

**A Letterbox, a Telephone, and
a Remote-Controlled Car:
Prayerfully Exploring Childhood Memories
in Spiritual Direction**

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“Spiritual direction is not indifferent to emotional difficulties or developmental arrests in the person...In spiritual direction these issues are seen as intimately related to the process of integration by the spiritually orientated adult.”¹

Introduction

Childhood experiences shape our psychological and spiritual lives in significant ways. Spiritual direction is one environment where formative childhood memories may surface as the Holy Spirit highlights experiences that continue to influence a directee’s sense of self and God, and impact their adult spirituality.² This essay examines the *prayerful exploration of childhood memories in spiritual direction*, and the potential this carries for spiritual freedom and growth.

By “exploring” childhood memories I have in mind a process of inviting God to highlight, and gently begin to heal, childhood memories that negatively impact an adult directee. Healing is a journey, so I don’t have in mind the complete transformation of a memory and wound. Rather, a more realistic expectation would be a fresh perspective gained from revisiting in prayer a formative childhood experience, offering some measure of grace and freedom.³ Such freedom often still needs to be lived-into through conscious partnership with God.

This research is specifically interested in occasions when childhood memories surface for a directee in prayer within spiritual direction. It is the Spirit’s prerogative to draw memories to the surface for spiritual attention. Our role as spiritual directors is to partner with the Spirit in helping directees explore those memories, and to join the directee in listening to God.

Research Interest and Method

This research was prompted by the surfacing of childhood memories for one of my directees over three consecutive monthly sessions. I subsequently interviewed them to hear their perspective on what took place for them at the time and afterwards.⁴ The research draws on verbatim transcripts of the three sessions, and from the follow-up interview, offering a thick description and a single case study of exploring childhood memories in spiritual direction.⁵

¹ M. Naidoo, “The Healing Work of Spiritual Direction,” *Practical Theology in South Africa* 21, no. 3 (December, 2006), 146.

² On the connection between childhood attachment and adult spirituality in the context of inner healing see E. James Wilder, Fernando Garzon and Eric L. Johnson, “A Christian Multi-Modal Approach to Therapy Utilizing Inner Healing Prayer: The Life Model,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 39, no. 1 (2020), 50.

³ Thomas Moore notes that sometimes our psychological and spiritual growth is found in receiving *care*, rather than *cure*, because a reflective caring environment itself may prompt growth. Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide For Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 18-19.

⁴ One month prior to our interview I gave the directee the relevant portions of transcript notes from the three sessions, which were recorded in 2021 for study purposes. I also gave him some questions to ponder (see Appendix). I obtained his consent to quote him and refer to his experience in this published essay.

⁵ I use the social science term “thick description” here because the directee’s own interpretation of their experience is woven into the research findings. Only one case study is drawn on for this research, so the

To shed extra light on the subject I also examine literature from the following fields of study: spirituality and psychology; the impact of childhood on adult spirituality; inner healing and the healing of memories; use of prayer and silence in spiritual direction; the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual direction; and best practice for directors in spiritual direction.

The conclusions of this research are broadly positive in affirming the potential for sensitively exploring childhood memories in adult spiritual directees, and the spiritual and emotional growth that can follow. However, a word of caution is offered around when to halt a session for emotional safety reasons, and when to refer a directee to a counsellor or psychologist.

A Letterbox, a Telephone, and a Remote-Controlled Car

After six months of working with Chris [*not his real name*] it was no surprise to hear him voice the following fears in relation to someone whose opinion he valued: "I've let you down. I've disappointed you.... You won't like me."⁶ He followed that up by saying: "I'd love to know where that comes from, and I'd love to get it out of my brain." Not wanting to miss an invitation like that, I replied: "We could take a moment, pause, invite God to speak into this." He was keen to do so.⁷ I then prattled unnecessarily for a moment about the Holy Spirit being able to shed light on things, which he interrupted by saying, "I think he's already showing me things." We hadn't even had a moment of silence, which I was leading into. Not only did Chris 'rudely' interrupt me, but so did God, as I was telling Chris what God might do! It was a refreshing reminder that the Holy Spirit is the true spiritual director.⁸ Referring later to how quickly God brought something to his mind on that occasion, Chris spoke on God's behalf, saying: "Oh, you've asked me. Ok, I'll tell you!" Then as if answering God, he said: "It's not your usual MO, to not make me wait."⁹

What Chris was *shown* was an occasion in childhood when his anxious mother asked if there was anything else in the mailbox, after Chris had cleared it. Chris' parents were in financial difficulty and waiting on a cheque in the mail. Chris anxiously searched the yard in case he

extrapolation of any general principles is obviously limited and can only be hinted at. The accompanying literature study helps in this regard by confirming certain principles, theories and practices.

