment from one participant who attended our session in Miami. From the Spiritual Directors International conference blog in 2005, Clara Delphin, SA, from Bogota, Colombia, posted:

Have you ever wondered what a male spirituality would look like? Well, I went to a workshop led by Dale and

Wall Graffiti (Transcribed) from the 2005 Spiritual Directors International Men's Workshop

Men at the workshop were asked to write on the provided wallpaper what they would want the co-gender workshop participants to know. This is what was recorded next to the various images of men posted on the walls. The authors called these the "cave drawings and inscriptions."

- ✓ How to be strongly flexible/flexibly strong so neither rigid or brittle?
- ✓ When was the last straight, sexually active male Spiritual Directors International keynoter?
- ✓ Why is it so difficult to be spiritually intimate with another man? Am I afraid to show my feminine side or am I afraid to show spirituality as masculine?
- ✓ Is the current "all girls" network really an enhancement over the old "all boys" network?
- ✓ What is a healthy male role model? What does healthy maleness look like?
- ✓ Servant leadership? Just be a leader!
- ✓ What is your experience of male vulnerability?
- ✓ There is more than one kind of man.
- ✓ Is patriarchal behavior limited to males alone?
- ✓ Men's passages are what bring us to spiritual direction.
- ✓ Can we embrace our feminine before we fully embrace our masculine?
- ✓ The Buddha was trained as a warrior king first.
- ✓ Exclusion of either gender does not make for a healthy spirituality.
- ✓ Warriors have wounds women can't heal.
- ✓ Spiritual direction as coaching or spotting for another. ■



Gordon—it was a profound deep-filled “Stand-up Comedy” where all of us, maybe 50, were participants as well as recipients of fun and laughter accompanied with the images and questions along the walls, which were put up there that morning by the all-male group that had participated in the first workshop. I am left with the task of rethinking my work with the men I accompany, asking them to help me use the words and images most adequate to journey with them.⁴

Recalling our men’s workshop, we are reminded of the wonderful way we concluded the experience: two men reading poetry aloud as a gift to one another. We ended with the following poem by Robert Francis, read in dialogical fashion, with robust voice and great passion. The poem speaks to the vigour in which I (Gordon) summon forth the masculine images that support my leadership, and it speaks to how I (Dale) appreciate my spiritual friendships with men who support me being fully alive. Clearly all men and women spiritual directors are being invited to reclaim healthy masculine energy and images in their ministries and spiritual lives. In true dialogical fashion, it seems that all God’s people, both men and women, gay and straight, are invited and encouraged to find the way to spot, experience, and express the masculine way of spiritual direction.

Summons

Keep me from going to sleep too soon
 Or if I go to sleep too soon
 Come wake me up.
 Come any hour of night.
 Come whistling up the road.
 Stomp on the porch.
 Bang on the door.
 Make me get out of bed and come and let you in
 and light a light.
 Tell me the northern lights are on and make me
 look.
 Or tell me clouds are doing something to the moon
 they never did before,
 And show me. See that I see.
 Talk to me till I’m half as wide awake as you and
 start to dress wondering why I ever went to bed
 at all.

Tell me the walking is superb.

Not only tell me but persuade me.

You know I’m not too hard to persuade. ■

Notes

1. See, for example, the books by Richard Rohr, OFM listed in References.
2. Dale Rhodes was a member of the events planning committee for the Spiritual Directors International conference from 2000–2005. Gordon Self was a member of the coordinating council of Spiritual Directors International from 1998–2004.
3. From the Web site description (www.sdiworld.org): “Positive male images have often been lost or denigrated as many reaffirm feminine imagery. This workshop will explore masculine images as they impede or facilitate spiritual formation. Fostering life-giving male archetypes for both men and women in spiritual direction will be central to this exploration.... Note first presentation is men only, second presentation is women only.”
4. <http://sdiworld.blogspot.com/2005/04/mens-workshop.html>

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