⁶ Chris had voiced his felt-need to please people, and his fear of disappointing people, a number of times.

⁷ In our interview Chris remembers trusting me as I suggested we listen to God together. He says: "I feel like I was willing, for the sake of getting the most out of it [spiritual direction]; I was willing to trust you with that." On the value of listening to the Spirit together as director and directee see Jeannette Bakke, *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 39.

⁸ In inner healing ministry also, "The Holy Spirit, not the counsellor, is understood to be the leader," says Walter James Thiessen in, "Praying in a New Reality: A Social Constructionist Perspective on Inner Healing Prayer," Unpublished Doctoral Thesis for University of South Africa (2003), 67.

⁹ Chris makes an interesting point here. We often do have to wait for God's answer to a prayer or question of faith. A delay between prayer and an answer of some kind may be God's normal *modus operandi* to encourage us to exercise faith and trust. However, there are clearly other times when God responds without hesitation.

had dropped a letter. He felt personally responsible. It's not difficult here to join the dots to the adult Chris who fears letting people down.

I asked Chris: "What does God say to the wee boy that takes on that responsibility for how his Mum feels?" His answer was fascinating. He proceeded to describe something else that had vividly passed through his mind. He saw his mother in the kitchen surrounded by light, and described a strange spiritual sense of "her transferring anxiety to me." Recalling that experience Chris described "almost a video replay [of] memory...kind of stepping out of myself almost, and seeing myself talking to my Mum in the kitchen....It's like God [saying]: 'Here we go, let's rewind your memories. Let's look at it from a different angle. And let's slow that down, and let's look at it in the spiritual, and see that there was a transference...' I started joining in my Mum's worry...It was like God saying: 'Your Mum was going through something massive then too, and that affected you, but it's ok.'" Immediately after this vivid experience Chris thought of the biblical injunction, "Do not be anxious about anything..." (Phil 4:6-7).

It is too easy as a spiritual director to presume we understand a directee's words, or imagery, or experience of God before asking them how they understand it. When I asked what God says to the anxiously burdened boy, I imagined Chris pausing to hear God speak a word of reassurance to lift his burden. I didn't expect further description of the childhood house, with an added supernatural element: his mother surrounded by light. Then when he described the light, I first assumed (silently) that it was a sign of divine comfort and healing.¹⁰ I did not expect Chris to associate the light with a negative and disturbing spiritual transference of anxiety.¹¹

My assumptions—overturned as they were—are a reminder that interpretation of spiritual experience belongs primarily with the directee, not the spiritual director.¹² The directee is the expert on their own life and faith journey, particularly if God happens to be directly speaking to them or showing them something, accompanied by a sense of what it means. We may ask the directee questions to clarify or tease out the interpretation, but we cannot presume to know more than they do. Chris' interpretation also made sense to me, thankfully.

Interestingly, rather than feel upset at his mother for carrying such anxiety, and unwittingly 'transferring' it to him, Chris described feeling compassion and empathy for her as the

¹⁰ On light or brightness filling the memory in inner healing prayer see Norma Dearing, *The Healing Touch: A Guide to Healing Prayer for Yourself and Those You Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2002), 135.

¹¹ Chris was explicit about the negative qualities of the light. He distinctly sensed that it was a disturbing thing.

¹² Mary Ann Scofield says that "One method for helping directees to name their experiences of God is to encourage concreteness. We should never assume as a director that we know what the directee means." See Mary Ann Scofield, "Waiting on God: Staying with Movements of God," in *Sacred is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programmes*, ed. Suzanne M. Buckley (New York: CrossRoad, 2005), 59. Interestingly some forms of inner healing prayer, such as Immanuel Prayer, prohibit any leading questions or suggestions from the prayer minister so that the person receive prayer pays exclusive attention to "the thoughts and images that pass through the mind, no matter how trivial or irrelevant they may appear." Wilder et al., "A Christian Multi-Modal Approach to Therapy Utilizing Inner Healing Prayer," 57.

revelation unfolded. In the original spiritual direction session he spoke of being “able to...understand what my Mum was going through.” Perhaps Chris’ anxiousness in life to please people is simply the shadow side of a lovely empathetic sensitivity.¹³ To have no anger towards his mother, but rather to feel compassion for her, was perhaps the clearest signal to me at the time that this was in fact a healing moment, as Chris himself later confirmed in our interview: “The understanding of [Mum’s struggle] brought a deeper level of healing.”

Picking up the issue the next month, I asked Chris if he would like to invite God to speak further into it. Chris said yes. A minute of silent prayer (this time!) led to Chris seeing himself answering the house phone as a child. He felt concerned that he had to answer it properly because it might be a business client calling for Dad, which meant income for a cash-strapped family. The same feeling of anxious responsibility flooded him, which actually prompted him to laugh aloud in our session at the absurdity of all that weight on a small boy’s shoulders when there was nothing he could do about his parents’ imploding financial situation. Like his adult empathic feelings for his fretful mother, Chris could now laugh lightheartedly at the burdened boy from a place of new perspective. That itself was presumably healing.

This time a question from me about what God might say to that boy was answered with a tone of relief and grateful realisation: “Ahh, yeah, it’s not my fault. It’s not my responsibility.” That was a poignant perspective shift for a man who feels anxious to please people. I invited Chris to sit with that realisation, and consider how it felt. After some peaceful silence he said: “It feels good. It feels freeing.” Chris then proceeded unprompted to tell me how that realisation could translate to greater inner freedom for him today. The adult Chris was already preparing to practice a new way of living in light of what God had shown him.¹⁴

The decision in spiritual direction to pick up the issue from the previous month and work with it further led to fresh insight for Chris and a God-given revelation: “It’s not my responsibility.” To return to something from a previous session can be unnecessary or seem forced. However, sometimes an issue is only half explored, or part of a larger narrative. The choice to focus on it again can be quite fruitful, as it was for Chris.¹⁵ It’s a decision that resides with the directee,

¹³ On the relationship between our greatest gifts and their distortion as faults see Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Dennis Linn, *Healing the Purpose of Your Life* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1999), 65.

¹⁴ In our follow-up interview Chris said that when he revisited that fear of getting things wrong in childhood, he found himself wondering: “...how much of that do I carry into my own [adult] sense of wanting people to like me, and not wanting to stuff it up?” He spoke of choosing a new response to “those just-under-the-surface-beliefs,” realising that, “It’s actually going to be ok if [I] upset someone.” He went on to tell me about recent occasions in life where he had drawn on that liberating spiritual realisation to counter internal anxiety.

¹⁵ On the need to sometimes pray more than once for healing see Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Dennis Linn, *Simple Ways to Pray for Healing* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1998), 64. One also thinks of Jesus praying twice for the blind man in Mark 8, in a two-stage healing process.

though the spiritual director can always put the invitation to them. In the interview Chris expressed appreciation that in spiritual direction, “I get to lead the conversation.”¹⁶

A month later it was another expression of fear—“Someone is disappointed in me”—that led to a third childhood memory surfacing in prayer. This time Chris recalled breaking a friend’s remoted-controlled car, which triggered shame, guilt for not telling his parents, and fear of the social repercussions at home and school. Ninety seconds of waiting on God was broken when Chris said: “Funny, I come up with two things. If I was my Dad in that situation and I knew about it, I would say: ‘This is solvable’ and ‘I love you.’ Even if it’s *not* solvable, ‘I still love you.’” He immediately applied that to adult life, musing joyfully on a God who loves him while he frets about things, whose love is not contingent on how he measures up, and who also has the power to solve any number of concerns – like a loving parent.

We see Chris consolidating new-found spiritual and emotion freedom as he leaps from yet another childhood memory—one that caused him genuine pain and shame at the time—to taking hold of words of life from God; words that ground him in divine love and acceptance. In our interview Chris described what took place in that third inner healing experience as, “...an absolute breaking off of something. How freeing does that feel? [I] haven’t let God down... I think that helped me to genuinely start that journey of [seeing] God as a father. I can now see it!” He needed no guidance from me to move swiftly from sensing how his own loving father would have sensitively responded to the boy who broke his friend’s toy, if he had only let him do so, to how God lovingly desires to reassure him and act on his behalf today.

The various vivid childhood memories dug up by the Holy Spirit; the revelation that came with them (of oppression, empathy, the release of responsibility, and freedom); the life-giving and liberating words spoken by God; and the decision to trial new responses in potentially anxious situations today: all this constitutes inner healing.¹⁷ As a spiritual director, it’s a joy to observe this take place for a directee. Chris of course still needs to learn to live-into that new-found freedom. But that fact takes nothing away from the poignancy of the moments where God met him, pulled up painful memories, and anointed those memories with soothing oil.¹⁸

¹⁶ He thanked me for not saying things like: “Have you thought about...” in a leading way. Yet he appreciated that I was “open to the Holy Spirit,” and prepared to gently guide the process. Chris is generous to me with these words. Gently leading when appropriate, without becoming overly directive or intrusive is a fine art. I don’t always get the balance right, and can sense sometimes when I’ve picked up the lead and shouldn’t have.

¹⁷ Agnes Sanford pioneered the modern field of inner healing with her book *The Healing Light* (London: Arthur James Limited, 1949) in which she emphasises replacing negative thought patterns that are rooted in the unconscious mind with faith-filled positive thought patterns. That is essentially what took place for Chris.

¹⁸ Chris did live-into the new spiritual and emotional perspective he had gained. In our interview he spoke of being “almost proud of myself” as he described a moment at work recently where “I felt that feeling [anxiety], and almost immediately my [positive] self-talk was resilient.” He promptly chose a new life-giving response.

Psychology and Spirituality in Spiritual Direction

Most spiritual directors are not trained psychologists so the relationship of psychology to spirituality, and the wisdom of using spiritual direction to delve into childhood wounds, are issues that require consideration. It may seem all good and well to say, “the Holy Spirit led there”—and we genuinely should trust the Spirit’s leading—but we are still entering territory that spiritual directors are only partially equipped to handle.¹⁹

The other area requiring consideration is the practice of inner healing prayer, which is essentially what’s happening if a painful memory surfaces for re-scripting within spiritual direction. Inner healing prayer ministry is a broad field of diverse practices and approaches, some of which are less appropriate than others for use in spiritual direction.

The first comment to make on psychology and spirituality is that the two disciplines are not so easily kept apart, nor should they be. Israel Galindo writes: “Unless one holds to a rigid dichotomy of spiritual and psychological dimensions of human nature, it must be admitted that psychological healing cannot take place without spiritual healing, and vice versa.”²⁰ David Benner speaks of our need to encounter “the lost parts of our self that remain hidden in the dark recesses of the unconscious,” as an integral spiritual movement in “establishing our true self in Christ.”²¹ Chris’ journey into the recesses of his childhood memory is just such a spiritual movement. In his own words from our interview: “For God to say, ‘This is where it [anxiety] comes from, and look at it *this way*,’ I think has been a game-changer.”

Psychology and spirituality are therefore inseparable. However, that doesn’t mean psychotherapy and spiritual direction are interchangeable. Gerald May expresses reservation about attempting combined holistic psychological and spiritual care because of the risk of “turning spiritual direction into a form of pastoral-psychological counseling that misses the spiritual mark.”²² He insists that the two disciplines have distinct objectives, even as he readily admits that the mind and spirit cannot be dealt with in isolation: “To attempt too strict a

¹⁹ The reverse also applies: psychotherapists are not always well-equipped to practice spiritual direction, and the attempt to do so can present dual-relationship and boundary problems says Siang-Yang Tan in, “Spiritual Direction and Psychotherapy: Ethical Issues,” in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*, eds. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2004), 190.

²⁰ Israel Galindo, “Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counseling,” in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, 207. Cf. Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 100; And, William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982), 147 where they remind us that both spiritual direction and counselling address a deep desire for wholeness, which has as its source “the indwelling Spirit of the living God.”

²¹ David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 83.

²² Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (New York: HarperOne, 1982), 14. Cf. Thomas Hart’s chapter on “Psychotherapy and Spirituality,” in *Hidden Spring: The Spiritual Dimension of Therapy*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 20-36. On the distinct remits of counselling and spiritual direction see David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2002), 93.

separation, to try to divorce mind from spirit, would be artificial and not at all helpful.”²³ The advice to spiritual directors is to not lose sight of the focus of spiritual direction, which is first and foremost spirituality (relationship with God) not psychological freedom – as much as the two may be entwined. Allowing the Holy Spirit to lead within the context of prayer helps ensure that primary focus.²⁴ For Chris it was the Spirit that brought to mind his childhood experiences of anxiety.²⁵ I did not go digging for childhood wounds.

Using spiritual direction to probe an emotional issue like anxiety may therefore be a mistake if it is not evidently related to the directee’s spirituality, or in some way brought to attention in the context of relationship with God. Having said that, we must remember that God is broadly in the business of setting people free from all forms of bondage. Although Chris’ fear of disappointing others did include an obviously spiritual dimension—namely a fear that he was only ever one small mistake away from provoking God’s displeasure—his anxiousness to please people affected other relationships in life also, and robbed him of peace. He sought God’s help with this. That was grounds enough to take a moment in prayer to explore the root of what was clearly both a psychological and spiritual issue. God then acted almost as a psychotherapist, by assuming the role of a loving parent in saying to Chris, “This is solvable, and I love you.” Those words from the Comforter helped lift the fear of frightening repercussions for making a mistake in life, touching a childhood wound at the root of the issue, and enabling Chris to conceive of God in safer, truer and more loving terms. That opened up new spiritual and emotional possibilities for Chris, the adult follower of Jesus.

Prayer and Silence in Working with Memories

The use of prayer for exploring memories is significant. A moment of prayer can open up space for the Spirit of God to take the lead in a direct way. The directee needs to be comfortable with prayer, or it should be avoided.²⁶ The form of prayer also matters when it comes to exploring memories. Silent listening prayer creates the conditions for God to draw memories to the surface. Looking back, Chris says, “God led in those quiet moments.” However, the first occasion that a memory arose for Chris is a reminder that even silence is not an essential precondition. God may jump the gun!

That first occasion was the exception to the rule though. Thereafter, silence (however brief) was the gateway for childhood memories to consciously surface, and for God’s words of

²³ May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*, 14-15.

²⁴ On having a peaceful confidence in the Holy Spirit as a spiritual director see Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 39.

²⁵ “The Holy Spirit is God’s finger on sore memories,” writes Leanne Payne with reference to how the Holy Spirit targets psychological wounding in order to bring healing. Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul Through Healing Prayer* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publishing, 1991), 75. Payne holds views on sexuality that do not resonate with all spiritual directors, but that is no concern in the context of this research.

²⁶ Sandra Thomas insists that in spiritual direction a request or consent from the directee to pray is essential. Sandra J. Thomas, “The Place of Prayer in Spiritual Direction,” Special Interest Project (SGM, 2010), 12.

comfort to lodge in Chris' heart and mind.²⁷ Reflecting on this after the fact, Chris said, "It's the opportunity to have a space to stop and to think, and to have silence and breath, and to have a posture that God's going to be a part of this...You can't rush it. There's got to be space for it." Amen! By his own admission Chris "loves talking." He says it surprised him to find that in spiritual direction, "...it's been very natural to sit and be still and close your eyes and go: OK God, what are you saying to me in this moment?"

On the subject of silence, Chris also thanked me for my silence as a spiritual director, where I let him think and speak in his own time. "There's the space that you provided," he says. "The space of not talking...I think that gift is enormous in this setting...I can trust that you're going to give me the time to collect my thoughts." I have had to learn to do this. Though less extroverted than Chris, I'm still a conversationalist by nature, and frequently have to bite my tongue in spiritual direction so as not to interrupt the spiritually fertile thoughts of a directee.

Inner Healing Ministry in Spiritual Direction

Few spiritual directors would dispute the value of prayerful silence within spiritual direction. But prayer for the purpose of evoking and healing memories might be contentious.²⁸ Inner healing prayer has its advocates and its critics, though it is a vast and varied field of ministry.²⁹ Philip Monroe and George Schwab offer the following definition of inner healing: "[A] divine work bringing growth or positive spiritual change to painful or distorted perceptions, experiences, habits, or emotions of a person."³⁰ Some forms of inner healing prayer are fairly prescriptive and therefore may not be appropriate for spiritual direction where the agency of the directee must be ensured, even as God and the director offer some guidance.³¹ When

²⁷ On the importance of silence and a contemplative stance for sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit, see Sandra Thomas, "The Place of Prayer in Spiritual Direction," 13-14. On silence as a portal to the deep mind see Sheila Pritchard, "The Work of Silence," *Presence* 17, no. 1 (Winter, 2016): 11-13. Cf. Liz Maluschig, "Contemplation as a tool of healing," *Refresh* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 3-6.

²⁸ Interestingly, Sandra Thomas lists the following reasons for prayer as inappropriate for spiritual direction: "seeking healing, deliverance or specific answer..." Does she mean physical healing here? Later in her article she lists, without evaluation, forms of prayer used by spiritual directors, including: "Healing of memories; Inner healing (Sanford style)." See Thomas, "The Place of Prayer in Spiritual Direction," 12; 21.

²⁹ For a summary of various forms of inner healing ministry, and some critique, see Wilder et al., "A Christian Multi-Modal Approach to Therapy Utilizing Inner Healing Prayer," 49-64.

³⁰ Philip G. Monroe and George M. Schwab, "God as Healer: A Closer Look at Biblical Images of Inner Healing with Guiding Questions for Counselors," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* Vol. 28, No. 2 (2009), 121. Cf. Roger Vaughan, *Saints for Healing: Leader's Manual* (Fair Gate, UK: Anglican Renewal Ministries, 1990), 9: where inner healing is defined as "a process of emotional reconstruction experienced under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

³¹ Christian Emotional Focussed Therapy seems quite structured and may not be appropriate. See Lydia C. W. Kim-van Daalen and Eric L. Johnson, *Transformation Through Christian Emotion-Focused Therapy* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2016). One school to inner healing ministry with strong advocates and equally strong critics is Theophostic Prayer Ministry, which seeks the source or origin of pain that underpins "maladaptive cognitions" (faulty core beliefs). See Fernando Garzon and Margaret Poloma, "Theophostic Ministry: Preliminary Practitioner Survey," in *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 5 (May 2005): 387-396. Cf. Dearing, *The Healing Touch*, 134 on flawed inner healing approaches that seek to guide the imagination during the recollection of a memory.

Spirit-led and not formulaic or prescriptive, sensitive inner healing prayer can appropriately be employed in spiritual direction. What's more, one could argue that there is no avoiding it if the Holy Spirit has already prompted a memory to surface in a moment of silence. And why avoid it? The same Spirit who prompts the memory to surface can shed new light on it, bringing that "positive spiritual change" that Monroe and Schwab speak of.

Emotional Safety and Professional Referral

Finally, a word of caution around when it may be unsafe to visit childhood memories, and when to refer a directee for psychological help. Chris' childhood was not severely traumatic. We could safely explore negative formative experiences without triggering overwhelming emotion. The more painful a directee's childhood, the more a spiritual director should hesitate before engaging in a prayer exercise that may open up childhood memories, though we can never entirely control what happens in prayer.³² Although we can hopefully trust the Spirit not to bring to the surface memories that are too painful to handle, we would be wise not to test those limits if we suspect a directee is carrying trauma. Len Sperry advises, "When indicated, spiritual directors may refer directees with psychological problems for concurrent psychotherapy or suspend spiritual direction until a course of therapy is completed (Culligan 1983)."³³ In addition to occasions where trauma surfaces, a directee might be referred to therapy if the general focus of sessions is shifting away from spiritual issues, and towards predominantly psychological concerns – notwithstanding the relationship between the two.

Conclusion

The work with Chris, and the literature, suggests that the exploration of childhood memories in spiritual direction can lead to genuine spiritual and psychological movement, if undertaken safely, sensitively, and with the directee's consent. If trauma is triggered the experience should be sensitively stopped so the directee can be referred to therapy. With appropriate caution spiritual directors may prayerfully partner with the Spirit in exploring the links between a directee's inner child and their adult spirituality. Not that all spiritual and psychological concerns are rooted in childhood experiences, but some certainly are.

Silent prayer creates the conditions where memories may surface, and opens up space for *seeing, hearing* and *feeling* what God wants to disclose to the directee. Of course prayer may lead other places as well, not just into memories. If a directee desires to explore the roots of

³² Jeannie Morgan advises ceasing ministry when someone disassociates during ministry due to past trauma. Jeannie Morgan, *Our Hands, His Healing: A Practical Guide to Prayer Ministry and Inner Healing* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2014), 179. See M. Naidoo, "The Healing Work of Spiritual Direction," 147 on knowing our own competency as spiritual directors for working with a directee's pain and difficulty, and when to refer a person to therapy.

³³ Len Sperry, "Spiritual Direction and Psychotherapy: Conceptual Issues," in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, 173; Sperry is referring to Kevin Culligan, "The Counseling Ministry and Spiritual Direction," in *Pastoral Counseling*, ed. Barry K. Estadt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1983), 37-49.

a spiritual-psychological issue in prayer, the spiritual director may do little more initially other than invite the directee into a quiet moment to wait on God. That allows the Holy Spirit to lead anywhere, and in any particular way. If childhood memories happen to arise, silence then also allows the directee to process the experience of revisiting those memories with God, and sit with what God says or does. The director may gently prompt movement within the process, for example by asking, “What might God say to that child?”³⁴

Not all forms of inner healing prayer are appropriate for spiritual direction. A prescriptive or heavily-guided approach is ill-suited for spiritual direction, and arguably not ideal in any context. The Holy Spirit should be allowed to lead, and the directee must retain agency throughout. The sessions with Chris suggest that the process can move surprisingly quickly. Memories that emerge can be vivid, and their interpretation may be unexpected. The spiritual director should withhold their own assumptions to first hear the perspective of the directee.

More than one session may be required to properly explore a spiritual and emotional issue rooted in childhood. Furthermore, any freedom catalysed in spiritual direction may still need to be consciously appropriated and lived-into through daily decisions and new responses practised in partnership with God. New spiritual-emotional frames of reference require time to embed in life. Time is therefore a key element in the process and ongoing healing journey.

The focus, as in all spiritual direction, must remain primarily on the directee’s relationship with God, even as childhood experiences of other relationships (for example, parents) surface. Spiritual and psychological growth issues are closely related, therefore although working with childhood memories is psychological terrain, it is also invariably spiritual terrain. Ultimately, the prayerful exploration of childhood memories in spiritual direction carries with it the beautiful possibility of divine encounter and liberating insights that can help shift a directee’s perspective of themselves, God and others, leading to greater personal integration, spiritual and emotional freedom, and above all a richer sense of God’s love and grace.

³⁴ Alternatively: “How does God want to be for this child?” I am indebted to Fran Francis for offering this question that allows for God to move in ways other than speech.

APPENDIX: QUESTIONS FOR THE DIRECTEE TO PONDER PRIOR TO OUR INTERVIEW
(accompanying the portions of transcript notes from three spiritual direction sessions)

1. What do you notice about these times when childhood memories came up for you?
2. Why do you think God brought up these memories?
3. What do you notice about what God said or did?
4. What do you notice about the part you played?
5. What do you notice about anything I (Jim) said or did?
6. Was anything I said or did particularly helpful or unhelpful?
7. Did these moments affect your relationship with God, and if so how?
8. Did these moments influence how you saw yourself, and if so how?
9. What value do you feel such times have in spiritual direction?
10. What's it like to revisit these moments now?

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NOTES FROM SPIRITUAL DIRECTION SESSIONS AND INTERVIEW

Verbatim transcript notes from spiritual direction sessions for SGM Spiritual Directors Formation Programme (Aug, Sept, Oct 2021). Used with directee's permission.

Transcript notes from interview with the same directee (July 2022). Used with permission.